

Language Policies in Pakistan: A dilemma of linguistic choices

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Language is an important factor in social, political, cultural, and economic systems of a country. In the wake of globalization, the role of dominant languages is becoming more visible as the indigenous languages are facing the threat of desertion by their own speakers. Language, at one level, can be viewed as a linking force of communication and at another level a symbol of identity and nationalism. In Pakistan, which is a multilingual country, the issue of language becomes more crucial. It is further complicated as Pakistan has a colonial legacy of English. Thus, the language policy and planning had to deal with the challenges of determining the status of colonial language, national language, and regional languages. Unfortunately, the issue of language did not get much attention in terms of its planning in Pakistan. There is no separate document dealing with the language policy in the country. The education policies, however, would sometime have a section or two on language policy. The only exception to this is a detailed section on language policy in the National Education Commission report (1959). This paper critically examines the language policies reflected in the national Education policies and reports of conferences and commissions; highlighting the gaps between professed policies and actual practices, and reviews the factors responsible for lack of proper implementation of these policies.

Keywords: Identity, Language Policies, National Language, Provincial/Regional languages

Introduction

Education is considered to be an important factor in the socio-economic development of a country. The role of education has become more significant in the contemporary times where the focus is on 'knowledge economy' and 'human capital' has become the most desired capital. Pakistan, since its independence in 1947, suffered from insufficient educational institutions and lack of qualified teachers which resulted into problems of access and quality (Kardar, 1998; Bergman and Mohammad, 2006; Aly, 2007; Siddiqui, 2010; The Pakistan

Education Task Force, 2011). Another major challenge faced by the policy makers in education was the issue of language for its central role in the process of learning and achievement of educational pursuits (Rahman, 1996; Mansoor, 2004; Siddiqui, 2010). Besides an instrument of communication and educational access, language is also an identity marker at personal and societal level (Rahman, 1996; Mansoor et al, 2004; Siddiqui, 2010). The role of national identity was quite evident during the Pakistan movement when different languages were being displayed as distinguishing identity markers for the different sets of population in the united India. During Pakistan Movement Urdu was associated with Muslims whereas Hindi and Punjabi were tagged with Hindus and Sikhs, respectively. Language remained a contested issue even after the independence of the country in 1947 giving birth to a number of questions.

Education Policies and Conference/Commission Reports

What should be the national language of the country? What would be the status of English, the colonial language? How would the provincial/regional languages be conserved and promoted? What language should be used as a medium of instruction? Which language/s should be compulsorily taught in the educational institutions? All these questions kept recurring in the education policies of Pakistan. A number of researchers studied the impact of educational policies and reforms, for example, Huberman and Miles, 1984; Fullan, 1982, 2001; McLaughlin, 1987; and Schorr, 1989. The focus of these studies was the implementation of reforms and policies in different parts of the world. In Pakistan as well a number of studies tried to study the implementation process of policies and reforms from indigenous perspectives, keeping in view the socio-cultural and economic realities of Pakistani context. Some of these studies included Bray, 1983; Bengali, 1991; Ahsan, 2003; Warwick, et al, 1991, 1992, Ali, 2006, Khan, 1997; Lingard, & Ali, 2009; Barber, 2010, and Iqbal, 2011. In the following pages we shall critically review the responses to the language related issues offered in the education policies.

The First Educational Conference 1947

Realizing the significant role of education in the development of a nation, the First Educational Conference was organized on 27 November 1947 to 1 December, 1947, the year of independence. The message of the Quaid e Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Founder of

Pakistan was read out in the conference. This was followed by a detailed speech by the then Education Minister, Fazal ur Rehman, who devoted a reasonable portion of his speech to the language challenges faced by the new born country. It is pertinent to study the sections of his speech that dealt with English, Urdu and provincial/regional languages. Talking of Urdu, he claimed that, “....it has shown an extraordinary vitality and sensitivity both as an instrument of communication and as a vehicle for the expression of the subtlest shades of thought and the most ethereal heights of fancy” (Government, 1947, p. 11). This was a clear indication that Urdu would be given a special status in the national structure. Later in his speech, he alluded the attributes of Urdu language and deemed it fit to act as lingua franca in Pakistan. According to him (Government, 1947, p. 11):

The facility with which it can borrow and assimilate words from foreign languages, its historic affiliations with Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and English and its high creative output in prose and poetry constitute to my mind unassailable grounds for its establishment as the ‘lingua franca’ of Pakistan.

