

Feminist Pedagogy and Student Voice in ESL Classrooms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

^{1st}Abdullah, ^{2nd}Sumaira Rauf, ^{3rd*}Jamal Shah

^{1st} MPhil Scholar Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan, abdullahenguob77@gmail.com
ORCID 0009-0003-4732-672

^{2nd} MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan sumirau00@gmail.com

*^{3rd} Lecturer in English, Department of English, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Pakistan, jamalshahis1996@gmail.com (Corresponding author)

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Abstract

This study is a qualitative investigation of the role of feminist pedagogy in promoting student voice and participation in undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. In total, 32 undergraduate ESL students (balanced by gender) in four public universities were the subjects of data collection for six weeks. Data comprised eight classroom observations, 16 semi-structured interviews, and 32 short written reflections. The study was informed by critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy and interactionist theories of second language acquisition. Thematic analysis revealed that the use of open-ended questioning, group discussion, shared authority and respect for students' lived experiences afforded more room for participation by learners. The students reported a higher level of confidence when the teacher gave importance to the opinion of the students instead of just the correct answer. Student feedback particularly that from female students, highlighted group work as a safer method of speaking that would ease the pressure before being put to the test in whole-class discussion. Participation was, nonetheless, influenced by sociocultural expectations, institutional ties, and prior learning experiences. The study suggests that feminist pedagogy can enhance the inclusive and communicative nature of ESL classrooms, but proper training for teachers and institutional support is necessary to create lasting change.

Keywords: feminist pedagogy; student voice; ESL classrooms; classroom participation; learner empowerment; Pakistan

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of study

English is now a major language in higher education, the workplace, technology and international communication. English has also gained considerable strength in universities in Pakistan as it is used as a medium of instruction and as an important academic language (Rahman, 2002, 2020). English is for a lot of pupils more than just a subject. It is also associated with higher education and professional mobility and engagement in broader academic communities.

Meanwhile, there are many challenges that are being faced in English language teaching at the level of the classroom in Pakistan. Many English as a Second Language (ESL) classes still practice teacher-centered practices. In these classrooms, the teacher talks most of the time, asks closed questions, corrects mistakes promptly, and requires students to listen, note down and repeat information. While these practices might be helpful in handling large classes, students' opportunities for real communication in English are likely to be curtailed (Awan & Shafi, 2016; Shahzad, Sibtain & Qasim, 2019).

For this reason, it is a big problem in language learning for students to have opportunities for their speaking, questioning, negotiating meaning, and learning from one another. According to the interactionist theory of L2 learning, language is acquired through meaningful interaction, feedback, and interaction and negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996). If learners have insufficient opportunities to speak, they might grasp the rules of grammar, but have difficulties communicating in English.

However, there is also an association between unequal participation in class and the concept of student voice. Student voice is the opportunity given to students to express their ideas, experiences, questions and opinions in the learning process (Cook-

Sather, 2006). Student voice is used in two ways in a language classroom. First, it is a democratic educational value as students should be heard as active learners. Second, it is a language learning need since the acquisition of communicative competence relies on language use and language hearing, as well as response to these.

But there is not a uniform availability of student voice for every student. The classroom climate is affected by the authority of the teacher, peer relations, gender expectations, language confidence and institutional culture. Studies of classroom interaction have revealed that male students are more likely to be the recipient of attention, and to be given a greater number of speaking turns, while female students have a tendency to speak less due to social dynamics, fear of judgment, and classroom power dynamics (Holmes, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1994). The patterns may be more apparent in mixed-gender classes for ESL learners where the English language is already a source of anxiety for many students.

The issues need to be studied in the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. In many educational contexts in KP, students are learning English in a broader social environment in which they are expected to respect the authority of the teacher, be modest, and communicate in an appropriate way that is gender-specific. Pupils may not be willing to disagree, question, or speak in public. When the participation involves public speaking in a mixed classroom, there is a possibility for the female students to be subjected to more pressure. So the question isn't just one of "do they know English," but one of "does the class provide a safe and respectful environment in which students can use English."

Feminist pedagogy is a helpful approach in solving this issue. Feminist pedagogy is not teaching for women or including women-related topics in the curriculum. It is an education that reflects questioning of unequal power relationships, lived experience,

¹ How to cite: Abdullah, Sumaira Rauf, & Jamal Shah. (2026). Feminist Pedagogy and Student Voice in ESL Classrooms in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 10(1), 85-93. <https://jll.uoch.edu.pk/index.php/jll/article/view/494>

encourages dialogue, and treats learners as co-creators of knowledge (hooks, 1994; Luke & Gore, 1992; Weiler, 1991). In this way, the teacher does not vanish from the scene as a guide, but authoritativeness is shared more. Students are encouraged to speak, listen, think, and participate in the development of classroom knowledge.

