

Higher Education Commission's English-Speaking Curriculum: The Preparation for Speaking Skills at Graduate level in Pakistan

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Abstract: *It is essential to have good speaking skills to succeed in job industries after graduation. The study delves into the speaking curriculum offered by universities, as approved by HEC, to evaluate its effectiveness in preparing students for their professional careers. Possessing strong speaking skills is crucial for success in post-graduation job industries. The study's framework draws from a language teaching model developed by Richard and Rodger (2001). The research employs an exploratory, case study, and qualitative research design. Data was gathered through teacher interviews, content analysis, and classroom observations in both public and private universities in Islamabad. The findings indicate that the current curriculum only partially equips undergraduate students with the necessary speaking skills for their future careers. Moreover, the study proposes suggestions to enhance the implementation of HEC's speaking curriculum and classroom instruction in higher education, offering recommendations for its effective execution.*

Keywords: HEC's speaking curriculum, speaking skills, job skills, curriculum analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, spoken English is considered the most crucial out of the four language abilities (Effendi et al., 2020). The objective of speaking skills is to nurture communicative proficiencies that are crucial in empowering pupils to utilise language in the diverse roles it plays in real-life situations (Nair, 2000). The workplace's linguistic environment is changing because of the worldwide spread of English and the global movement of the economy. Language teachers are now required to meet business demands and equip students for the professional world, highlighting the importance of applicants being proficient in English (Doan & Hamid, 2021). English's extensive utilization, especially inside Pakistan's educational framework, is leading students to experience pressure to communicate in English. (Ayub & Lodhi, 2016). Universities have the authority to independently decide on their curricula'

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development, implementation, assessment, modification, and improvement. This autonomy is crucial to ensure decentralization and universities' independence in creating curricula. The responsibility for executing curriculum changes has been transferred to universities, which has significantly impacted a large part of their curricula (Zamharir et al., 2023). The Higher Education Commission (HEC) in Pakistan has implemented a policy allowing institutions to develop and offer their English language courses curriculum. This policy grants universities the flexibility to modify their curricula to the unique requirements of their pupils and the employment landscape. Teachers are responsible for creating and presenting lectures, sharing knowledge in the classroom, and employing different instructional techniques (Imran & Wyatt, 2019).

Background Of Study

The HEC's curriculum includes functional English as a fundamental subject to enhance academic performance and assist career progression. Functional English is designed to enhance learners' proficiency in the four critical areas of communication: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. It aids students in understanding the mechanics of speech, accurately producing English phonemes, and speaking English with appropriate emphasis and intonation. Upon further scrutiny of the current situation, colleges allocate a mere 3 to 4 hours per week for the instruction of 'Functional English' throughout a standard semester duration of 3 to 4 months. The HEC Functional English program was designed with mandatory core courses in the English language that must be taken across all four years of BS programs.

- English I: Reading & Writing Skills
- English II: Composition Writing
- English III: Communication and presentation skills
- English IV: Academic Reading & Writing Level (OPTIONAL FOR UNIVERSITIES) (HEC, 2018)

HEC mingled these four functional English courses in undergraduate policy in 2023 into functional English and expository Writing. HEC claims that effective communication is one of the most critical aspects of education and is crucial for success in the workplace. The functional English course emphasizes fundamental elements of the English language, including grammar, vocabulary, and practical usage in real-life contexts. The course on expository writing is designed to enhance students' academic writing abilities, focusing on technical and report writing skills (UGP, 2023).

The present study examined communication proficiency exclusively in the context of English-speaking Skills. Universities are supposed to create lectures that cover all the HEC's undergraduate policy 2023. The lectures are designed to be delivered within 15-20 sessions. Every lesson is allocated 110-120 minutes.