As far as English language is concerned, there was a mention of “the injurious effects of making an alien language the medium of instruction”, but, in the same wake, the inevitable role of English was admitted, “Besides, from purely self-regarding motives we should not easily throw away a language which gives us so easy an access to all the secrets of Western science and culture” (Government, 1947, p. 11). The question of the role of English kept recurring in the education policies. The conference also underlined the significant role of provincial/regional languages. It was suggested that,

“We in Pakistan must provide the maximum scope for growth to our provincial languages not merely as media of instruction but also as instruments for the dissemination of the culture they embody without at the same time sacrificing the unity of our common culture.” (Government, 1947, p. 11).

The conference that lasted for four days made committees to deliberate on issues important for education. The committee that deliberated on the issue of language and medium of instruction reported that:

... the institution of common language was essential to the maintenance of the new nation of Pakistan. The Committee agreed that the common language should be Urdu. Some members of the Committee suggested that Urdu should not only be the common language for Pakistan but it should also be the medium of instruction in each Province. Other members of the Committee, however, felt that the question of medium of instruction should be left to each Province to decide according to its requirements but that Urdu should be the second compulsory language in schools. The Committee was inclined to support the second view. The D.P. I. East Bengal, however, felt that Urdu should not be the compulsory second language and should be one of the options. (Government, 1947, p. 21)

This rather long quote is reproduced here in order to understand that the resistance of language issue was there even during the initial years of Pakistan. This later turned into a powerful language movement. The Committee also considered the question of English language and suggested that "as a transitional measure it should be retained as a compulsory language at the school stage." (Government, 1947, p. 21)

Pakistan, having a colonial past, had a choice to opt for the language of its masters, that is, English as its State language or the language of the majority of the population that is Bangla. Neither of the two choices was exercised; rather a third option was made in favor of Urdu because of an emotional association with it. Another stated reason for selection of Urdu was its intelligibility in various part of the country. It is important to note that Urdu was spoken only by a small minority of population in Pakistan, constituting about 6% of the total population. Interestingly, the First Education conference held in 1947, the year of independence of Pakistan, recommended Urdu as a lingua franca and a compulsory subject in schools but there was no mention of Urdu as a State or National language. It was on March 24, 1948 that M.A. Jinnah in his speech in University of Dacca elaborated on the issue of State language, emphasizing that "There can be only one state language if the component parts of this state are to march forward in unison and that language, in my opinion, can only be Urdu."

The major ethnic groups living in Pakistan at the times of independence were Bengalis and Punjabis. There were four important

differences between the languages and attitudes of these two majority ethnic groups. Firstly the Punjabi language had relatively more linguistic affinity with Urdu as compared with Bangla's affinity with Urdu language. Secondly, Punjabi, as compared with Bangla, had no strong tradition of acting as an academic language in the educational institutions. Thirdly, majority of the urbanized Punjabis preferred Urdu over Punjabi as a language of communication in their families and finally, since a large number of Punjabis were part of the Military, an important domain of power in Pakistan. As a result they didn't experience political deprivation and thus felt no need to insist on Punjabi language.

