Desire for English in Youth: An Exploratory Study of Language Learners in a Developing Country

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Abstract

English being the official language is a source of prestige and necessary for recognition in Pakistan. Research studies usually debate the positive and negative influence of English on students in developing countries. However, the concept of desire attached with acquiring English is a less explored area. The present study attempts to understand the desire of Pakistani students majoring in English, for understanding their meaning-making for selecting English as their major. Using qualitative method, the data were collected through interviews, focus groups and mind-maps of students. The study participants were undergraduate students in a public university in the capital city Islamabad. The data were recorded, transcribed and coded using constructivist grounded theory for obtaining themes. The findings revealed that the youth's association with English language is not just for gaining prestige; rather, they share deeper affiliations with includes a desire for acquiring the native persona, attaining global solidarity and achieving communicative competence. The attached desire with English language and its literature can have positive effect on students' motivation to excel in their studies; however, unrealistic desires can harm students. The findings of the study hence, add to improvement in English language instruction and understanding of desires among the students.

Keywords: communicative competence, global solidarity, language desire, native persona, societal projection

Introduction

Globalization is multifaceted and complex (Lee & Vivarelli, 2006). It highlights countries' greater interdependence on one another (Fischer, 2003) resulting in Westernization (Irani & Noruzi, 2011), whereby the West dominates cultural, economic and political lives of the masses. Consequently, this Western expansion has resulted in the spread of English language (Phillipson, 1992), making it a representative of globalization (Crystal, 2003). Theorists have attempted to label this strong relationship between English language and globalization under different terms: English as Lingua Franca (Jenkins, 2006), English as International Language (Sharifian, 2009), or World Englishes (Crystal, 2003; Kachru, 1986).

Consequently, learning of English is considered an investment (Bordieu, 1991) as it provides both symbolic (including friendship, prestige etc.) and material resources (money, capital goods and so on) to the individual (Haidar & Fang, 2019; Norton, 2000). It is also the main source of communication around the world and therefore, a matter of serious deliberation in terms of research. Language desire, a new aspect in second language learning, aids researchers in comprehending learners' deeper affiliation with English language.

Language desire elaborates on individuals' desire for transforming identity by mastering the target language (Piller & Takahashi, 2006). This conceptualization is different from the notion of need as according to Ryan, Rigby and Przybylski (2006), not all language learners have a compulsive need to acquire the English language skills for gaining a higher socioeconomic status, rather there are other reasons which can be suitably addressed under the notion of desire (Kubota, 2011). For instance, the desire to be socially included into the English-speaking society cannot be termed as a need (Kubota, 2011). Hence, language desire provides an alternative notion to address the psychological side of the language learners. Similarly, several studies have been conducted on learners' motivations for learning English (Garcia, 2014; Kormos, Csizér & Iwaniec, 2014); however, personal drives have been less investigated (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019), particularly those ones which are motivated by a desire to learn English (Piller & Takahashi, 2006) in various language learning settings. The current study investigates the unexplored context of Pakistan with the following research questions: What language desires are constructed by the Pakistani youth in relation with English language and its learning? And why the Pakistani youth desires to learn the English language?

Literature Review

Background of English in Pakistan

The British introduced the English language and English education into the Indian subcontinent to educate the elites to serve as a bridge between the colonialists and the Indians and also to make them professionals running the affairs of the state (Rahman, 2002; Viswanathan, 2014). Thus, English became the dominant language by replacing Persian, the language of Muslim rulers, before the dominance of British colonialists (Rahman, 1998, 2002). The dominance of English remained after the independence of Pakistan in 1947 due to stacks of the dominant class, who were competent in English and resisted replacing English with local languages (Rahman, 2002). Initially, it was decided that English would be replaced with national language Urdu and other local languages when these languages will develop to serve as medium of education and to be official languages (Shamim, 2008, 2011). However, until now English remains the official language and the language of education, especially of higher education in the country (Mansoor, 2004).

English is considered superior to local languages due to its symbolic power for being the language of elite in the country (Rahman, 2002, 2007). It is necessary for higher education and for prestigious jobs, since it is pre-requisite for professional jobs in the country. Research on the role of English in Pakistan and other developing countries unfolds that English is used as a gatekeeper to enter into prestigious social positions (Coleman, 2010; Coleman & Capstick, 2012; Haidar & Fang, 2019). Thus, the use of English serves as one of the main sources of failure for students, especially for low socioeconomic students (Haidar, 2016). However, other studies consider it a source of access to information which enables people in developing countries to communicate with the world (Crystal, 2003; Majhanovich, 2014; Rassool, 2013; Seidlhofer, 2011). English is considered as a source of progressive identity and personal development in Pakistan like other South Asian countries (Chowdhury, 2010; Norton & Kamal, 2003; Norton, 2010).