Problem Statement

In Pakistan, many students commonly view English as a third language rather than a second language because of the different and mix cultures (Ayub, 2020). Students commonly use their native language in their homes and Urdu at public places, whereas English is the medium of instruction in educational institutions. According to the learners that students utilize multiple languages in diverse circumstances. ESL learners need assistance cultivating practical communication skills to meet society's demands for interpersonal skills (Ayub, 2020). Even though English is the primary language used for teaching, still students require assistance with composing their CVs, formal letters, practical reports, interviews, and post-graduation interviews. In educational institutions, teachers need to align their teaching methods with industry needs (Zafar, 2016). The curriculum design and implementation fail to enhance students' intellectual abilities and adequately prepare them for industry demands. Google recently hosted a coding competition, and the outcomes were concerning. Pakistan is placed 1336th in the poll. India was rated sixth, and Bangladesh was ranked thirty-ninth. Pakistan produces approximately 25,000 to 30,000 computer science graduates annually. Despite the substantial amount, our ranking at 1336th place was solely attributed to the inefficacy of our educational system (Ali, 2023). The job market requires proficiency in English and strong communication skills due to differences in language and cultural norms. The HEC's functional English course is designed to improve communication and presentation skills, which are essential for many career sectors. It was essential to investigate the extent to which public and private universities follow the HEC aims of the undergraduate policy 2023 and how the course material is practically applied. The study assessed how public and private universities comply with the HEC's curriculum implementation and prepare graduates with speaking skills for their careers. To determine whether universities prepare graduates' speaking skills for industries following are the research objectives.

- To determine whether universities appropriately implement HEC's functional English course to teach English speaking skills.
- To determine whether universities offer fieldwork to enhance students' job-oriented speaking skills in natural settings.

The following research questions drive the study.

- How do private and public sector universities prepare graduates' speaking skills for industries?
- How do private and public sector universities appropriately implement HEC's functional English course to teach English speaking skills?
- Do private and public sector universities offer fieldwork to enhance students' job-oriented speaking skills in natural settings?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Islam et al., (2022) stated that learning is a process that necessitates communication to gain knowledge. Fluency in speaking is crucial for pupils as English is the primary language of instruction. Lack of proficiency in using the language in the classroom may lead to a lack of

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confidence or comfort in using English in ordinary conversations outside the school. Thus, speaking is an essential talent that students should hone and master. Functionalists believe universities should primarily focus on preparing students for future job positions and developing the workforce. This study examines the speaking curriculum created by universities and approved by HEC at the undergraduate level, which is crucial for employment opportunities. The present study theoretical framework is based on the language teaching model proposed by Richards and Roger (2001). The model comprises three levels, first one is approach that is instructional techniques to introduce a new language and elucidate and exemplify the target language's formal, communicative, or other facets, second is design: "The level refers to how the syllabus is structured to achieve the desired outcomes" and the procedural level involves analyzing the strategies and approaches, classroom activities, and resources employed. The framework created by Richards and Rodgers in 2001 is an ideal model for scrutinizing the curriculum in this study. The study examined the procedural level of this model to analyze the effective implementation and practical use of the HEC undergraduate policy 2023 in both private and public universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The curriculum is a dynamic process that requires frequent updates and is not a fixed state. In Pakistan, the curriculum development could be more active. The major obstacle to educational reforms in Pakistan is executing a curriculum tailored to meet specific needs (Haider, 2016). An investigation into achieving the intended goals and identifying the individuals who would assist in their execution is necessary in Pakistan (Aziz et al., 2014). The worldwide expansion of the English language highlights the increasing necessity for individuals to have outstanding English communication skills and the related difficulties linked with the language. English language students may feel overwhelmed, tense, and anxious when speaking English (Ayub & Lodhi, 2016). English for Specific Purposes (ESP) focuses on enhancing communication skills for individuals in many sectors, such as business, economics, science, medicine, and more. Business English (BE) evolved as a branch of English for Specific Purposes, emphasizing vocabulary and skills needed in a professional environment (Mohammad & Ali, 2023; Dugosija, 2021). Proficient communication is a crucial attribute of a well-educated individual, especially in professional environments. Zafar (2016) criticized Pakistan's educational system for its severe shortcomings and failure to reach global benchmarks. Pakistan needs a standardized educational system. It is divided into two sections: Urdu and English. The disparity extends beyond linguistic differences and carries significant implications. There is a common perception that individuals educated in Urdu medium schools may need help to compete with those educated in English medium institutions. This prevalent attitude in our society contributes to the low self-esteem experienced by graduates from Urdu medium schools, resulting in inadequate communication skills, usually in English, during job assessments and interviews. Urdu medium school graduates lack proficiency in English, a crucial ability in today's job market (Zafar, 2016). Curriculum preparation is crucial for setting employment objectives and readying students for the workforce. The problem with the curriculum involves both the content and the delivery technique. Pakistan and other nations

