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Exploring Pakistani University Students' Perceptions of Effective English Language Teachers in Higher Education

Ammara Mumtaz

IELTS Trainer, Arise College of Professional Studies, Rawalpindi

Email: ummeammara2511@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Although the characteristics of effective teachers have been extensively investigated in educational research, limited attention has been given to students' perceptions of effective English language teachers within the Pakistani higher education context. This study examined the qualities of effective English language teachers as perceived by BS and MS English students at a public sector university in Pakistan. Adopting a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 100 participants through a structured questionnaire adapted from TESOL-related teaching and assessment frameworks and supplemented by semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, whereas qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students generally held positive perceptions of effective English language teachers and valued a combination of linguistic, pedagogical, and socio-affective competencies. Among these dimensions, linguistic competence emerged as the most highly valued attribute, particularly proficiency in grammar, fluency, pronunciation, and language use. Participants also emphasized the importance of effective teaching strategies, classroom management, motivation, and positive teacher–student relationships. Furthermore, statistically significant differences were observed between BS and MS students regarding their perceptions of certain teacher qualities. The study underscores the importance of preparing English language teachers who possess a balanced integration of linguistic expertise, pedagogical knowledge, and interpersonal skills to enhance learning outcomes in Pakistani ESL classrooms.

Keywords: English Language Teacher, Teacher Effectiveness, Student Perceptions, Higher Education

Introduction

In contemporary educational discourse, the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning has gained considerable attention among researchers, educators, and policy makers. Within this context, teaching effectiveness and teacher quality are widely recognized as key determinants of students' academic and personal development. Empirical evidence further suggests that teachers' intellectual and professional resources play a significant role in shaping students' learning experiences and in enhancing academic achievement. In addition, strong and collaborative teacher–student relationships have been shown to positively influence student achievement and engagement (Haq et al., 2032).

The literature also emphasizes the importance of developing a shared understanding of what constitutes an effective educator across different educational stakeholders. In this regard, students' perceptions of teaching are particularly significant, as learners remain central participants in the teaching and learning process. Prior studies have consistently indicated that specific teacher characteristics are closely associated with student achievement (Liu et al, 2025; Toropova et al., 2019). However, despite its importance,



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teaching effectiveness remains a complex and somewhat elusive construct due to the multifaceted nature of teaching itself (Job, 2017).

Recent scholarship highlights the need to further explore the qualities that characterize effective ESL teachers, particularly from the perspective of learners (Sadaf et al., 2026). Teaching effectiveness cannot be understood through a single dimension; rather, it encompasses multiple interrelated aspects, including instructional practices, emotional support, and the broader social dynamics of the classroom environment (Ghaffari et al., 2022). Teaching, therefore, is widely acknowledged as a multifarious and intricate process (Ahmad & Arif, 2020), requiring a diverse set of professional competencies from teachers, who remain central to the effectiveness of the entire educational process.

Within this complex framework, effective teaching is generally understood as a multidimensional construct involving mastery of subject matter, awareness of contextual teaching and learning conditions, and the application of appropriate pedagogical skills in the classroom. Park and Lee (2006) categorize these competencies into three broad domains: subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and socio-affective skills. Socio-affective skills refer to teachers' ability to facilitate meaningful communication, motivate learners to interact actively with teachers and peers, and create a supportive and relaxed classroom atmosphere conducive to language learning. Pedagogical knowledge involves the ability to transform linguistic knowledge into effective instructional practices, including clear instruction delivery, meaningful assessment, and constructive feedback. Subject matter knowledge, on the other hand, reflects teachers' depth of expertise and professional competence in the language they teach (Ariza Pinzón et al., 2025).

In addition to these core domains, some researchers have also emphasized personality traits as an important component of English language teaching effectiveness, particularly in relation to ethical behaviour and classroom interaction. Empirical studies on ESL learners' perceptions consistently reveal that linguistic proficiency is often considered the most important attribute of an effective English teacher (Ahmad & Arif, 2020), given its direct association with academic success (Sheng et al., 2011). Furthermore, strong content knowledge has been found to positively influence teachers' pedagogical decision-making and instructional adaptability (Jones & Moreland, 2015). Other studies highlight the importance of empathy, rapport-building, and positive personality traits in shaping students' perceptions of teacher effectiveness (Suleman et al., 2025).