The case with Bangla, the language of the Bengalis (citizens of the then East Pakistan, part of Pakistan before 1971) was quite different as it was an established academic language which was used by their speakers with pride. Bangla language, unlike Punjabi language, had no affinity with Urdu in terms of its vocabulary and script. Unlike Urdu which is written from right to left, Bangla is written from left to right. Besides, Bengalis had a strong sense of deprivation as all the sources of power, for example, the capital, the presidency, the Prime Minister, the headquarters of Army, Navy, and Air Force were situated in West Pakistan. This background is important to understand the two distinct responses to the declaration of Urdu as the National language. The overwhelming majority of the population demanded to declare Bangla as the State language besides Urdu. Protests and rallies were organized against the decision of declaring Urdu as the sole national language. On 21 February, 1952, the students of University of Dacca took out a procession demanding Bangla as a national language. The procession was dealt with sheer force and a number of student protestors were killed by the police fire. It was in 1956 that Bangla was finally given the status of National language besides Urdu.

Commission on National Education 1959

The report of Commission on National Education (Government, 1959, p. 289), which had a detailed section on language issues, observed that, "Urdu and Bengali have now been officially declared to be the National languages of Pakistan, and therefore the question of their adoption in place of English in the educational system is no longer a matter of debate." The Commission recommended that the national language should gradually and progressively replace English as the media of instruction at all levels (Government, 1959, p. 290). We can

see more rhetoric and less commitment as the commission talked about the status of National Languages, English, and provincial languages. According to the 1959 Commission report (Government, 1959, p. 290),

“Even when this has been done, it will still be necessary for our young men and women to learn English as a compulsory language from class VI onwards to the degree level...We therefore recommend that English should be taught as a compulsory language from class VI to XII in schools and at the graduate level. But it should be taught as a functional language rather than as literature, except for those who wish to specialize in English language and literature.”

The Commission believed that, “...a period of approximately fifteen years will be needed to replace English as the medium of instruction in a large number of subjects taught at the university level” (Government, 1959, p. 295). According to this, English should have been replaced by the National language by 1974 but like many other educational targets, for example literacy, universal education, and female education, this target date also passed without bringing any significant change in the linguistic scenario.

Education Policy 1970

The 1970 National Education policy underlined the educational, social, and political role of language in a society. It acknowledged the potential role that language can play in the national development and cultural identity. The issue of using mother tongue was discussed at theoretical level by suggesting the criteria for selecting the medium of instruction. The criteria given by the policy (Government, 1970, p. 18) included that the language selected as a medium of instruction should have the ability to, “(a) help students acquire knowledge as effortlessly as possible; (b) communicate with clarity and objectivity; and above all; (c) stimulate critical and creative thinking.” The policy (Government, 1970, p. 19) links the change of medium of instruction at higher level with the replacement of English for official purposes. The policy suggests that, “Both of these inter-linked issues need, therefore, to be examined together, and, their full implementation worked out so that the changeover is easy and smooth.” It is important to note that this condition was not easy as the tradition of official correspondence in English was well established in the offices and preparation for ‘official

Urdu' were not made. The policy referred to the Pakistan Provisional Constitution Order that envisaged the establishment in 1972 of a Commission to examine and report on the question of the replacement of the English language for official purposes. The policy recommended that, the Commission should be set up forthwith to examine the question of the change over from English to the national languages for official purposes and also that of complete switch-over to the national languages as media of education.

Education Policy 1972-1980

In 1971, Pakistan lost its one part, East Pakistan where predominantly Bangla language was used. The 1972 policy was presented in the changed circumstances as the Bangla speaking population left the New Pakistan. There was no elaborate section devoted to the language issues in the 1972 policy. Surprisingly, there were no directions given in the policy in terms of medium of instructions. However, there was a reference to the significance of provincial languages. The policy suggested that (Government, 1972, p. 15) "... for national cohesion, it is necessary for the people of one region to understand the language and literature, social structure and customs, attitudes and motivations of the people of the other regions." The policy recommended to

"...establish a department for undergraduate study of the language, literature and culture of the various regions of Pakistan. For research and post-graduate studies of the language, literature and culture of the people of Pakistan, a National Institute of Pakistan Studies will be established at Islamabad University." (Government, 1972, p. 15)

Besides reference to provincial languages, there were no guidelines given on the issue of medium of instruction which had always been a hot topic in Pakistan educational system. According to Aly (2007, p. 79) the Policy adopted a position of benign neglect on medium of instruction and made no reference to language.

Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973

The 1973 Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan contains provisions for language rights for the citizens of Pakistan. According to this constitution (Government, 1973, p. 16), "Subject to Article 251 any

section of citizens having a distinct language, script or culture should have the right to preserve and promote the same and subject to law, establish institutions for that purpose.”

The constitution also clearly mentions about the arrangements to be made to empower Urdu as official language in fifteen years. According to the constitution (Government, 1973, p. 148), “The National language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes within fifteen years from the commencing day.” According to this, the arrangements should have been made by 1988 but there were no serious and consistent efforts made to this effect.

The constitution contains following articles to the promotions of Arabic, English, and the provincial languages:

- The State shall endeavour, as respects the Muslims of Pakistan,-To make the teaching of the Holy Quran and Islamiat compulsory, to encourage and facilitate the learning of Arabic language and to secure correct and exact printing and publishing of the Holy Quran. (Government, 1973, p. 17)
- Subject to clause (1), the English language may be used for official purpose until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu. (Government, 1973, p. 148)
- Without prejudice to the status of the National language, a provincial Assembly may by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language. (Government, 1973, p. 148)

It is important to note that even in the presence of this provision the provincial assemblies did not work for the promotion of local languages. Only recently, the provincial assembly of Khayber Pakhtoon Khawa did some useful work for the promotion of local languages.

National Policy 1979

National Educational Policy (1979) reflected the cultural, linguistic, and religious preferences of Zia ul Haque, the military ruler at

that time. He tried to islamise education in Pakistan, and vowed to promote National language, Urdu, as a medium of instruction. (Government, 1979, p. 2). English medium schools were instructed to use Urdu as a medium of instruction. In 1979, Urdu as the medium of instruction was established from Class 1 to matriculate in 1989. Urdu was given such importance to promote it as a symbol of Muslim identity. The English language was dubbed as a legacy of colonialism and was hit hard in the 1979 policy (Government, 1979, p. 59), which stated that:

The continued existence of English medium schools, as a legacy of the colonial era the principle of development of unison of thought by integrating different streams of education into a single unified and coherent system for education. It has, therefore, been decided that all Pakistan 'English medium schools throughout the country will be required to adopt Urdu or an approved provincial language as the medium of instruction. The nomenclature 'English medium schools' will be abolished.

This decision was, however, reverted later and English again became the medium of instruction. Besides extra emphasis on Urdu language, the policy suggested ways to promote Arabic language. Moreover, the 1979 policy gave elaborate directions in terms of medium of instruction at various levels and use of Urdu, English, provincial languages at various levels with certain conditions. However, emphasis still was on the promotion of Urdu. Some important recommendations of the policy (Government, 1979, pp. 60-61) included:

- (i) Starting April, 1979 all students admitted to Class I in all English medium schools will undergo instruction through the medium of Urdu or an approved: provincial language, which will be progressively introduced in successive grades thereafter.
- (ii) Primary education will be imparted in the National or an approved provincial language depending upon the choice of the Provincial Governments.
- (iii) A Provincial Government may run educational institutions in approved provincial language. In

such institutions Urdu will be a compulsory subject from class III onwards.

- (iv) English will be taught as a compulsory second language from class VI onwards in all the schools.
- (v) National language will be used as alternate medium of instruction at the college and university levels progressively. Complete switchover to Urdu as medium of instruction will be accomplished in a phased manner in a period of 5-7 years.
- (vi) The decision to introduce National language at the professional and university education level as medium of instruction will be based on preparations much in this regard in due course.
- (vii) Teachers in the existing English medium schools will be permitted to teach through the medium of Urdu or an approved provincial language.
- (viii) Existing textbooks in the English medium schools in subjects other than English will be replaced by those written in Urdu or an approved provincial language.
- (ix) No new English medium school will be established throughout the country.
- (x) The task of standardization terminology will be undertaken on an urgent basis.
- (xi) Writing of Urdu books in scientific, professional and technical subjects will be encouraged. Selected books in various crucial subjects will be translated for adoption in Universities and Colleges.
- (xii) In schools where the National language is the medium of instruction, one of the regional languages will be taught from class III onwards.

