

The Role of language in Education: An Analytical Review of Pakistan's Education Policy 2009

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Abstract

The focus of this discussion is the latest language policy in Pakistan, suggested in 2009. The theme of “divide and rule” has been an essential part of language policy in Pakistan through the colonialist role of English during the colonial period as well as the post-independence period. We have analyzed the role of proposed language in NEP (National Education Policy), 2009 in terms of educational divide. The conclusion of this discussion is that teaching in mother tongue for primary education can be successfully implemented. It will help minimize dropout level and help children in their educational careers at the same time. A strategy for the development of English language teaching in Pakistan has also been suggested in this paper. This strategy has been outlined, keeping in view the objectives of the NEP and the available resources.

Keywords: Education Policy, Language Policy, Educational divide, Primary Education, Medium of Instruction

Introduction

In the colonial period (1857-1947), English was introduced in Education as a key to join civil service and to promote educated elite class that shared the interests of the British in the Indo-Pak sub-continent. After independence in 1947, the ruling class in Pakistan carried forward the colonial legacy with an over-developed, exclusive English-medium education for the elite, but on the other hand, an Urdu or vernacular-medium education was introduced for the masses. The post-independence era, has a strong nationalist current to constructs Pakistan as a nation unified by one language: Urdu. The national unity of Pakistan feels threatened by more than one languages, as it happened in the case of East Pakistan (Bangal) by declaring Urdu as the national language and omitting Bangla as an important state language. However, the making of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971 resolved the Urdu-Bengali controversy. The dilemma of this situation was the complexity of identifying a national language between four provincial languages, English as the colonial legacy, Arabic as an Islamic identity and Urdu as a symbol of newly found Muslim nationalism. This in place was complicated by the 1973 Constitution which declared Urdu (the national language), to be the official language within fifteen years, and English would be the de facto official language, until arrangements could be made to implement the constitution.

The time frame of fifteen years stipulated for Urdu to become the official language has passed since long. English is still language of power. This policy of differentiating between those that can afford it and those that cannot, creates a similar divide that was created between the colonizer and the colonized. English is for the elite ruling class and Urdu and other regional languages are for masses. This distinction in education system is a powerful marker of social privileges and power distribution in Pakistan.

Pakistan's commitment to use Urdu as the medium of instruction in its state schools is evident from the whole national history of sixty-five years. Pakistan is ambitious to provide an easy access to English language learning at the same time. This two dimensional policy, itself, is a barrier to an effective education system. The most recent *National Education Policy 2009*, has proposed to promote the country's main regional languages as the medium of instruction. The aim is to include the poorest in the mainstream education and skill development system to alleviate poverty.

The total Population; in Pakistan was last reported to be 176745364 in 2011(World Bank report, 2012). The population of Pakistan is not only very large but it is very young as well. One third of the population is aged 0-14 years. 8th half the population is under 20, and two thirds are under 30. So almost half of the population is of school age. Pakistan has an economically divided society. Sixty percent of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. The top ten percent of the population, holds more than a quarter(26.5%) of the state income. The language policy for schools, inherited from the British rule, is badly effecting the state education. The economic divide can

be bridged by providing education to students in their most familiar language by acknowledging Pakistan's multilingual identity in classrooms. More than 70 languages are spoken in Pakistan. Urdu, the national language and the medium of instruction in the majority of state schools, is spoken by just 7% of the population. So 93% of the population has some language other than Urdu as their mother tongue and they do not have access to education in their mother tongue. They face significant challenges while learning Urdu as a second language in school. They are surrounded by their local home language outside the school.

Children, in the rural areas, have to face major obstacles like slower progress in reading and writing due to the lack of support from parents in Urdu, during their early school years. In Pakistan, only 60% of children complete primary school and only 10% finish secondary school, while 59% of girls attend primary school compared to 73% of boys. More than 70% of population lives in rural areas. The proposal to provide early-years education in regional languages, with Urdu taught as a second language in primary school can lead to a lesser dropout rate in village schools. English, as a foreign language, should be taught from the middle school, with the option to introduce English-medium education later in secondary school.