The conceptual framework of this study is informed by the CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) guidelines developed by Cambridge University, which are also aligned with English language training practices supported by institutions such as the British Council. According to CELTA, effective English language teaching is grounded in three key domains: understanding learners and the teaching context, language analysis and awareness, and the development of teaching skills and professionalism (Al-Issa, 2017).

The first domain emphasizes a contextualized approach to teaching, where teachers are expected to consider learners' backgrounds, needs, and expectations in order to sustain motivation and enhance engagement. This corresponds closely to socio-affective competencies, which focus on fostering meaningful communication and supportive classroom interaction (Park & Lee, 2006). The second domain, language analysis and awareness, relates to teachers' content knowledge and their ability to demonstrate linguistic and professional competence in the subject they teach. The third domain, developing teaching skills and professionalism, corresponds to pedagogical knowledge, which includes classroom management, instructional planning, and the effective



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organization of learning activities such as group, pair, and individual work (Cirocki & Hallet, 2024).

Overall, while existing literature presents varied classifications of effective language teacher qualities, this study conceptualizes English teacher effectiveness as students' perceived satisfaction with their teachers' linguistic competence, pedagogical effectiveness, and personality traits that collectively contribute to successful English language learning.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the principles of sociocultural learning theory, which emphasizes the central role of social interaction and mediated learning in cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is fundamentally a socially situated process in which learners develop higher-order thinking through interaction with more knowledgeable others in meaningful contexts. From this perspective, learners should be engaged in task-based and problem-solving activities that encourage them to mobilize their cognitive and linguistic resources to achieve communicative competence.

A key construct of this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the distance between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more experienced individual. In this regard, the English teacher in an ESL classroom functions as the "more knowledgeable other," providing scaffolding that supports learners until they are able to internalize skills and perform independently. As Fahim and Haghani (2012) note, language development occurs when such mediated support is gradually withdrawn as learners gain autonomy.

Within the Pakistani ESL context, this theoretical orientation is particularly relevant, as English language learning often occurs in environments where exposure to authentic language use is limited. In such settings, teachers play a crucial mediating role in facilitating comprehension, guiding interaction, and supporting learners through structured scaffolding. The theory further underscores the importance of an integrated approach to language teaching, where language components such as vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills are not taught in isolation but are developed holistically through meaningful classroom tasks. This integrated process requires teachers who possess strong linguistic, pedagogical, and interpersonal competencies to effectively guide learners toward independent language use.

Thus, sociocultural theory provides a strong foundation for this study, as it highlights the significance of effective English language teachers who can mediate learning through interaction, scaffolding, and contextualized instruction within socially organized classroom environments. In the absence of such mediation, learners may struggle to progress beyond basic proficiency levels, particularly in ESL contexts like Pakistan where classroom instruction often serves as the primary source of language exposure.

In addition to its theoretical grounding, this study is informed by existing empirical and contextual evidence highlighting concerns about English language proficiency and teacher effectiveness. Local and regional studies have reported weak English language performance among students, often attributed to insufficiently prepared or linguistically underqualified English teachers (Khan, 2023; Misbah et al., 2017). In some cases, teachers' own limited proficiency in English has been identified as a contributing factor to students' poor learning outcomes (Jha, 2014). In the Pakistani ESL context, where disparities in language achievement persist, it is therefore reasonable to assume that teacher quality plays a decisive role in shaping student success or failure. This makes it essential to clearly conceptualize the attributes that constitute an effective English



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language teacher in higher education settings.

Another important concern addressed in this study is whether differences exist between undergraduate and postgraduate students in their perceptions of effective English language teachers. Previous research provides mixed findings in this regard. For instance, Saiyood (2016) reported that both English major and non-major university students valued qualities such as clear explanation, subject knowledge, motivational ability, fairness, and humour. However, Phothongsunan (2016) found significant differences between student groups in their perceptions of teaching methods, classroom behaviour, assessment practices, language proficiency, and teacher–student interaction. Similarly, Naper et al. (2025) identified linguistic knowledge as the most dominant perceived quality of an effective English teacher.