However, one aspect, which is usually ignored by second language acquisition research at large and about English learning in particular is the enjoyment attached with acquiring a second language (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dewaele, Witney, Saito & Dewaele, 2017). Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) believe that "There is

a need to accommodate positive emotions more effectively into our descriptions to understand students' desire for acquiring English" (p. 205). Language desire, a new construct in second language acquisition (Kubota, 2011), has been least explored in developing countries such as Pakistan. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the desires of undergraduate students majoring in English language in a public university in Pakistan. The study explores meaning-making of these students and the desires they attach with majoring in English language.

Theories of Human Desires

For interpretation of data, we have used social theory of human desire (Deleuze & Guttari, 1987), taxonomy for motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and sociolinguistic scales (Blommaert, 2010). Deleuze and Guttari's (1987) social theory of human desire considers desire as a natural, positive and fluid part of the human psyche, which directly impacts the identity of the subject. This approach helps in differentiating the concept of desire and needs as it promulgates that desire is the primary production agent inside the human mind, which breeds the well-built human needs (Kulick, 2008; Motha & Lin, 2014). In fact, the instrumental benefits (jobs, degree, financial benefits) attached with English learning usually compel learners to attain competence to intermediate level (Dörnyei, 1990). However, sociocultural and nonprofessional reasons of learning English make students acquire high proficiency, since they wish to master English rather than attain minimal competence for survival (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). As already stated, the study plans to explore language desire of students beyond its instrumental benefits; therefore, the theory of human desire is relevant for understanding the phenomenon.

In fact, language desire is embedded in social context that results in perpetual waxing and waning (Motha & Lin, 2014). It is thus different from motivation which is mostly concerned with conscious benefits attached with the target language and often separated from social environment. The effects of language desire are intense that compel individuals to make great sacrifices to get access to that language. Desire can be both conscious and unconscious, which results in constant love and yearning often associated with unrealistic dreams (Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019; Motha & Lin, 2014; Takahashi, 2013). Motivation is often linked with conscious self, while desire is linked with emotional self. So far, the role of English in Pakistan has been explored from motivation and identity perspectives, but the desire attached with the English language has been least explored (Haidar, 2018; Mansoor, 2004; Norton &

Kamal, 2003; Rahman, 2007; Shamim, 2008).

Secondly, Ryan and Deci's (2000) taxonomy elaborates on integrated regulation, where individuals identify with another group and internalize that motivation which starts shaping their identity. The volitional behaviors accompanied with the experience of freedom and autonomy are representative of oneself, but those behaviors accompanied with external pressure and control are not representative of self (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Thirdly, Blommaert's (2010) conception of sociolinguistic scales provides a theoretical foundation that social events' impacts are layered in a continuum from macro to micro, resulting in transformation for the language learner (Appadurai, 1996). According to Blommaert (2010), some people's linguistic resources are low scale and limited in terms of geographical and social boundaries, while some people's linguistic resources are mobile and valued across geographical and social boundaries. Haidar (2017) expresses that "Lower scale linguistic resources are often momentary, local, situated, personal, individual, contextualized, and subjective, while on the higher scale linguistic resources are timeless, trans local, widespread, and impersonal" (p. 4). These theories elaborate on the process of second language learning and the social status attached with it. Hence, they are useful to explore Pakistani students' desire for learning English.

Methodology

The study explores the multiple meanings and interpretations of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) using the qualitative approach with regard to their desire for the English language. The investigation is exploratory as it examines inquiries, which reflect human judgment in particular (Wolcott, 1992, p. 7). From this initial point, the current study begins with a broad interest in comprehending Pakistani students' perceptions on learning and using English language. The study thus is phenomenological, focusing on the meaning making of students to acquire English (Cresswell, 2012). It also tries to understand students' reasons for wanting to learn English.