National Education Policy 2009

The most recent national educational policy document in Pakistan (NEP 2009) declares English as a subject from class one onwards, and as a medium of instruction for science and mathematics from class 4 onwards (NEP 2009:27). The policy reinforces English as the medium of instruction for higher education, as well as for science and technology. English is, hence, considered inevitable for higher education. Urdu is the unifying force for the Pakistani nation. The policy recommends literacy in both Urdu and English language, in addition to one of the local languages. A higher level of academic qualification for the teachers has been recommended but no recommendations have been made for the career development of teachers. The importance of English language has been reinforced as a language of power, commerce, science and technology. It also adds to the for-granted supremacy of English as a language for science and higher education, already existing in Pakistan. This policy, implicitly, again excludes those who cannot either afford to learn English or do not have access to the English medium schooling.

The policy (NEP, 2009:11) discusses the scope of various languages in Pakistani context:

"English is an international language, and important for competition in a globalized world order. Urdu is our national language that connects people all across Pakistan and is a symbol of national cohesion and integration. In addition, there are mother tongues/ local vernaculars in the country that are markers of ethnic and cultural richness and diversity. The challenge is that a child is able to carry forward the cultural assets and be at the same time able to compete nationally and internationally."

It reaffirms the belief that Urdu language has unifying impact, and it connects Pakistanis into one cohesive unit. So the one nation is united through one national language. The language policy is reinforcing the concept of national integrity: "Language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure or functional allocation of their language" (Cooper, 1989). The collocation, "Mother tongues/local vernaculars as markers of cultural richness, given the assumed language-culture link, an official policy of multilingualism would rouse ethnic political aspirations (Blommaert, 1996:211-212). But it does not talk about ethnic identity and preservation of culture. English has been mentioned as a language "important for competition". The word "competition" suggests the recognition of English in the modern world market in terms of "globalized world order", whereby English is the working language of international trade. Another "challenge" for a child is "to compete nationally and internationally", which implicitly hints at Urdu and English as the two key languages necessary for success in Pakistan.

Dr Rahman (1997) argues that the purpose of education is to impart knowledge and information that encourages critical thinking and empowers people. However, "As regards the medium of instruction, it would be fair and just that most services of the State and the private sector should operate in the local language and Urdu. It is quite unjust that, in the centuries-old colonial tradition, our people face an alien State that does not serve them in their languages. This must change so that as far as possible, the people are able to speak to State officials in their own languages and be responded to in the same. This will also ensure that in this age of globalization people will remain in touch with their identities."

The recent report by the Planning Commission "Vision 2030", shows a visible divide in all areas of the education system in Pakistan (NEP, 2009:17) The previous policy announcements regarding the roles of English and Urdu in education have had relatively little influence on actual practice, the current state of affairs is likely to be impacted in a significant way by the 2009 National Education Policy (Ahmed-Khurrum, 2009), despite this document does include much detail about languages in education in Pakistan. For example, in Section 5.4, the importance of literacy and non-formal learning has been talked about but it does not give any clue about which language or which writing system should be followed. Following are the important postulates about language,

made in this document (NEP, 2009:24). The policy states:

- a) The curriculum from Class I onward will include English (as a subject), Urdu, one regional language and mathematics (27).
- b) Provincial and area education departments 'will have the choice select the medium of instruction up to Class V" (27).
- c) English will be the medium of instruction for sciences and mathematics from Class IV onwards (27).
- d) For the first five years, Provinces shall have the option to teach mathematics and science in English or Urdu/ official regional language; but after five years the teaching of these subjects shall be in English only (27).

So, this policy requires that 'for five years, Provinces will be given a choice to teach mathematics and science in English or Urdu/regional language, but after five years the teaching of these subjects will be in English only. The above policy statements (a, b, c, d) taken together raise a number of points, left unanswered. Firstly, It has been stated that any language can be used in Classes I to V. But there is no explanation about the language, to be used in the secondary level. Secondly, it gives a choice to select any language for teaching in Classes I to V but English is mandatory for teaching science and mathematics in Classes IV and V. Then how can the choice of language be considered open for provincial authorities? Thirdly, the level of schooling (primary or secondary) has not been mentioned, when it comes to the choice to teach science and mathematics in Urdu or regional languages between 2009 and 2014.