The importance of teacher qualities has been widely acknowledged in language education research (Suleman et al., 2025). However, in the Pakistani ESL University context, particularly at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels, there remains limited linguistic research examining how students at different academic stages perceive teacher effectiveness. Some related local studies, such as Naper et al. (2025), have explored perceptions of teaching effectiveness, but their focus was primarily on evaluating teacher education programs rather than examining student perceptions across academic levels in higher education.

Given that teacher effectiveness significantly influences learners' motivation, attitudes, and academic outcomes (Ghaffari et al., 2022), it is important to explore how university students conceptualize effective English teaching. Such insights are particularly valuable in ESL contexts like Pakistan, where opportunities for English exposure outside the classroom are limited, and teachers serve as the primary source of input and guidance.

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate Pakistani university students' perceptions of the qualities of an effective English language teacher and to examine whether differences exist between undergraduate and postgraduate students in this regard. In light of these objectives, the following research questions are formulated:

What qualities of an effective English language teacher are perceived by Pakistani university students in an ESL context?

Is there any difference between undergraduate and postgraduate students in their perceptions of the qualities of an effective English language teacher?

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design guided by the research questions developed to achieve the objectives of the study. The design incorporated a mixed-methods approach in which quantitative data were first collected through a structured questionnaire, followed by qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews for in-depth interpretation and triangulation of findings.

Participants

The population of the study consisted of 100 Pakistani university students enrolled in English Language and Linguistics programmes in an ESL context. The participants included two academic groups: undergraduate students enrolled in BS Linguistics, and graduate students enrolled in MS Linguistics.

Participants were selected from the Department of English Language and Linguistics University of Sargodha because such a relatively homogenous group is considered appropriate for examining a bounded system in depth (Creswell, 2012). This ensured that all respondents shared a common academic and linguistic background relevant to the



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study's focus on English teacher effectiveness.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, as they were considered information-rich cases capable of providing meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. The selection was also guided by the researchers' professional experience as an English language teacher spanning more than two decades.

Students of English language and Linguistics were deemed particularly suitable informants due to their direct exposure to English language instruction and their ability to critically evaluate teacher effectiveness in an ESL university context. In addition, convenience (available) sampling was also applied, as the participants were easily accessible to the researchers.

All the participants completed and returned the questionnaire. For the qualitative phase, ten students were purposefully selected for semi-structured interviews. The final sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which was reached by the eighth interview, although two additional interviews were conducted for confirmation. To address the research objectives, two data collection instruments were used: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview.

Data Collection

A structured questionnaire consisting of open-ended and Likert-scale items was used to collect quantitative data. Open-ended components allowed participants to express their views freely without restriction. The questionnaire was developed based on the Cambridge English Teaching framework (fifth edition) and was reviewed for content and face validity by two ELT experts.

The framework underlying the questionnaire was organized around three key domains: learners and teachers in context, language analysis and awareness, and developing teaching skills and professionalism. These domains align conceptually with Park and Lee (2006), who categorize effective English language teacher qualities into English proficiency (subject matter knowledge), pedagogical knowledge, and socio-affective skills. Similar conceptual frameworks have been adopted in recent studies with minor terminological variations but consistent theoretical meaning.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to complement the quantitative findings and provide deeper insights into students' perceptions. Since the study aimed to explore meanings, interpretations, and conceptual understandings, interviews were considered an appropriate method for data collection (Creswell, 2012).

The interview consisted of two open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' views on the most significant qualities of an effective English language teacher and their perceptions of which teacher competencies (content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, or socio-affective skills) most strongly influence learning outcomes, along with justification for their responses.

Ten students were interviewed, selected purposively based on their willingness to participate and articulate their views. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Procedure

Data were collected from 100 Pakistani ESL university students using the 18-item questionnaire. Before administering the instrument, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and provided clear instructions on how to respond to the questionnaire items. The questionnaire administration took approximately 30 minutes to complete. A similar orientation procedure was followed for both the pilot study participants and the interview



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participants to ensure clarity and consistency.

For qualitative data analysis, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then coded and organized into emerging themes aligned with the research questions. This systematic procedure allowed for a comprehensive integration of quantitative and qualitative findings in line with the study's mixed-methods design.