Feminist pedagogy can be particularly beneficial in ESL classrooms since it allows for the type of interaction needed to learn language. Some language learning activities, such as open-ended questions, collaborative learning, reflective discussion and inclusive turn-taking, can provide enhanced opportunities for learners to speak. These practices can also help minimise errors without fear since students are motivated to convey meaning rather than correct grammar. Feminist pedagogy relates social justice in education to communicative language learning in this way.

1.2 Problem statement

Student engagement is far from equal in most ESL classrooms in Pakistan. Classroom talk may be monopolized by one or a few teachers or by a few confident students while other students are silent. This access imbalance stifles students' voice and opportunities for authentic engagement with English. There may be greater obstacles for girls as cultural expectations, power dynamics in the classroom, and fear of negative judgment may make it difficult for girls to share their voices publicly.

Despite the extensive discussion of feminist pedagogy and its connection to democratic learning and empowerment of learners, there has been very little empirical research on the impact of feminist pedagogical practices on student voice in ESL classrooms in Pakistan. The need is to explore what the feminist-oriented practices might be in actual classroom interaction and students' understandings of the actuality of their participation in such classrooms.

1.3 Research aim and research questions

This study aims to discuss the role of feminist pedagogy in increasing student voice and participation in undergraduate ESL classrooms of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan.

The following research questions are used to guide the study:

1. What are the feminist pedagogical practices that are employed in ESL classrooms?
2. How do these practices affect students' voice and participation in the classroom?
3. What are students' experiences of empowerment and participation in feminist pedagogies in the classroom?

1.4 Significance of the study

This study has three important implications. First of all, it addresses one of the streams of research in the field of student voice, which concerns how voice is created in classrooms instead of just from individual confidence. Secondly, it connects L2 feminist pedagogy to L2 learning by highlighting the importance of inclusive teaching practices in creating more enriching opportunities for communication. Thirdly, this work contributes to the literature on ELT in Pakistan by concentrating on the context of KP due to the influence of social norms, institutional practices and gendered expectations on classroom interaction.

The study can benefit ESL teachers, teacher educators, curriculum planners, and researchers who are interested in inclusive language pedagogy. It is not enough to change textbooks or test systems to improve English language learning; it implies more than that. It also demands a focus on the way teacher's structure classroom discourse, the ways in which students are called on, and on whose voice is valued.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feminist pedagogy and classroom power

The feminist approach to pedagogy emerged to challenge the traditional concept of school where the teacher's sole role is to

impart knowledge to the learner. Authority typically flows from teacher to student, such as in the case of a classroom. Feminist educators say that it is possible to create a broader social inequality because it does not allow for a lot of room for learner agency, personal experience and varied perspectives (hooks, 1994; Weiler, 1991).

Feminist pedagogy has a strong tie to critical pedagogy. Freire (1970) spoke against the banking model of education, where students are seen as empty vessels into which information can be poured. He advocated dialogic education, which is a process in which learners and teachers learn through problem-posing, dialoguing and reflection. Feminist pedagogy maintains that this is the case and places special emphasis on how the classroom experience is influenced by gender, class, culture, language, and identity (Luke & Gore, 1992).

Feminist pedagogy is a pedagogical practice involving relationships. The teacher remains responsible for the planning, direction, and facilitation of learning, but the classroom is not a place of unquestioned authority. Students are encouraged to relate learning to their lived experiences, listen to other voices and be responsible for shared knowledge making. This is an approach that emphasizes "dialogue, care, respect and critical reflection" (hooks, 1994).

Sometimes feminist pedagogy is perceived as a "one size fits all" list of activities. It's more apt to be defined as a mindset about classroom relations. Group work, open discussion, reflective writing, or tasks that are led by students can be feminist, but only when it challenges hierarchy, involves voices outside of the center, and empowers students. Therefore, feminist pedagogy demands constant attention to the who, what, and how of speaking and remaining silent, what is known and what is not known, and how authority is exercised in the classroom.

2.2 Student voice and participatory learning

The concept of student voice has emerged as a key concept in democratic learning. Student voice refers to the presence, sound and power of students in educational decision making and in classroom life, according to Cook-Sather (2006). It involves students being not only taught, but individuals whose thoughts and experiences are relevant. Student voice can also disrupt the school's structure and lead to more meaningful relationships between teacher and learner, as suggested by Fielding (2004).

Students' confidence, responsibility, and engagement can be fostered if they are given meaningful roles in the school (Mittra, 2004). Student voice is not just about giving learners time to say what they have to say in the classroom. It's also about ensuring their input is listened to, valued and incorporated into learning. Student talk in a classroom can be present, but student voice can be absent if the teacher only welcomes answers that are predetermined.