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must transition from rote learning to an educational system that promotes critical thinking, questioning, and creativity (Aziz et al., 2014). Sahito et al. (2017) studied the necessity of remedial English teaching in universities in Sindh and identified the main reason for its introduction. Providing remedial English teaching for students whose language challenges impact their academic success is essential. The students were enraged by the university administration's inadequate learning facilities. The strategy to enhance language competency includes employing language teachers with inadequate skills, providing cheap salaries, and offering minimal material support (Sahito et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on exploratory, case study and qualitative research design. The data was collected from public and private universities in Islamabad, Pakistan. It involved interviews, classroom observations, and content analysis to gather data. The universities develop their curricula after the Higher Education Commission (HEC) approval. The study analyzed the curriculum presented by four university instructors (two from public universities and two from private institutions) in a PowerPoint format. Using observation sheets, data was collected through classroom observations, with twelve observations at public and private universities. Five English professors were interviewed to gather additional data. Each professor has over ten years of experience in instructing English at the university level, and the interviews lasted around 25 to 30 minutes. The teachers signed the consent letters before recording; the interviews were conducted in Urdu and English. The study focused on speaking skills that are relevant and necessary in various business sectors. Specifically, the study created codes about speaking skills relevant to different employment sectors, which were part of the HEC's Communication and Presentation Skills course (HEC, 2018). The codes discussed in the study are interviews, presentation skills, communication in a team, and speaking with confidence (HEC, 2018). The codes were derived from the HEC's undergraduate policy 2023 and included implementation, expository writing, grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and fieldwork.

RESULTS

Through a comprehensive examination of English-related tasks across public and private universities, data analysis offers invaluable insights. This data is based on a thorough analysis of industry-specific functions that require English proficiency. The findings are presented in easy-to-understand tables and graphs, serving as valuable tools for researchers to explore the correlation between language proficiency and industry-specific tasks.

TABLE 4.1: Job-Oriented Speaking Task at Public & Private Universities

Speaking tasks related to the job	Interview skill in %		Presentation skill in %		Communication in a team in %		Speaking with confidence in %	
	public	private	Public	private	Public	private	Public	private
Interview	21.4%	22.4	51.7	26.1	17.2%	37.7%	9.7%	13.8%
Classroom	6.2%	21.1	85.4	43.4	8.4%	29.1%	0%	6.4%
Content Analysis	18.9	24.8	65.5	45.9	13.7	17.2	3.2	12.1

The table (4.1) shows interview data on speaking tasks in public and private universities. In public universities, teachers focus on interview skills 21.4%, 51.7% on presentation skills, 17.2% on group discussions, and 9.7% on speaking with confidence. Classroom observations reveal that teachers focus 6.2% on interview skills, 85.4% on presentation skills, 8.4% on group discussion, and 0% on speaking confidently while learning speaking skills in public universities. Furthermore, content analysis of the functional English curriculum prepared by university teachers shows that in public universities, teachers focus 18.9% on interview skills, 65.5% on presentation skills, 13.7% on group discussions, and 3.2% on speaking confidently while learning speaking skills in the classroom. In private universities, interview data shows that among speaking tasks related to jobs, teachers focus on interview skills 22.4%, 26.1% on presentation skills, 37.7% on group discussions, and 13.8% on speaking with confidence. Classroom observations reveal that teachers focus 21.1% on interview skills, 43.4% on presentation skills, 29.1% on group discussions, and 6.4% on speaking confidently while learning speaking skills. Moreover, content analysis of the functional English curriculum prepared by university teachers shows that in private universities, teachers focus 24.8% on interview skills, 45.9% on presentation skills, 17.2% on group discussion, and 12.1% on speaking confidently while learning speaking skills in the classroom.