Analysis

The quantitative data collected through the survey questionnaire were coded and entered into SPSS version 23 for analysis. To address the first research question, descriptive statistics, including mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), were computed to determine Pakistani university students' perceptions of effective English language teacher qualities in an ESL context.

To examine whether differences existed between undergraduate and postgraduate students (BS and MS levels) regarding their perceptions of effective English teachers, an independent samples t-test was employed. This inferential analysis was used to determine whether academic level significantly influenced students' views on teacher effectiveness.

The qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically to gain deeper insights into students' perceptions of effective English language teachers in the Pakistani ESL context. The interview protocol focused on three key domains derived from the theoretical framework: contextualized teaching approach (socio-affective skills), linguistic competence (content knowledge), and teaching skills and professionalism (pedagogical knowledge). This allowed for triangulation and richer interpretation of findings beyond the questionnaire data (Creswell, 2012).

Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data. Recurring patterns and meaningful statements were identified, coded, and organized into themes representing students' perceptions of effective English teachers. Similar codes were grouped together while redundancies were removed to ensure clarity and coherence. The data were systematically organized and stored electronically to facilitate analysis. Thematic analysis was then conducted, and pseudonyms were used to ensure participant anonymity.

Results

The results are presented in alignment with the two research questions.

The overall findings indicated that Pakistani university students held a strongly positive perception regarding the importance of effective English teacher qualities. The descriptive analysis showed a generally high level of agreement across all categories (M = 3.43, SD = 0.441).

Table 1

Overall Perceptions of Effective English Language Teacher Qualities among Pakistani ESL Students

Variable	N	M	SD
Overall Perception of Effective ELT Qualities	100	3.43	0.441

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

Overall, the results revealed a clear ranking of teacher qualities as perceived by the students in the Pakistani ESL context. Linguistic (content) knowledge emerged as the most highly valued category (M = 3.89, SD = 0.699), followed by pedagogical



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knowledge ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.703$), while socio-affective/contextualized teaching approach was rated comparatively lower ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.672$).

Table 2

Students' Perceptions of Major Categories of Effective English Language Teacher Qualities

Quality Category	M	SD	Rank
Linguistic (Content) Knowledge	3.89	0.699	1
Pedagogical Knowledge	3.51	0.703	2
Socio-affective Skills	3.11	0.672	3

Note. Higher mean scores indicate greater perceived importance.

Students frequently emphasized that an effective English teacher should possess strong linguistic competence, including the ability to explain grammar rules, use appropriate instructional strategies, and enhance learners' fluency and accuracy.

Table 3

Students' Perceptions of Socio-affective Qualities of Effective English Language Teachers

Item	M
Understanding learners' backgrounds, motivations, and needs	3.77
Developing and maintaining learner motivation and responding to expectations	3.72
Awareness of teacher roles at different stages of instruction	2.30

Note. Only the highest- and lowest-rated items are reported.

Analysis of socio-affective skills revealed variation in students' responses across the six questionnaire items. The highest-rated item was understanding learners' backgrounds, motivations, and needs ($M = 3.77$), followed by the ability to develop and maintain motivation and respond to learner expectations ($M = 3.72$). In contrast, the lowest-rated item was awareness of teacher roles at different stages of instruction ($M = 2.30$), indicating comparatively less emphasis on this dimension among students.

Table 4

Students' Perceptions of Linguistic Competencies of Effective English Language Teachers

Linguistic Competency	M
Use of appropriate strategies, approaches, and techniques	4.22
Ability to identify grammar rules related to words, sentences, and texts	4.17
Use of a range of reference materials for language teaching	4.15
Category Statistics	Value
Overall Mean	3.85

The data strongly indicated that students placed the greatest importance on linguistic competence in English language teachers ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.601$). Within this category, the highest-rated item was the use of appropriate strategies, approaches, and techniques ($M = 4.22$), followed by the use of a range of reference materials ($M = 4.15$), and the ability to identify grammar rules related to words, sentences, and texts ($M = 4.17$). These findings highlight students' strong preference for teachers who demonstrate high-level



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language proficiency and instructional command of English in the Pakistani ESL classroom.