In particular, students' voices are significant in language education. The use of language is essential to language learning. Students must ask questions, make errors, correct meanings, comment on other students' work, and experiment with new modes of communication. The discourse of the classroom can be either an opportunity or a barrier to learning (Walsh, 2011). When teachers dominate the conversation in the classroom, students have limited opportunities to create longer language and communicative competence.

Participative learning is also helpful in the development of language as it provides opportunities for the learner to speak English in meaningful situations. Students use language as communication by explaining ideas to peers, requesting clarification or responding to varying opinions. This also fosters confidence as students see themselves as legitimate users of the English language, not just students being assessed by a teacher.

2.3 Classroom discourse and second language learning

Language teaching in classrooms has revealed certain commonalities in classroom language discourse research. Sinclair and

Coulthard (1975) identified a sequence of events that the teacher generally employs: Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF), that is, asking a question, expecting a short response from a student, and then giving feedback. This structure can be useful for structuring classroom discussions, and it can give some students less voice due to people feeling they are just the ones being asked to answer questions rather than to be part of the conversation as meaning makers. Seedhouse (2004) has also demonstrated that there is an organisation to interaction in the classroom, and that this organization influences the products of learning, as well as what they can say and do.

In many teacher-dominated classrooms, students are trained to wait for the teacher's questions, and then give a brief answer. This interaction is not always designed to enable learners to explain ideas, challenge assumptions, and extend on others' ideas. This is a significant constraint for ESL classrooms as communicative competence is developed through the extended and meaningful use of language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Walsh, 2011).

By increasing student participation, there is a strong justification for it from the perspective of interactionist theory in L2 acquisition. Language learning is fostered when learners interact, become aware of their language gaps, are given feedback, and negotiate meaning, as stated by Long (1996). Participation and language development can therefore be facilitated by group discussion, peer exchange, and open classroom discourse. Feminist pedagogy can enhance these processes as it considers students active contributors and decreases the predominance of teacher talk.

2.4 Gendered participation in classrooms

In education research, the issue of gender participation has been much discussed. Sadker and Sadker (1994) discovered that classroom interaction can be unconsciously gender biased, as boys are given more opportunities for attention and more opportunities to answer and are encouraged more. Also, according to Holmes (1995), there are gendered communication norms, or norms which are specific to a particular gender. It is acceptable for male students to be assertive in public speaking, but not for female students to be so. An assertive public speech is more acceptable for male students than for female students, who may be expected to be polite, quiet or careful.

The patterns are not to be interpreted as evidence of students' lack of ability or interest. Instead, the picture they present is one of socially-determined participation. Sometimes a student can be silent because she does not have any ideas, but because speaking in the classroom is risky. In the language classroom, this can be heightened as students may be concerned about their grammar, pronunciation, when their peers laugh, or when the teacher corrects them.

Feminist pedagogy attempts to address these disparities in the ways in which children are invited to participate. It prompts teachers to listen to who is talking and who is not, to build confidence among less assertive students through teamwork, to link less confident students' experiences to public speaking, and to accept students' reports and experiences as valid knowledge. Instead of just encouraging women students to be more confident, feminist pedagogy teaches them to be confident. It invites teachers to create classroom structures for the development of confidence.

2.5 ESL learning and the Pakistani context

History, Policy, Social Status and Classroom Practice all influence the teaching and learning of English in Pakistan. English is associated with higher education, official communication, and employment opportunities (Rahman 2002, 2020). Many students, meanwhile, go to university with a low level of confidence in spoken

English owing to the way they were taught in primary and secondary schools, which focused on grammar, translation, memorization and written examination performance.

In Pakistan teacher-centered approach to English language teaching and low communicative interaction have been repeatedly observed in the studies conducted on the subject (Awan & Shafi, 2016). Similarly, Shahzad, Sibtain and Qasim (2019) find that teachers might be interested in communicative language teaching but it is not always feasible due to classroom contexts, curriculum requirements, assessment practices and scarcity.

These problems can be exacerbated in KP due to the larger class sizes, limited access to resources, and high expectations for conduct in the classroom. Pupils might show so much respect towards the teacher that they do not ask questions or challenge him. In addition, female students are advised to be cautious about their speech in mixed classes. These factors do not mean that it is not possible for students to participate, but it does demonstrate that student voice requires intentional programming.

In recent studies carried out in Pakistan, students are also reported to seek learning opportunities outside their classrooms such as digital platforms and self-directed learning (Rintaningrum, 2023; Shahabullah, Abdullah & Hussain, 2025). This indicates some students would like to have more opportunities to practice English, but class organization may not always allow this. Inclusive and participative pedagogy can, therefore, be used to link classroom learning with learners' communicative needs.