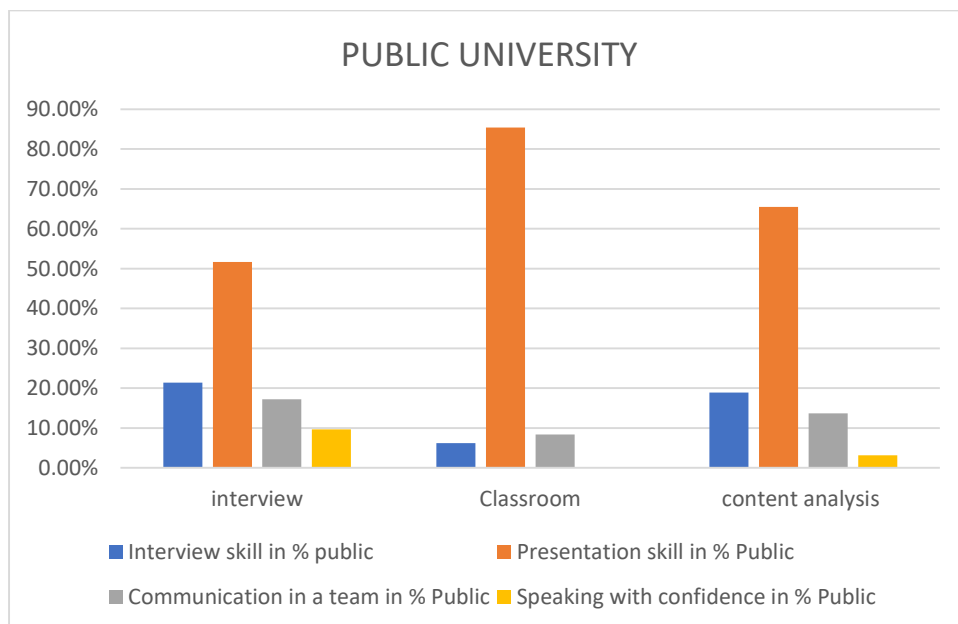


FIGURE 4.1: Speaking Task at Public University

The graph (4.1) provides a detailed insight into the English-speaking tasks related to various industries at public universities. The graph depicts the data in a graphical format, making understanding the trends and patterns easier.

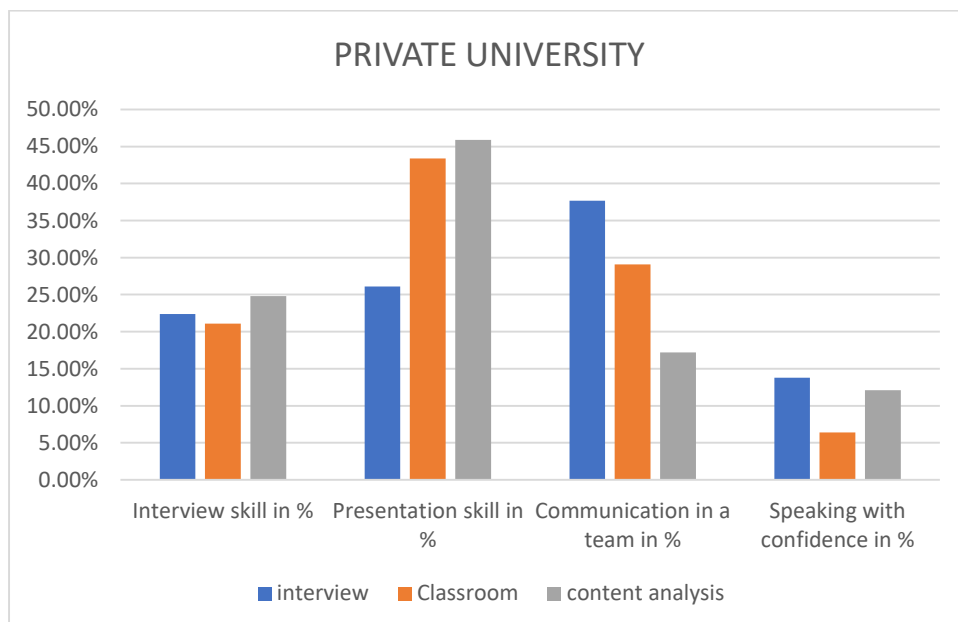


FIGURE 4.2: Speaking Task at Private University

The above graph (4.2) shows the English-speaking tasks related to industries at private universities. The data included in the graph is based on a comprehensive analysis of the tasks associated with industries that require English proficiency.

TABLE 4.2: Implementation of Language skills and Field Work in Public Universities

Public Universities	Implementation				Field Work
	Expository Writing	Grammar	Vocabulary	Speaking	
Content Analysis	23%	33%	7%	37%	0%
Interviews	8%	22%	11%	59%	0%
Classroom Observation	17%	63%	5%	15%	0%

Table (4.2) contains content analysis data of functional English curricula prepared by university teachers. It shows that in public universities, teachers focus on 23% expository writing, 33% grammar, 7% vocabulary, and 37% speaking skills. However, they offer 0% fieldwork to students to experience real-world job-related English-speaking skills in a real-world setting.

The data collected from interviews shows that in public universities, teachers focus 8% on expository writing, 22% on grammar, 11% on vocabulary, and 59% on speaking skills. Furthermore, 0% fieldwork was mentioned to enhance the student's English-speaking skills in a real-world setting.

The data collected from classroom observation shows that teachers in public universities focus 17% on expository writing, 63% on grammar, 5% on vocabulary, and 15% on speaking skills. It was observed that there was 0% fieldwork for the learners to prepare them for a career.