The rationale for this policy is that:

"It is not easy to obtain a white collar job in either the public or private sectors without a minimum level of proficiency in the English. Most private and public schools do not have the capacity to develop the requisite proficiency levels in their students. English language also works as one of the sources for social stratification between the elite and the nonelite. Employment opportunities and social mobility associated with proficiency in the English language have generated an across the board demand for learning English language in the country." (NEP, 2009:27)

Consequently, this argument supports the idea of introducing all children to English during early schooling. It is suggested as a remedy to overcome social stratification. This rationale seems to have the following flaws:

1. In rural areas, it will be inappropriate to prepare children just for white collar jobs in public or private sector. Language choice in primary schools should target maximum enrollment and minimum dropouts. In rural areas, literacy rate is already alarmingly low due to teaching in the second language, Urdu, as the students do not have a support for Urdu outside classroom (Punjab (26%) has more than twice as high an enrolment rate compared with Balochistan (11%) and FATA (11%). Pakistan is one of 34 less developed countries which have large rural populations. NEP 2009:60) English, as a medium of instruction, will lead to a 'dramatic exclusion' of the speakers of regional languages from education than ever before.
2. Primary schools need to develop literacy skills of students and make them proficient in their home/familiar language through qualitative learning in the classroom. So that they have useful literacy skills, in case they do not have access to secondary school education. As a large number of children do not attend school after primary level (48% urban versus 22% rural in both 2005-06 and 2007-08, NEP, 2009:69), especially there is a high dropout rate of girls in the middle schools in rural areas.
3. The decision to implement English as a medium of instruction is not the only solution to reduce social stratification. The quality of English language teaching and learning may not be improved by enforcing English as a medium of instruction. As it is likely to result into wider illiteracy and lack of knowledge amongst students. The formation of fundamental concepts in the mother tongue is a far better approach than making students struggle against the linguistic barriers and poor comprehension.
4. It will be difficult for the teachers to interact with students in English and to integrate knowledge in a foreign language without a formal training. The period of training (four weeks), mentioned in the policy for in service teachers is short enough to develop the skill to teach in a foreign language.
5. Educating children in their familiar language brings highly desirable learning outcomes. Literacy in the home language mediates learning of a second or foreign language (Genesee, 1987). But if the foreign language is employed as a medium of instruction just after three years of learning in the home language, the literacy skills in the first language are not adequately developed to be transferred in two languages: L2 and L3. The risks of high dropout level, poor academic achievement, poor acquisition of second and third language, and ethnic marginalization cannot be minimized by just three early years of education in the home language.
6. Education in the home language will enable children to share their new knowledge with their parents and other family members. They can transmit their academic knowledge in their daily life interaction with other members of society. Parents will also feel involved in the process of their children's academic progress, as they are familiar with what their child is learning.

7. Introducing home languages, as a medium of instruction, will give a positive message of equality to different language communities in Pakistan. They will feel privileged, if their home language is given respect as an academic language. Hence regional languages or vernaculars will be preserved and developed. The linguistic fractionalization and sociopolitical instability, in the country can be controlled by an appropriate school language.

8. Decisions regarding language in education should be based on the regular access of the students to the school language outside the classroom, rather than which languages is nationally and internally recognized. Home language will have a strong, positive impact on the academic achievements of learners in rural areas in particular, where poverty and poor learning conditions (90% of urban schools benefit from water and sanitation facilities, only 63% of rural schools do so, NEP 2009:59) are additional barriers to quality education.

Primary school children, possessing the positive impact of literacy in the home language, are likely to achieve greater proficiency in English. Ever since independence (August 1947), Urdu is the medium of instruction in public schools and yet Urdu is the first language of only 6.8% of the population. In non-elite private schools English is the medium of instruction, and in the near future English will be the medium of instruction for certain subjects in public schools as well, yet English is the first language of only a tiny elite in Pakistan. Therefore, approximately 95% of children in Pakistan will not have access to education in their mother tongue

The policy stipulates that:

"A comprehensive school language policy should be developed in consultation with provincial and area governments and other stakeholders." (NEP, 2009:40)

It will be obviously more expensive and laborious to train teachers and develop textbooks in multiple languages than to do so in just one language. But it is rather expensive for the development for a country to let a large number of children remain illiterate or dropout in their early schooling due to linguistic barriers. This lack of institutional support for the local languages like Punjabi language, which is the mother tongue of about 50% of the citizens of Pakistan, has literally cut off the children from the rich literary heritage of their language. Multiple languages in primary school education will strengthen the loyalty of ethnic minorities to the state, because all ethnic groups perceive that they are being equally respected.