The most drastic shift in 1979 Education Policy was turning the existing English medium schools into Urdu medium schools by allowing the teachers to teach in Urdu medium and replace the existing textbooks into Urdu or approved provincial language.

Education Policy 1992

The 1992 Education policy was launched by a civil government after a long tenure of military dictatorship. According to the policy (Government, 1992, p. 16), "The medium of instruction as may be determined by the Provinces, shall be either the approved provincial language, the national language, or English." The policy (Government, 1992, p. 25) recommended that, "At tertiary level, English may be the medium of instruction for science and technical subjects."

The provinces, however, were still in the hangover of centrist mindset and were not sure to avail this opportunity.

Educational Policy 1998

This policy did not deal with the language issues in detail. It only reproduced the following paragraph from the 1973 constitution that deals with the promotion of Arabic language, language of the holy Quran.

To make the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and Islamiat compulsory, to encourage and facilitate the learning of Arabic language, and to secure correct and exact printing and publishing of the Holy Quran: to promote unity and the observance of the Islamic moral standards. (1998, p. 5)

Education Policy 2009

2009 Education policy was designed during Pervaiz Musharraf's era, the President of Pakistan in early 2000. The policy laid emphasis on the promotion of English language. It suggested that English being a globalised language was important for international competition. The policy (Government, 2009, p. 27) considered English as one of the factors responsible for educational inequality in Pakistan.

A major bias of the job market for white collar jobs appears in the form of the candidate's proficiency in the English language. It is not easy to obtain a white collar job in either the public or private sectors without a minimum level proficiency in the English language. 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 elite and non-elite. Combined with employment opportunities associated with proficiency of the English language the social attitudes have generated an across the board demand for learning English language in the country.

Musharraf made conscious efforts to offer a vision of 'enlightened moderation' which had a symbolic importance after the 9/11 incident in order to present a softer look of Pakistan. It was during Musharraf's regime that English was declared a compulsory subject, right from KG 1 up to the higher levels. A number of practical steps were recommended in the policy (Government, 2009, p. 28) to implement the pro-English initiatives. They were:

- Ministry of Education in consultation with Provincial and Area education departments, relevant professional bodies and the wider public, shall develop a comprehensive plan of action for implementing the English language policy in the shortest possible time, paying particular attention to disadvantaged groups and lagging behind regions.
- The curriculum from Class I onward shall include English (as a subject), Urdu, one regional language, mathematics along with an integrated subject.
- The Provincial and Area Education Departments shall have the choice to select the medium of instruction up to Class V.
- English shall be employed as the medium of instruction for sciences and mathematics from class IV onwards.
- For 5 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.
- Opportunities shall be provided to children from low socio-economic strata to learn English language.

- A comprehensive school language policy shall be developed in consultation with provincial and area governments and other stakeholders.

Discussion

A critical review of the education policies reflects that language issue was not given a priority and thus suffered in the absence of proper language planning. The initial mistake of omitting Bangla as one of the State languages had serious repercussion on the political scene of the country. We witnessed a prolonged debate on the issue of medium of instruction. Promises were made at governmental level for the promotion of Urdu as a National language. Unfortunately, these promises were not followed up by any serious efforts to empower Urdu to act as an official language. Similarly, the major power domains of Pakistan, namely military, judiciary, and bureaucracy, remained 'no go areas' for Urdu, whereas English was considered as the key to enter these domains of power. Thus, declaring Urdu as the state language of the country in 1948 had no adverse effect on the social status of English language that continued to be the most powerful language in offices, courts, and the major corridors of power.