TABLE 4.3: Implementation of Language skills and Field Work in Private Universities

Private Universities	Implementation of Language Skills				Field Work
	Expository Writing	Grammar	Vocabulary	Speaking	
Content Analysis	16%	35%	12%	43%	0%
Interviews	10%	21%	7%	62%	0%
Classroom Observation	11%	57%	3%	29%	0%

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The data from Table (4.3) provides a content analysis of the functional English curricula prepared by university teachers. It shows that in private universities, teachers focus on different areas: 16% on expository writing, 35% on grammar, 12% on vocabulary, and 43% on speaking skills. However, there is no provision for fieldwork to help students gain real-world job-related English-speaking skills.

Interview data also indicates that in private universities, teachers allocate 10% on expository writing, 21% on grammar, 7% on vocabulary, and 62% on speaking skills. Similarly, fieldwork is not emphasized to enhance students' English-speaking skills in real-world scenarios.

Classroom observations demonstrate that private university teachers dedicate 11% to expository writing, 57% to grammar, 3% to vocabulary, and 23% to speaking skills. Notably, fieldwork must be included in preparing learners for their future careers.

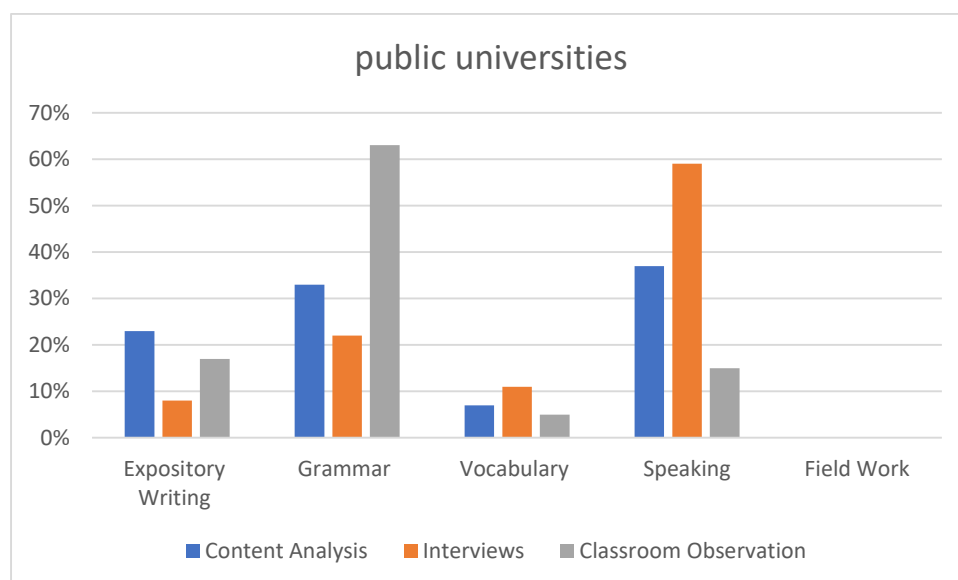


FIGURE 4.3: Implementation of Language Skills and Field Work in Public University
The above figure (4.3) shows the implementation of language skills given in HEC's undergraduate policy 2023 and fieldwork (job-related speaking skills actual practice) in public universities.