2.6 Theoretical framework

Three related theories – critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy and the interactionist theory of second language acquisition – guide this study.

The study looks at power in the classroom with the use of critical pedagogy. The study bases itself in Freire (1970) who considers education as a dialogic process in which the learner cannot be considered as an object of knowledge to be received. Feminist pedagogy also incorporates aspects of gender, identity, lived experiences and shared authority (hooks, 1994; Luke & Gore, 1992). It sheds light on the importance of classroom relations to student voice and how some students might be silenced by social and institutional norms.

The importance of participation in language development is discussed in terms of the interactionist theory. Long (1996) claims that meaningful interaction helps learners master the language through negotiation of meaning and feedback. Feminist pedagogy is not only a social justice approach, from this point of view. It is also pedagogically significant for ESL learning as it provides more opportunities for students to engage in meaningful English use.

In conjunction, these theories enable the study to grasp students' voice as an educational right and a language learning resource. They also contribute to the understanding of participation as a manifestation of classroom talk, teacher practice, peer interactions, and the broader sociocultural context.

2.7 Research gap

Previous studies have been conducted on students' voice, classroom talk, gendered interaction and language education in Pakistan. Less research has focused on the implementation of feminist pedagogical practices in undergraduates' ESL classes in KP, however. In the same study, there is also minimal work that is linking feminist pedagogy to real classroom interaction, student interviews and written reflections.

This study seeks to fill this void by exploring the relationship between feminist pedagogical approaches and student voice and participation in the classroom. This is centered on what is observed in the classroom and also on what students said about participation, confidence and empowerment.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research design

The research design for this study was Qualitative Research. A qualitative method was appropriate because the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of classrooms interactions and student participation and perceptions. The arguments about these issues can be best understood in terms of more than just numbers. They need to be attuned to classroom discourse, student experience, and the sense students make of their participation in the class (Creswell, 2013).

The study was exploratory and interpretive study. It did not examine statistical relationship between feminist pedagogy and achievement scores. Rather, it analyzed the manifestations of feminist pedagogical practices in ESL classrooms and how students felt regarding these practices. In this design, the "for" student perspectives and realities in the classroom matched the feminist pedagogy's goals.

3.2 Research context

The study was carried out in undergraduate ESL classes of four public universities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province in Pakistan: University of Peshawar, University of Malakand, Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan, and Hazara University. English was a language of instruction and was taught as a communicative language in which students were expected to use English to discuss in class, to write assignments and for other academic purposes. Classrooms selected utilized discussion-based and interactive learning activities. Therefore, they were suitable for the study of feminist pedagogy as it was a study of classroom practices that would foster dialogue, shared participation and student voice.

3.3 Participants and sampling

This study used 32 undergraduate ESL students. The sample was selected balanced by gender and site (at the 8th year and 8th year) with four female and four male students from each of the two institutions. In total, 16 female and 16 male students participated. This balance was chosen because this study focused on student voice, classroom participation, and the possible gendered patterns in participation.

As the study needed people with firsthand experiences of classroom interaction, group discussion, and reflective writing, Purposive sampling was carried out. Qualitative inquiry utilizes purposeful selection when the subject(s) can provide detailed information regarding the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002; Palinkas et al., 2015). The number of interviews was also adequate for an interview-based qualitative study as the data sources were supplemented with observation notes and written reflections and patterns in the data began to emerge (Guest et al., 2006).

3.4 Data collection

Three types of qualitative data were collected: classroom observation, semi-structured interview, and brief written student reflection. This resulted in a final data set comprising 8 classroom observations, 16 student interviews and 32 written reflections. The researcher used more than one source to allow for comparisons between what was occurring in the classroom and how the students explained their own experience.

3.4.1 Classroom observations

Eight classroom sessions were observed over six weeks, with two observation sessions in each university. Teacher questioning, student responses, gender distribution of speaking turns, peer interaction, group discussion, and instances in which students were

invited to link lessons to their own experiences were observed. Classroom practices and patterns of participation were documented using observation notes.

It was linked to feminist pedagogy, and the observation focus. The researcher focused on the extent to which the teacher fostered dialogue, provided speaking opportunities, acknowledged varying perspectives, minimized fear of error, and provided for quieter students.

3.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

A total of 16 students (from each university) were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. In order to maintain a balance in the sample, 2 female and 2 male students were interviewed from each institution. The students' freedom of expression was found as they gave their own explanations of the views, while the dialogue was maintained within the scope of the research questions through the interview format.

The interviews aimed at inquiring students' attitude towards their own participation in classroom discussion, what facilitates or hinders them from speaking, how they experienced group work, and whether their opinions were respected in their class.