Table 5

Students' Perceptions of Pedagogical Competencies of Effective English Language Teachers

Pedagogical Competency	M	SD
Establishing and maintaining good rapport with learners	4.08	1.006
Creating a constructive learning environment and ensuring classroom safety	3.96	1.113
Teaching learners at different levels with limited resources	2.71	1.287
Category Statistics	Value	
Overall Mean	3.48	
Standard Deviation	0.669	

Note. Teaching learners with limited resources received the lowest rating within the pedagogical category.

Students also expressed positive perceptions regarding pedagogical skills, though this category ranked second overall ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.669$). The highest-rated pedagogical item was the ability to establish and maintain good rapport with learners ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.006$), followed by creating a constructive learning environment and ensuring classroom safety and order ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.113$).

Table 6

Rank Order of the Most Preferred Qualities of Effective English Language Teachers in Pakistani ESL Classrooms

Rank	Teacher Quality
1	Strong linguistic competence
2	Effective pedagogical knowledge
3	Socio-affective and contextualized teaching skills

Note. Rankings are based on mean scores reported by students.

However, responses indicated relatively lower agreement for the item related to teaching learners at different levels with limited resources ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.287$), suggesting that students placed less emphasis on resource constraints as a defining feature of teacher effectiveness in this category. Overall, with the exception of this item, students demonstrated a generally positive perception of pedagogical competencies as an essential component of effective English teaching in the Pakistani ESL context.

Table 7

Illustrative Group Statistics for BS and MS Students

Quality Category	Group	N	M	SD
Socio-affective Skills	BS	50	3.32	0.65
	MS	50	2.90	0.61
Linguistic Knowledge	BS	50	4.05	0.58
	MS	50	3.73	0.60
Pedagogical Knowledge	BS	50	3.56	0.67



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	MS	50	3.40	0.66
Overall Perception	BS	50	3.64	0.38
	MS	50	3.22	0.42

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether BS and MS students differed in their perceptions of effective English language teacher qualities. Results indicated statistically significant differences between the two groups regarding socio-affective skills, $t(98) = 3.33$, $p = .001$, and linguistic knowledge, $t(98) = 2.71$, $p = .008$. BS students reported significantly higher ratings than MS students on both dimensions. However, no significant difference was found regarding pedagogical knowledge, $t(98) = 1.20$, $p = .233$. The overall perception score also differed significantly between the groups, $t(98) = 5.23$, $p < .001$, suggesting that undergraduate students generally attributed greater importance to effective English teacher qualities than postgraduate students.

Table 8

Illustrative Independent Samples t-Test Results

Quality Category	BS Mean	MS Mean	t	Df	p
Socio-affective Skills	3.32	2.90	3.33	98	.001
Linguistic Knowledge	4.05	3.73	2.71	98	.008
Pedagogical Knowledge	3.56	3.40	1.20	98	.233
Overall Perception	3.64	3.22	5.23	98	< .001

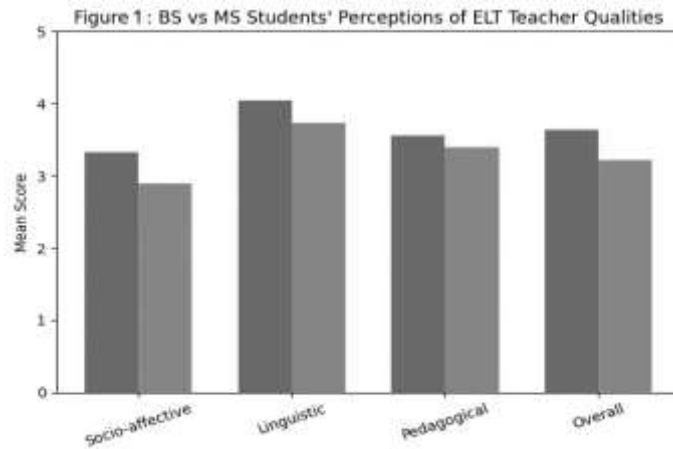
Discussion

This study investigated how Pakistani university students in an ESL context conceptualize the qualities of an effective English language teacher and whether differences exist between BS and MS students in their perceptions. Overall, the findings indicate that students expect a balanced and multidimensional combination of teacher qualities across linguistic, pedagogical, and socio-affective domains. This general orientation is consistent with earlier research (Saiyood, 2016), which also emphasizes that effective English teachers are perceived as those who integrate multiple competencies rather than relying on a single skill set.