Recommendations

National Education Policy 2009 is an attempt towards an extended role of English in education, although many aspects of this policy remain unanswered. As the policy suggests: "A comprehensive plan of action for implementing the English language policy should be developed." (NEP 2009:27), but who will develop this plan and what are the desired goals to be achieved through the implementation of this plan, still remains unanswered. We would suggest that the comprehensive plan can be developed through training, in Teaching English for Young Learners, for the English Language teachers at primary and secondary level. A learner-centered, activity based curriculum of English should be designed for the young learners. Teachers should be familiarized with the target language culture and in developing assessment tools to measure the English language competence of learners in a meaningful way.

Efforts to make learners acquire proficiency in English should involve quality of linguistic input, activity based curriculum, and transfer of literacy skills between the mother tongue and the target language. Pakistan should not promote English as a medium of instruction at the expense of quality education and socioeconomic equality. Teachers should be properly trained to face the new pedagogical challenges.

The policy also suggests: "Particular attention should be given to disadvantaged groups and region. Children 'from low socio-economic strata' should be given opportunities to learn English." (NEP, 2009:27) This stipulation, in our opinion, is the core of a strategy for supporting the learning and teaching of English in Pakistani public schools. The poorest sector of society, receive their education from religious schools (madrassas). Since NEP, 2009 claims to focus on the poor and marginalized class through providing them opportunities to learn English, there should be a comprehensive plan of action for the school language policy in the religious schools as well.

The entrance examinations for the civil service, other public and private employment domains, and the universities require a functional competence of English by all the candidates.

As the English medium schools have managed to sustain this criterion, by ensuring quality in their teaching and learning system and a transparent foreign examination system, so it has been perceived that "English medium" schools provide a qualitative or better education.

This divide between the public and private school structure, examination system, and medium of instruction is attempted to be equalized in NEP, 2009 by enabling poor students to pass examinations in English to open doors to higher levels of learning and to employment opportunities. English is a major barrier to entry to white collar jobs, higher education, and hence social mobility. This declaration of the *NEP 2009*, obviously, means that all the high profile jobs will continue to require the English-proficiency. So this policy tends to reinforce the attitude of

masses towards English instruction. We would suggest that the candidates, in the civil service entrance exam, should also be required to have a functional competence in Urdu (to serve the state) and one of the local languages (to serve the public), as English does not have a functional value while dealing with masses.

This requirement will oblige the elite schools to develop not only their pupils' proficiency in English but also their functional ability in Urdu and in at least one local language as their students are averse to Urdu and local culture. Something like that would align all the three languages on an almost equal level of prestige and bridge the gap between public and private schooling.

This divide between the public and private school structure, examination system, and medium of instruction can not only be equalized by enabling poor students to pass examinations in English. There should be an updated curriculum, professionally qualified teachers, and learning resources for the public school students as well. It will enable them to compete for higher levels of learning and to employment opportunities. As the policy (NEP, 2009:10) states: "There are close links between equity in educational opportunities and equitable income distribution and income growth. If the education system is constructed on a divisive basis, the divisions it creates can endanger in the long run economic growth. An unjust society creates an unstable society and an unstable society cannot sustain stable long term growth."

Conclusion

It is unfair to make assessment of a child's abilities in a language which s/he does not use outside the school. A child's real level of skills and capabilities, across the curriculum, cannot be judged in a second or third language. Literacy skills in an unfamiliar language, in the first place, do not lead to critical thinking and wider understanding of academic concepts. The policy makers should review the weaker areas of NEP, 2009 and develop a plan of action for its implementation. The evils of illiteracy and socioeconomic exclusion can lead the poorest class towards extremism and terrorism, if madrasas (religious schools) are not made to align with the modern curriculum, teaching methodologies, and higher education.

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