3.4.3 Written student reflections

Each of the 32 students provided a brief reflection about the classrooms. These reflections enabled students to share opinions which may not have been expressed verbally in their interviews. The reflection data proved helpful for grasping how the students comprised voice, respect, participation and empowerment in the classroom.

3.5 Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used to analyze the data based on the general guidelines of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was a suitable approach in this study because it enabled the researcher to spot recurring themes throughout the observation notes, interview responses and written reflections.

Several steps were taken for the analysis. The first step was that the researcher read the data several times to get used to the content. Second, initial codes were built on elements of participation, teacher questioning, teacher group work, student confidence, gendered participation, and classroom respect. Third, codes that were connected were grouped into larger themes. Lastly, the themes were understood in terms of the theoretical framework of feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy and interactionist second language learning theory.

3.6 Trustworthiness

Data source triangulation was used to support the trustworthiness. Classroom observations revealed the practice of participation, interviews revealed students' description of their participation, and written reflections revealed other personal descriptions of participation. The balanced sample also resulted from having four universities that helped prevent one classroom from being the sole source of the study. These sources were used to reduce the dependency on a single source of data.

The research also had a transparent analytic process. Codes and themes were identified after repeated reading of the data and then related to the research questions. In order to support the interpretations, examples of the classroom talk and of students' accounts were drawn directly from the data.

3.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical principles for studying human subjects were adhered to in this study. Students were told what the study was about, they could choose to take part and consent was obtained prior to the data collection. The participants were informed that they might withdraw from the study without any consequences. The information in the report has been anonymised to comply with confidentiality requirements.

Since the study was conducted through observation in the classroom, interviews and written reflection, precautions were taken to ensure that the students were not harmed, embarrassed, or pressured. This study was not about evaluation of individual students or teachers but about classroom practices and learning experiences.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The results are presented in accordance to the three research questions. From the analysis, it is seen that the feminist pedagogical practices that are manifested in the classroom are open-ended questioning, group discussion, shared turn taking, and recognition of students' lived experiences. To this end, these practices provided greater opportunities to participate, yet they do not eliminate barriers. Gender expectations, confidence, and classroom behaviors of the institution still influenced student voice.

4.1 Feminist pedagogical practices used in ESL classrooms

The first research question was about the use of feminist pedagogical practices in the ESL classrooms. It was observed that four practices existed: open-ended questioning, collaborative learning, inclusive turn taking and use of students' experiences as part of learning.

4.1.1 Open-ended questioning

An important practice that was evident was the use of open-ended questions. The teacher would rather ask students to explain opinions, interpret social issues, or relate to the content of the lessons and the personal experience of the student, than asking a question with only one right answer. For instance, in a conversation with the students about language and culture, the teacher asked:

What do you believe is the connection between language and perception of the world?

This type of question encouraged students to think, explain and speak English beyond the memorized responses. It also eliminated the pressure to get the answer right, as there was some choice about how the students could respond to the question from various angles. The question left room for students to express themselves by asking them to repeat knowledge and to invite them to interpret it.

The impact of open-ended questioning on the role of the teacher was also different. The teacher didn't immediately assess all responses as correct or incorrect. Instead, the teacher gave students an opportunity to articulate their thinking and reflect on their peers. This resulted in a more dialogic classroom atmosphere.

4.1.2 Collaborative learning and group discussion

Group discussion was another good practice. Considerable effort was made to break students into small groups prior to sharing with the entire class. Because of this arrangement, students had time to formulate their thoughts and respond initially in a less stressful environment. Small-group discussion was used as a stepping-stone to participation in the wider class setting for those students who were shy or afraid of making mistakes.

Peer learning was facilitated through group discussion. Students heard one another, provided vocabulary, and supported one another in developing ideas, and sometimes helped others who were less talkative with the encouragement to speak. This transformed the individual performance in front of the teacher to a collective activity in the classroom.

4.1.3 Inclusive turn-taking

The teacher also made conscious attempts to ensure participation was distributed. If there was small groups that were doing most of the talking, the teacher asked for input from those in other parts of the room. During one of the observed lessons the teacher commented:

Not heard from this end of the room yet. What do you think about this issue?

This invitation is significant because it acknowledges that classrooms have a variety of types of silence that are not neutral. There are some pupils who are not talking because they are not sure if their contribution will be welcomed. The teacher encouraged other students to speak by saying that it was not just for the confident students.

Meanwhile, the turn-taking had to be done in an inclusive manner. An invitation that is too direct can cause the shy children to be embarrassed. The teacher generally employed a supportive tone and would give students ample time for a response in the observed classroom. Invitation was not as threatening.