The major role of English, as a language and power combine, had multiple effects on the educational domain of Pakistan. A number of military rulers, Ayub, Yahya, and Zia, issued political statements in favor of Urdu without taking concrete steps that is introducing it in the domains of power. With this meaningless lip service in favor of Urdu by the political rulers, we see the emergence of some scholars who vehemently opposed the English and English medium schools. This opposition that could be based on good intentions ignored the global role of English in terms of jobs, higher studies, trade, etc. We see this tension between adherence to national linguistic heritage and a compelling desire to reach out since 1947.

Similarly, the other local languages spoken in provinces like Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Baluchi, were either ignored or considered as inferior languages. This attitude was manifested in the lack of institutional support shown to these languages. A case in point is the Punjabi language, which is the mother tongue of about 50% of the citizens of Pakistan. Punjabi is not taught as a subject at school level. Thus children of Punjabi families cannot read or write in their mother tongue, and are literally cut off from the rich literary heritage of their

language. To a less extent, this is true to other Pakistani languages like Baluchi, Pushto, and Sindhi as well.

Unfortunately, in Pakistan, we see a common approach of rejection between the two competing schools of thought. One school of thought, that is in favor of Urdu or local language, does not see any role of English. Similarly, the other school of thought, in favor of English, considers native languages as insignificant and unimportant. Since the second school of thought is in power, we see that the local languages are either ignored, or under-estimated. There is no institutional support provided to them and they are subjected to slow death. The painful fact is that majority of students, who are being educated in English medium schools in Pakistan, find it difficult to read a book written in their own mother tongue. They do not even know how to count in Urdu or in their mother tongue. The reason is obvious; they are exposed to English primers first and then to any other reading material. They start learning English alphabets before they learn any alphabets of their National language or mother tongue.

Conclusion

English is an important contemporary language, and its rejection could in fact be depriving the students, with low socio-economic status, of a passport to the enhanced opportunities of successes in life. We must learn English but it should not be based on the rejection of local languages. Rather, we should be striving for a balance between English and local languages. Such balance could only be achieved if our local Pakistani languages are given respect and validation through institutional support. This would mean introducing these languages in primary classes as a subject.

The significance of exposing students to their own native languages is not just to provide them an extra linguistic tool for communication, but to help them remain associated with the roots of their culture of which language is an important manifestation. As discussed earlier, a number of education policies were presented during different governments but there was no comprehensive document called as language policy. Excerpts from different documents do refer to certain claimed objectives but they did not enjoy institutional support. There is a serious need to carve out a policy that is realistic in nature, and makes an attempt to preserve local languages and culture as well.

We see lack of seriousness and commitment on the issue of language at governmental level. That is why the promises made in favor of Urdu and provincial languages were not realized. In 1959, Commission of National Education it was stated that within 15 years, Urdu will replace English. Similarly, in 1973 Constitution, another deadline of 15 years was given to make Urdu as an official language. However, both the targets remained unachieved. A major factor was the lack of practical measures and follow up. Another factor was the lack of continuity of policies. We see some drastic and at times reverse decisions by different governments. For instance, Zia ul Haque's military regime instructed the existing English medium schools to be replaced with the Urdu medium. It was also decided that no English medium schools would be established in future. Similarly, during Musharraf's era, another military dictator in the history of Pakistan, a drastic announcement was made to teach English from grade one. These two examples lead to a third factor that is lack of consultation with the stakeholders. The outcome is lack of ownership that ultimately results in poor implementation.

Keeping in view the significance of language issue, proper planning needs to be done based on the reliable linguistic data. The language policy should be designed as a result of consultative process, with the national as well provincial aspirations in perspective. Arrangements should be made on consistent basis to ensure the promotion, growth, and empowerment of national and provincial languages. The language policy needs to realize the pragmatic need of English as a global language together with the cultural identity linked with national and provincial languages. The vitality of a language is often linked with academic support it gets from educational institutions. It is, thus important that provincial languages should be taught as a subject in the schools. Similarly, Urdu needs to be associated with the domains of power in Pakistan, for example, Army, Judiciary, and Bureaucracy. These practical steps may help enhance the prestige of Urdu as a national language.

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