Data Collection

The research involved twenty students between the age of 18-23, majoring

English language and literature at a public university in Pakistan. Since these students were explicitly aiming to master English language as a part of their undergraduate and graduate degree, the researchers sought them as suitable participants for the study. Data were collected through focus group interviews and mind-maps. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews elicited respondents' perceptions on their desire for English language and their affiliation with the West. The interviews lasted around sixty minutes with each participant, whereas the focus group discussions were of around two hours. There was no gender distribution sought for this study; all those students who fulfilled the criteria, volunteered and consented were made part of the process. Resultantly, twelve females and eight male participants became part of the sampled data set. Some participants were also asked to create mind-maps regarding what they perceive about the fascination for English, which were also included as data for the study.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed. Constructivist grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2014) approach was deployed, which is based on inductive approach to develop themes from the data. At first, a descriptive word was assigned to each line of the transcribed data, which were arranged into categories and subcategories through finding links in these descriptive words. The linkages among similar categories were sorted to develop six main themes through guidance obtained from theoretical framework and literature survey.

Findings and Discussion

Desire for Societal Projection

Societal projection refers to the individual's attempts of associating similarities with others (Robbins & Krueger, 2005).This particular theme was prevalent in a majority of the responses recorded through interviews. According to Deleuze and Guttari (1987), one characteristic of desire is that it allows eruption of multiple other desires. For example, participants shared the desire for learning English language because it helps them to address another desire, which is to attain higher posts and to meet social standards after getting skilled in English. A respondent stated:

"I can impact my current situations, current society, current dilemmas. I can monopolize the society."

The participants associated prestige with the English language learning (Motha & Lin, 2014). One participant used the expression:

"I want to dominate the society."

This indicates that despite of getting freedom from Britain, the colonized mindset is still prevails in Pakistan. Initially, British colonialists projected their language as a source of monopoly followed by locals who became competent in English. The sentiments still seem dominant among youth in Pakistan, especially those who study English as their major.

This desire for societal projection coordinates with Ryan and Deci's (2000) conceptualization of extrinsic motivation, where they explicate that an individual desires something for a distinct and viable outcome. In this case, one of the participants mentioned:

"I think English is necessary to meet social standards and also to fulfill desires. I aim for having a good job that is why I want to study it and I also want a good social projection of myself; I want to develop a [native-like] accent."

According to Blommaert (2010), social processes develop from the micro layer to the macro layer constructing varied sociolinguistic scales. In a similar manner, these acquired desires at the micro (or individual) level coordinate to generate desires that would leave an impact at the macro level for the individual. For instance, in the aforementioned statement, the participant begins from one desire to attain a good occupation through English, towards a larger desire, where he involves the society as well by desiring for a positive recognition.
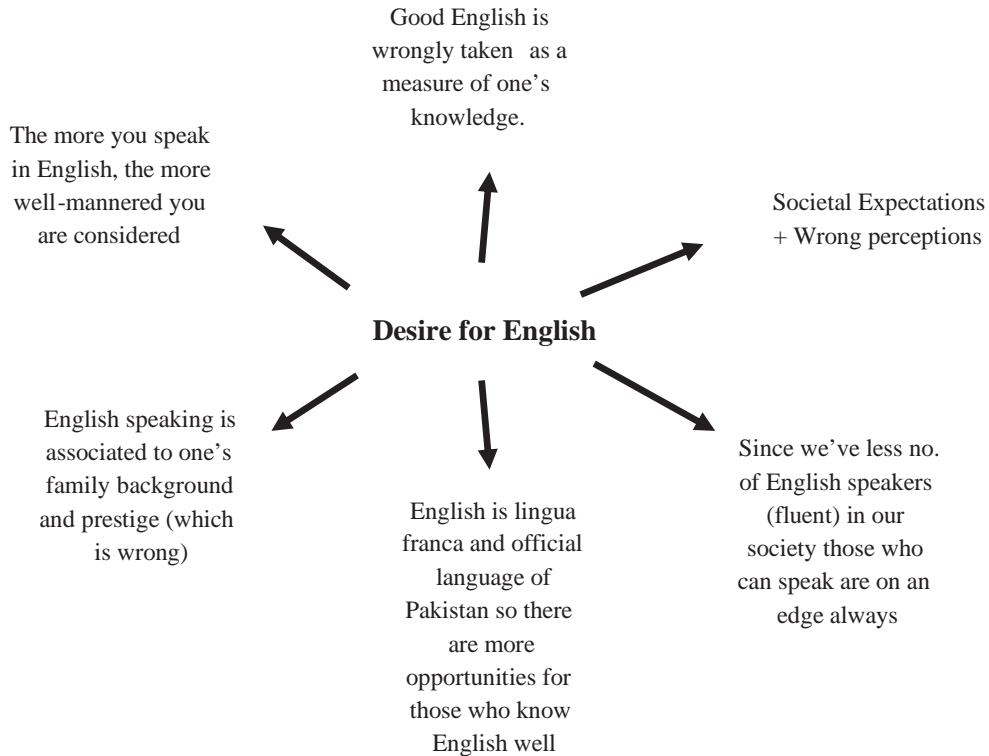
Good English is
wrongly taken as a
measure of one's
knowledge.