Despite this holistic understanding, Pakistani ESL students in this study placed the greatest emphasis on linguistic or content knowledge as the most important attribute of an effective English teacher. This prioritization of English language proficiency aligns with previous research findings (Ahmad & Arif, 2020), which similarly reported that students tend to value teachers' linguistic competence above other professional qualities. In the Pakistani ESL context, this preference is understandable given the limited exposure to English outside the classroom, where the teacher often becomes the primary or sole linguistic model. Consequently, students rely heavily on teachers' language proficiency to support comprehension of academic content and development of language skills. This finding also supports earlier studies that link strong language proficiency with academic success (Sheng et al., 2011).



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Regarding socio-affective skills and the use of a contextualized teaching approach, students highlighted the importance of establishing and maintaining positive rapport, understanding learners' needs and backgrounds, and effectively managing diverse classroom activities such as group, pair, and individual work. These findings are consistent with prior research emphasizing the role of supportive and context-sensitive teaching practices in enhancing student motivation and engagement (Phothongsunan, 2016). In the Pakistani ESL classroom, such socio-affective competencies are particularly significant for sustaining learner interest and facilitating meaningful interaction in a context where English is not widely used beyond academic settings.

In terms of pedagogical knowledge, students rated teaching skills and professionalism as the second most important dimension of teacher effectiveness. Specifically, they emphasized the ability to build positive teacher–student relationships, create a supportive learning environment, and maintain classroom order. The interview data further confirmed that both BS and MS students generally regarded pedagogical competence as a key requirement of effective English teaching. These findings resonate with earlier studies that underline the importance of pedagogical knowledge in shaping effective classroom practices (Phothongsunan, 2016).

The inferential analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between BS and MS students in their perceptions of effective English teacher qualities in the Pakistani ESL context. This suggests that academic level influences how students evaluate teacher effectiveness, with BS and MS students demonstrating different priorities in their responses.

Further analysis indicated that BS students placed greater emphasis on both socio-affective skills and linguistic knowledge compared to MS students. One possible explanation is that MS students, having spent more time in university-level ESL learning environments, may have developed greater familiarity with different teaching styles and classroom dynamics, leading them to place relatively less emphasis on socio-affective dimensions. Additionally, their increased exposure to advanced English coursework may have enhanced their linguistic self-confidence, thereby reducing their dependence on teacher linguistic competence. Linguistic self-confidence refers to an individual's belief in their ability to use a second language effectively and adaptively (Liu et al., 2025).

The differences observed between the two groups highlight how academic experience shapes perceptions of teacher effectiveness in the Pakistani ESL context. While BS students appear to prioritize immediate linguistic support and affective classroom facilitation, MS students tend to adopt a more balanced or critically informed perspective shaped by extended academic exposure.



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Conclusion

This study examined Pakistani BS and MS students' perceptions of the qualities of an effective English language teacher in an ESL context. The findings reveal that students expect English teachers to demonstrate a balanced combination of linguistic competence, pedagogical skill, and socio-affective ability, although linguistic knowledge remains the most dominant perceived requirement. This emphasis is likely influenced by students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom and their reliance on teachers as primary linguistic models.

The results also provide support for Vygotsky's socially mediated learning theory, which emphasizes the importance of teacher scaffolding and guided interaction in developing learners' cognitive and linguistic abilities. In ESL contexts such as Pakistan, teachers play a central mediating role in supporting learners through structured interaction, modeling, and scaffolding that enable gradual development toward independent language use.

The relatively lower emphasis on socio-affective skills is noteworthy, given that such competencies are crucial for motivation, engagement, and emotional support in language learning environments. This suggests a need for greater awareness among students and educators regarding the importance of affective and contextual dimensions of language teaching.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of aligning English teacher education programs in Pakistan with students' expectations while also broadening their understanding of effective teaching to include linguistic, pedagogical, and socio-affective dimensions in an integrated manner.

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