4.1.4 Recognition of lived experience

Another practice of a feminist pedagogy was the acknowledgment of students' experiences. It was an opportunity to engage students in relating the concepts of the lessons to their social and cultural lives. This experience enabled students to consider that their experience might be a topic for academic discussion.

If student topics were related to language, culture, media or gender, they were asked to make observations about these topics when they were present in the classroom. This added to the meaningfulness of the lesson and provided room for other voices. It also encouraged language learning, as the students communicated more than just the words from the textbook in English.

4.2 Influence on student voice and classroom participation

How can feminist pedagogical practices impact on student voice and participation was the second research question. These results indicated that these practices led to more and better participation opportunities. Students' answers were longer, they interacted with peers more and they were more comfortable expressing opinions.

4.2.1 Longer and more meaningful student responses

The data obtained from the observation indicated that students tended to give long answers when the dialogic discussion was conducted. Typical IRF responses are brief answers that students wait to be assessed by the teacher. Students in the observed classrooms were more likely to explain, provide examples and respond to other students. This was resulting in more meaningful English usage.

Students discussed gender representation in the media and shared their views and responded to one another. The teacher did not stop the discussion when just one correct answer was given. Rather, students were permitted to develop on their predecessors' ideas. This meant a change from answering to meaning making in the classroom.

4.2.2 Reduced fear of mistakes

The results of the student interviews revealed that the majority of the students were afraid to make mistakes in English. Correspondence with the fear was related to grammar, pronunciation, peer responses, teacher correction. Pupils reported higher levels of comfort when the teacher aimed to communicate rather than correct at the time.

One female student stated:

I don't feel at ease speaking in other classes as teacher asks questions and expects the correct answer. In this course, however, the professor inquiries about our opinions, making it simple to talk about them.

The result indicates that involvement was linked to the teacher's responses to the answers. Students were more comfortable when asked for opinions than for absolute answers. That isn't to say

accuracy was not paramount. Instead, it was about the accuracy not being able to stifle communication.

4.2.3 Group work as a bridge to public speech

Some students reported that group discussion was useful as they were able to rehearse their ideas before speaking to the whole class. One student stated:

The ease of speaking later in front of the whole class is aided by the ease of speaking in groups for conversation. You've already completed your message.

This is a key discovery for ESL education. Planning time is frequently necessary before students can speak in their second language. They had time for group discussion to think, practise vocabulary and build confidence. It also helped to take away the stress of speaking individually in front of the teacher and the entire class.

4.2.4 More balanced participation, but not complete equality

The classroom became more participatory, with not equal participation. There were still some students who spoke more than others. Some students required teacher guidance or nurturing in taking more turns, especially the quieter students, while confident students were able to make more turns. This demonstrates that feminist pedagogy can provide better opportunities but not with an instant fix of all barriers.

Participation was shaped by previous learning experiences. Students accustomed to teacher-centered classroom activities tended to wait for teachers' approval before speaking. Some learners were also concerned that their English language was not adequate. These responses demonstrate that student voice needs to be fostered over time with a series of supportive practices.

4.3 Students' perceptions of empowerment and participation

The third research question was: What did students think empowerment and participation in a feminist pedagogy-based classroom were? Students related empowerment to hearing, respecting and giving them an opportunity to express their opinions in the interviews and written reflections.

4.3.1 Feeling that opinions matter

A large percentage of students reported feeling more engaged in the learning process as a result of classroom discussions. One student reflected:

If the teacher gives us the chance to voice our opinions, it makes us feel like our opinion is important. It also contributes to the comprehension of the topic.

This reflection illustrates that the affective and cognitive aspects of student voice can be demonstrated. Students felt valued and this was encouraging them to engage even more with the content of the lesson. Not only was involvement about speaking, but it was about being involved in the learning process.

4.3.2 Respectful listening

Respectful listening was also appreciated by the students. One reflection stated:

All participants listen to others in this class. If there are differing views, they are considered in a respectful manner.

This result demonstrates that the opportunity to speak is not enough, as is the quality of listening, for student voice to be heard. Even if a classroom allows students to speak turns, and others laugh at their ideas, laugh them out of the picture or interrupt them, participation can still feel unsafe. Respectful listening was thus one of the components of empowerment.

4.3.3 Female students and safer participation

Group discussion was especially mentioned as helpful by the female students. One reflection stated:

Sometimes girls are shy in talking in class, particularly when boys talk more. However, group discussion aids as everyone has an opportunity to voice their thoughts.

This reflection refers to the participation of gender. There were no reports of silence as a lack of ideas from female students. They said it was related to classroom interactions, to the dominance of the males in talk and to shyness in public speaking. They were given a more accessible path into participation with group discussion. The results thus indicate that feminist pedagogy offers a potential way to help female students by altering classroom interactions. The results also indicate, however, that empowerment is not a natural occurrence. Relying on sustained teacher monitoring of group organization, turn taking, respect in the classroom, and the sociocultural environment.