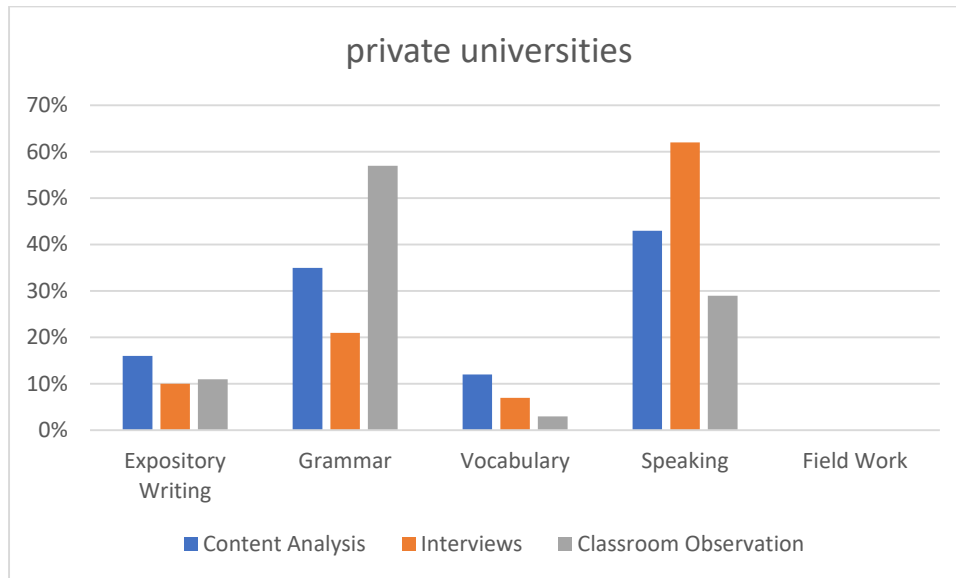


FIGURE 4.4: Implementation Language Skills and Field Work in Private University

The above figure (4.4) shows the implementation of language skills given in HEC's undergraduate policy 2023 and fieldwork (job-related speaking skills actual practice) in private universities.

DISCUSSIONS

In 2018, before HEC's undergraduate policy 2023, English-speaking topics related to the jobs industries were given in the content list; now, universities are making and following the curricula of their choice according to the undergraduate policy 2023. HEC had not provided any content list yet. According to findings of the study private universities often have more flexibility and resources to implement the educational policy, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) provides effectively. The insights gathered from interviews with teachers from public and private universities indicated that their primary objective is to enhance students' speaking abilities. However, an in-depth analysis of content and observations in the classroom revealed that both public and private universities, even at the graduate level, tend to prioritize teaching grammar over other advanced skills. Additionally, it was noted that private universities emphasize developing students' speaking skills more than public universities.

HEC should strictly evaluate all university programs to ensure they align with industry expectations (Chaudhry & Muhammad, 2020). It is essential to examine practices and processes comprehensively for policy to be effective. The policy must deeply understand how teachers teach in the classroom and their requirements for teaching EMI courses. (Akhter, 2022).

Implication to Research and Practice

The ability to speak English fluently is crucial in various job industries. The study is a valuable tool for researchers, educators, and students interested in exploring the relationship between

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language proficiency and industry-specific tasks. Many employers require their employees to be proficient in spoken English. Therefore, this research is valuable to the Higher Education Commission (HEC), curriculum designers, universities, and other higher education institutes as it provides insight into the job-specific skills that employers are looking for. The findings of this study will enable the HEC to ascertain the necessity for a uniform syllabus across universities, emphasizing skills essential for career advancement. Moreover, it will also enlighten students about the pivotal skills they should prioritize mastering before entering the professional realm. By prioritizing the development and implementation of job-oriented curricula, educational institutions in Pakistan can better equip graduates with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their careers and contribute meaningfully to the economy. The main objective of a curriculum audit is to examine if the educational system possesses a well-managed instructional program (curriculum) that is created, implemented, and assessed according to appropriate criteria. The curriculum audit should assess the extent to which a curriculum is being implemented in classrooms and the level of analysis applied to it. Therefore, an essential element of the curriculum is the alignment of the curriculum (Jabbar, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Through a comprehensive analysis, the study identified commonalities and discrepancies related to English speaking skills between public and private institutions and areas that need improvement in both sectors. The field work is mentioned in HEC's undergraduate policy 2023 but absent in a universities' curriculum significantly impacts graduates' careers. Fieldwork bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge gained in classrooms and practical, real-world applications. Engaging in hands-on experiences through fieldwork equips students with valuable skills and competencies relevant to their field and enhances their problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and teamwork skills. Implementing HEC's undergraduate policy 2023 properly can enable the students to understand their respective subjects better, providing them with the knowledge and skills required to thrive in competitive job markets. Incorporating job-related speaking skills can further enhance the student's communication abilities, enabling them to effectively articulate their ideas and thoughts professionally.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has examined the job-relevant speaking skills taught at the graduate level. However, researchers can still explore the writing skills required at work. More research is needed at the master's level relevant to the teaching and learning of English required in the job market. Only universities can adapt their teaching methods, incorporate modern technologies, and provide practical experiences that align with the aims and objectives of the HEC. This proactive approach can better prepare students for the job market by focusing on relevant skills and practical knowledge. The linguistic landscape of workplaces is evolving due to the global dissemination of English and the international business shift. Further investigation is needed from the employees and employers to explore the growth of English language usage in the job

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market, especially in developing nations. Language teachers are now required to meet business demands and equip students for the professional world, highlighting the importance of applicants being proficient in English (Doan & Hamid, 2021).

DECLARATIONS

Ethics approval

Conflict of interest: Not applicable.

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