The more you speak
in English, the more
well-mannered you
are considered

Societal Expectations
+ Wrong perceptions

Desire for English

English speaking is
associated to one's
family background
and prestige (which
is wrong)

English is lingua
franca and official
language of
Pakistan so there
are more
opportunities for
those who know
English well

Since we've less no.
of English speakers
(fluent) in our
society those who
can speak are on an
edge always

Figure 1. Desire for societal projection: Example from mind-maps

The mind-map in Figure 1 was developed by the participants, which reflected the desire for societal projection as well; for instance, one of them equated speaking English to being considered as well-mannered in the society. In fact, the upper class in the country (including most of the government officers) speaks English (Rahman, 2002). Henceforth, English fluency is considered a pre-requisite to be included in the dominant class (see also Bourdieu, 1991; Haidar, 2018). Moreover, the participants' comments resonated that societal expectations do develop an urge among Pakistanis to learn the English language.

Desire for Native Persona

Participants exhibited an attraction towards the image expounded by the native English speakers (Motha & Lin, 2014; Takahashi, 2013). This desire expanded on likeness for their intelligence, confidence, body language and mannerisms. A participant professed:

> *"They (native English speakers) have a different demeanor in their personality."*

Such interest in the personality of the English speakers explicates a psychological desire to be like them. This notion co-relates with the idea of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). They state that one aspect of an intrinsically motivated individual is that he/she would relate themselves with a particular notion or activity. In this case, twelve of the participants explicitly shared the desire to be affiliated with the native persona – which highlights another facet of their desire for learning the English language. Blommaert's (2010) proposition of English as an international language which dominates the globalized world (including both macro and micro scales) is exhibited through the present study's findings. The interviews and focus group discussions pointed towards a fascination for the British accent among the participants. For instance, a female participant admitted:

> *"If I am in the market and if I hear somebody speak in the British accent then I would say that this is amazing; I want this accent for myself too."*

This dimension coordinates with Deleuze and Guttari's (1987) conceptualization of desire; they argue that desire holds the potential to construct a particular reality for the individual. In this sense, this recognition of the natives' identity as worthy, according to Motha and Lin (2014), is socially constructed through discourse. Moreover, such instances reflect approbation of the whites as superior (Motha & Lin, 2014; Nogueira, 2013) and the influence on the colonized by the colonizers.

The notion of perceiving the native English speakers as superior is reflected through the data of mind-maps (see Figure 2). The participant wrote that people who speak English are marked as intelligent. Moreover, they wrote that their desire for learning English emerges out of the want to be considered equal due to the privileges that they have as speakers of English. This perception of students is problematic in itself as all white people are not English speakers. Moreover, all English native speakers do not lead a prosperous life. This is again the continuation of imperialistic and colonialist mindset (Phillipson, 1992) associated with English language and native speakers.
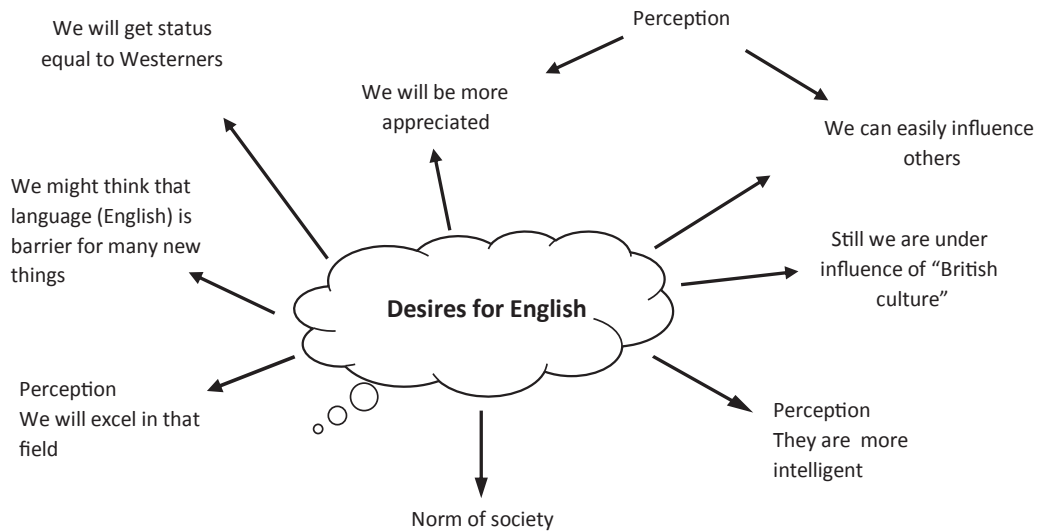
Figure 2: Desire for native persona: Example from mind-maps