4.3.4 Empowerment as a gradual process

Students did not refer to empowerment as a momentous shift. Instead, it was a gradual rise in confidence, they said. The classroom was empowered when students felt their voice was heard and that their errors were not severely sanctioned, and that their opinions were listened to with respect.

This is significant because empowerment, in the framework of feminist pedagogy, should not be interpreted as an action, or even a single lesson. It is created as a result of repeated classroom practices which alter students' perception of themselves as participants. This also implies that students start to perceive themselves as persons who can communicate in English with meaningful ideas in the ESL classroom.

5. Discussion

The results indicate that classroom participation is not just an individual characteristic of the learner. It is influenced by pedagogy, the classroom discourse, gender expectations, institutional routines, prior experiences and learner identities. This is significant as one of the students is not spoken up is seen as a weak student, a shy student, or a disinterested student. The present study proposes two additional approaches to understanding silence as the outcome of classroom conditions and as the result of the social position that learners of the language occupy in the language classroom (Pavlenko, 2002; Norton & Toohey, 2004).

5.1 Feminist pedagogy as shared authority

The observed practices demonstrate the possibilities of transforming the authority structure in the classroom from unidirectional to an alternative model of shared authority, which is a feminist pedagogical dimension. Open ended questions, group discussion and recognition of lived experience enabled students to engage as knowledge contributors rather than simply knowledge recipients in instruction. This is in line with hooks' (1994) perspective that classrooms can be places of freedom when learner's voices are heard.

This change is related to Freire's (1970) analysis of the banking approach to education. If students are only called on to recite answers the teacher considers to be correct, they will continue to rely on the teacher's judgment. Invitations to interpret, question, and relate ideas to experience involve them in knowledge-making. This shift was found to facilitate democratic participation and language use in the classrooms observed in ESL.

But sharing authority does not mean that the teacher does not have authority. Teachers' role was still significant. The teacher organized, posed questions, facilitated discussion and safeguarded respectful classroom environment. The absence of teaching is not the same as skilled teaching; therefore, a feminist pedagogy needs skilled teaching. It involves teachers to act with authority in a way that will create space for learners, not obstruct it.

5.2 Student voice as interactional opportunity

The results demonstrate that student voice is developed through interaction. When the classroom structure provided time,

safety, and purpose for students to speak, there was an increase of their voices. It is consistent with Cook-Sather's (2006) view on the link between voice and presence and power. Students must be in the conversation of classroom discourse...and they must have power to participate in shaping that meaning.

The findings also suggest that from an ESL point of view, it can be concluded that the findings are pertinent to the interactionist perspective of L2 acquisition (Long, 1996). Students were given opportunities to negotiate meaning, to communicate in the real English language, and for feedback through group discussion and dialogic exchange. This is not the same as in a classroom where English is primarily used to explain grammar or provide brief responses from the teacher.

Fear is an important factor too. There were many students who were concerned about errors. This fear was eliminated by feminists' pedagogy, which emphasized on communication and opinion. Missteps were more likely to be tolerated if they were not corrected on the spot by the teacher. This is all a part of the "risk taking" that is involved in learning a language; without risk taking, there could be no language learning.

5.3 Gendered participation and the limits of classroom change

The results demonstrate successful collaborative and supportive participation structures for female students. They had an opportunity to speak in a more safe and secure manner after some group discussion, and they were free to voice opinions without having to come up with a single correct answer in response to open-ended questions. This is in line with the studies that indicate that classroom conversation can be gendered and that males can dominate the public conversation (Holmes, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1994).

The study also demonstrates that gender barriers are not an easy hurdle to overcome with feminist pedagogy alone. But there were moments when participation was not even. This is because classrooms are linked to broader socio-cultural expectations. Students carry with them from previous schools, homes, beliefs and fears about language. Students come to the classroom with beliefs, norms, language fears, etc. from the past school, home and/or culture. A teacher can challenge these patterns but not wipe them out in one day!

Feminist pedagogy needs to be considered as a process, therefore. It's not an easy way that ensures equal participation. It's an ongoing process to look at classroom power, to seek out voices that remain silent, to listen respectfully, and gradually to develop students' confidence. This process needs sensitivity when used in situations like KP. It is important for teachers to facilitate students' participation without suddenly imposing a public burden on them, particularly on girls.

5.4 Implications for ESL teaching in Pakistan

There are a number of implications for ESL teaching in the study. The first thing teachers need to do is to ask more open-ended questions that allow for explanation, interpretation, and personal response. Closed questions can be used to assess understanding, but should not be the focus of language lessons. Students require questions for which they have to think and communicate in English. Second, group discussion should be a planned activity and not a filler activity. Teachers can provide students with clear roles, questions to ask, and time to prepare prior to whole class speaking. This can be helpful to students whose first language is not English and to students who are quiet.

Thirdly, teachers should track participation. They should become aware of those students that speak a lot of the time, those

that remain silent, and the equal opportunities of male and female students. This does not imply that all pupils have to speak with the same voice. It involves offering alternative paths to participation, such as pair work, small group discussion, written reflection and whole class discussion.

Fourth, teacher education programs in Pakistan need to incorporate classroom discourse, student voice, gender sensitive pedagogy and communicative language teaching. To many teachers it may be possible to support participation in theory but not be able to facilitate open dialogue in real classroom. Training may be a means to enable teachers to utilize authority in more inclusive ways. Last but not least institutions need to facilitate pedagogical change. Participatory teaching is challenging because of the high number of students in a class, the pressure of examinations, the limited time, and the strict syllabi. Creating conditions for teachers to use dialogic and collaborative methods is a requirement for the development of communicative competence if the institutions want their students to develop communicative competence.

5.5 Contribution of the study

This study will be of benefit to applied linguistics as it will relate feminist pedagogy to ESL classroom discourse in Pakistan. It demonstrates that 'feminist pedagogy' is not a pedagogy apart from language learning. It directly facilitates the learning of language by adding opportunities for interaction, eliminating fear, and integrating student experience into meaning in the classroom.

The study also provides insight for research on student voice, as it is demonstrated that voice is personal, but not solely personal. It is developed in the classroom setting in the form of structures. Environment provides students with opportunities for speech to be meaningful, safe, respected. This discovery is significant because, in some contexts, silence by students is considered a student confidence issue.

5.6 Limitations and future research

The study has some limitations. The study was qualitative, and it was conducted with 32 ESL undergraduate students of four public universities in KP. While the sample was balanced by gender and site, it was not a statistically representative sample. So the results should not be extended to all the classrooms of Pakistan. The study also was in terms of participation and student perceptions, not direct measurement of language proficiency. It is crucial to get more people involved, but it is not sufficient to demonstrate better grammar, word recognition, or test scores.

Some studies in the future could be conducted to compare different pedagogical practices in different education levels and institutions across provinces with feminist approach. It could also look at the further development of student voice over a longer time. Three methods of study and analysis for classroom discourse analysis, student interviews, and language performance might be used in combination to answer the question of the relationship of participation to measured language development in a mixed method study.

There is also a need to continue the work with the teachers' perspectives. While inclusive participation can be supported by teachers, there are also institutional barriers (such as large classes, assessment demands, and limited training) that may confront teachers. Knowing the challenges of teachers would facilitate the creation of practical models for the feminist and communicative approach in ESL instruction in Pakistan.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the use of feminist pedagogy for voice and participation of students in ESL classrooms at undergraduate level in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan. The results indicate that open-ended questioning, collaborative learning, turn-taking that is inclusive, and acknowledging of students' lived experiences can help to construct more participatory classroom spaces. These practices enabled pupils to express their views, opinions and feelings freely and to feel their ideas were valued.

The study also reveals that supportive and collaborative classroom architecture can be beneficial to female students. The group discussion provided them with a more comfortable way to get into public involvement and dialogue helped put them at ease when speaking. But even so, sociocultural expectations, institutional routines and learning experiences remained influential to participation. Time, skill of the teacher and institutional support are required for feminist pedagogy to overcome these barriers.

The primary thesis of the paper is that student voice is not just a democratic teaching and learning tool, but also a language learning asset in ESL classrooms. The students' learning of English is more meaningful when they are given opportunities to communicate in English in real situations, to reflect on their learning of English, and to interact in the English language. Feminist pedagogy can address this by creating more inclusive, respectful and responsive classrooms that are sensitive to learners' experiences.

The study recommends that communicative language learning cannot be achieved merely through new activities in ESL classroom in Pakistan. It demands new, different relationships between students and teacher and among students. Students are more likely to think of themselves as users of English, when teachers share authority, listen to them, and provide opportunities for them to participate in an environment that is safe for them. The classroom atmosphere that can foster language development and empower learners.

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Declaration of generative AI use

Language editing, organization and manuscript preparation were facilitated by generative AI tools. The author(s) have read, revised and accepted the final manuscript, which is responsible for the content, accuracy, interpretation and integrity of the work

Credit authorship contribution statement

Abdullah Writing –review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Sumaira Rauf:** data collection, coding and , Conceptualization. **Jamal Shah:** Sorted the data, contribution in analysis and formatting of the paper

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