Desire for Communicative Competence

Participants shared a desire to be competent in English by being aware about how and when to use utterances appropriately. According to Blommaert (2010), a gain in competence is a definite part of the globalized world. This phenomenon is evident in the participants' responses as well, where they were of the view that through learning English, they can enhance their communication skills and accent. If an individual does not gain competence in a dominant language, then he/she may be perceived as uneducated (Blommaert, 2010). Resultantly, participants of this study pointed out their efforts to enhance their competence in English language through listening to English songs. One participants reiterated:

> *"I listen to English songs to develop [native-like] accent and also because I want to improve my listening skills."*

Another dimension of desire, as explicated by Deleuze and Guttari (1987) is that it tends to associate with elements which are concretely identifiable. In this sense, competence of a person in a specific language is clearly visible through writing and speaking particularly as they are productive language skills. Keeping this aspect in the forefront, the participants exhibited a desire to attain this competence, as it

would reflect through their language use.

> *"To become a speaker of English, it is necessary to have competence over the language; speaking skill which helps while doing a paper presentation."*

These examples highlight that the students have the realization that English is needed to improve their skills. This participant believed that by learning English, her presentation skills would improve. Moreover, desire is a positive force, which leads the individuals to gain something productive (Deleuze & Guttari, 1987; Motha & Lin, 2014). In this case, the desire of the participants to attain communicative competence can be seen as a productive conceptualization as it would lead them to improve their language skills.

This desire for achieving communicative competence in English language was vehemently reflected in the mind-maps as well (see Figure 3). The participants indicated that they desire to communicate well with everyone in the English language. This theme is relevant in modern times, since English is used predominantly in the world (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2006) including Pakistan wher English language competence is needed for survival and social mobility (Haidar, 2018). Ten out of twenty participants agreed with this notion and fervently talked about it in the interviews.
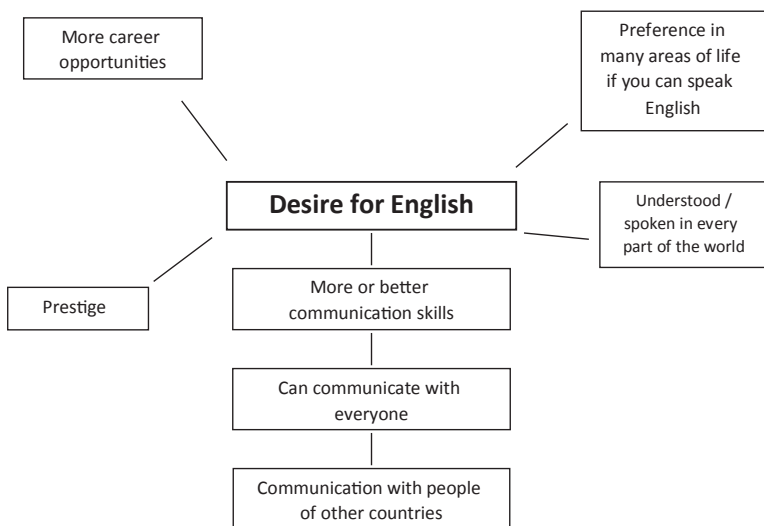
More career opportunities

Preference in many areas of life if you can speak English

Desire for English

Understood / spoken in every part of the world

Prestige

More or better communication skills

Can communicate with everyone

Communication with people of other countries

Figure 3. Desire for communicative competence: Example from mind-maps

Desire for Western Adaptation

The conceptualization of the West has caused the other communities to struggle in finding their own unique identity (Stuenkel, 2011). Moreover, considering the Western language and culture as superior is a common ideological assumption (Bonnett, 2004). This has resulted in a fascination for the West among the Pakistani youth as well. For instance, one of the participants desired to live in Auckland and informed:

> *"I would have an apartment in Auckland… here, I would be able to see the top of all buildings through a glass door."*

This example exhibits what Ryan and Deci (2000) also argue that language or discourse enables the individuals to straight forwardly express their affiliation or interest towards a particular goal. Here, the participant utilizes discourse to give words to her dream of having an apartment in Auckland; along with this, she exhibits her desire to be at the top of all others so that she can feel satisfaction of being superior from the rest. This instance matches with another characteristic of desire that a desire directly or indirectly relates with the individual desiring for more power than other individuals in his/her community (Deleuze & Guttari, 1987). Thirteen out of twenty participants explicated this desire through their discourse during the focus group discussions.

Another participant was asked why he was applying for a foreign degree program in writing. To this question, he answered:

> *"I was motivated [to go abroad] because I am charmed and fascinated by their parties, environment and the friends that I might have there."*

This statement shows his fascination for being part of the Western lifestyle, where the natives are liberals, who enjoy life, make friends and have no worries. Such a perception compels him to apply to a Western university. This perception has been termed by Blommaert (2010) as motivation for mobility, where the individual sees the dominating language as a means to get away from the native land and become part of another fascinating advanced world (Motha & Lin, 2014; Takahashi, 2013).

One of the participants wrote that English speakers occupy a distinct class in the world and there is a strong fascination with their style of living (see Figure 4), which develops a desire to adapt that style. However, the students need to know that learning English language does not ensure that a person will have life like the Western people. Moreover, studies have shown that not all people in the West have a prosperous life (Motha & Lin, 2014; Takahasi, 2013).
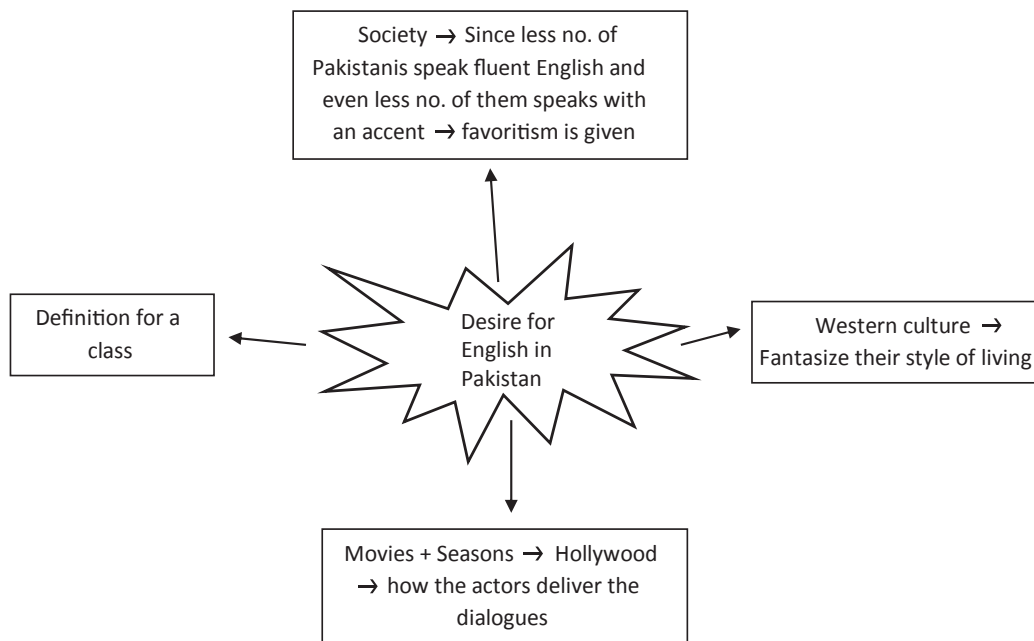

Figure 5. Desire for western adaptation: Example from mind-maps

Desire to Marginalize Others

Another facet of desire is to wish for something which differentiates oneself from the rest (Deleuze & Guttari, 1987). From this perspective, one of the desires to learn English among the participants was to use English as a tool to marginalize others; it explicates that the individuals learn and use the English language to feel distinct. For instance, the a participant mentioned that she uses English to maintain distance with people:

> *"If there is an argument going on, it would end immediately if a person speaks English; then nobody would dare to argue with that person."*

This notion is further clarified by Blommaert (2010), who argued that English is considered an elite variety in a majority of the societies; hence, using English explicates that one gets power to silent the rest. Moreover, the data showed that English has been used by the participants as an avoidance strategy as shown in the following utterance:

> *"Using English helps me to maintain a distance with others and if I want to avoid somebody then I would start speaking English."*

This notion was evident in the interviews of nine out of twenty participants of this study. The desire to marginalize people might be the reflection of British policies which they used during their colonial rule in order to promote the English language (Bourdieu, 1991). This is also in line with Blommaert (2010) who defines 'English as high scale language' due to its symbolic power. Moreover, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the motivation for achieving a particular goal is also the result of historical and situational factors, which emerge as a desire for something. Colonization can be accounted as a one of the primary factors in this regard. Moreover, this relation between English language and colonialism has produced the images of *'Self and Other'* (Pennycook, 2002), where the individual's self longs to be superior and at the same time, the individual desires the others to stay inferior. This factor was reflected in responses of the participants as well.

Desire for Global Solidarity

Globalization has significantly impacted the socio-linguistic repertoire of the people and has transformed them into globalized societies (Kroon, Blommaert & Jie, 2013). English, being marked as a globalized language, ultimately connects elite classes globally (Blommaert, 2010). Consequently, the participants of the present study also depicted a strong realization of the fact that English is necessary for cross-linguistic connections. This theme was dominant in eight out of twenty interviews conducted for this study. For example, one of the participants remarked:

> *"People from different places will be students with you [when one goes abroad]. There will be people from Africa, Chinese, Japanese. One would make a group consisting of people from different diversities. This would help in making connections with the wider world."*

This statement depicts a desire to embed within the global community. Moreover, Ryan and Deci (2000) postulate that people would be intrinsically willing to do those things that are considered valuable in the society on the whole. In this case, the individuals highlight a wish to be valued in the globalized world and for that they desire to specialize in the English language

Corresponding with Marxian philosophy, Deleuze and Guttari (1987) expound that desire, directly or indirectly, relates itself to a materialistic concern. Based on the notion that the use of English provides more opportunities for business and trade (Khan & Chaudhary, 2012), the participants depicted a desire to be considered as equal to the natives and stated:

> *"You can say that we can [through English language] do trade and commerce transactions with the Western countries. This would enable us to work side by side with them."*

This notion illuminates the Pakistani youth yearning to be recognized in the West and to represent themselves as rightful participants in shaping the global community. English has become the lingua franca in the world and its competence enables one to communicate with different linguistic groups globally. Moreover, it is the dominant language of education and research in the world and henceforth, the study's participants consider it necessary to become an effective global citizen.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The desire for English is not just for the language, but for numerous other things that it represents (Motha & Lin, 2014). The participants' utilize English language as a means to project a positive image, acquire native characteristics, marginalize others, obtain communicative competence, adopt the Western lifestyle and integrate with the global community. Studying desire for language develops a consciousness about these factors. The desire attached with English can serve as a positive reinforcement to remain interested in their studies. These desires can keep learners motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al. 2018) as some desires are related to learners' imagined identities (Early & Norton, 2012), while others are about the practical utility of the English language. The desire for learning English is good for keeping the interest of the

students for learning and excelling in their major. They are thus, highly motivated to learn the English language and literature as they consider it a great source to become like English speakers. Motha and Lin (2014) believe that "This desire of the students compels them to make tremendous, sometimes unfathomable sacrifices in order to gain access to the [English] language" (p. 332). Not only English is considered necessary for native speakers' identity, but also as a source of social status because in Pakistan it has become necessary for social mobility and to be considered educated (Haidar, 2018).

However, some of the desires attached with the English language can be problematic and need serious reconsiderations. The learner, educator or policy maker can critically check their rationality as probably mere English learning will not help them to attain their desires (Motha & Lin, 2014). There is a need to educate the youth that only competence in English will not help them in achieving such goals. The participants have attached several unrealistic wishes with English language, which probably can result in disappointment. According to Motha and Lin (2014), this may lead to "Internal conflict, ambivalence, repression and even animosity" (p. 332). Hence, these students should be aware that learning English is crucial for communication; however, it does not guarantee prosperity and success. They will need to excel in other aspects of their studies for having a better future.

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