

## **A Historical Perspective of Pakistan's Language in Education Policy**

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### **Abstract**

The shifts and gaps in English language policies and medium of instruction have always been a hurdle in the achievement of English language and overall education goals in Pakistan. This situation has raised a continuous debate on language-in-education policy and medium of instruction in Pakistan since independence and Pakistani governments to date have been indecisive regarding this. This chaotic situation has caused a great setback to the education system in Pakistan. To understand the issues and challenges pertaining Pakistan's English language education, this paper presents a historical perspective of Pakistan's language in education policy. This paper concludes that there is a dire need of discarding the obsolete colonial language policies and formulating effective language-in-education policy for the achievement of language education goals and ultimately the education goals for the better future of the country. The first step to achieve this goal is to provide Pakistani students with equal opportunities to learn English and have access to learning in English medium.

**Keywords:** language-in-education policy; medium of instruction; English language; British colonial rule; Pakistan

### **Introduction**

Since decolonisation in many Asian and African countries during 1950's, English has become the international language of technology, scientific research, education, business and media (Canagarajah, 2006; Rassool, 2007). The dominant status of English language has created a number of language and education issues in the postcolonial countries, such as Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Kenya and Pakistan, making it difficult to formulate coherent language-in-education policies and make a final decision regarding the medium of instruction (MOI) at school level (Rassool, 2007). On the other hand, university education in majority of such countries is imparted in English MOI (Rassool, 2007; Tsui & Tollefson, 2004). Due to receiving school education in language other than English, this situation has been and is still creating problems for university students and presenting them with challenges due to lack of proficiency in English, such as difficulties in following lectures

imparted in English, making presentations, academic writing, assessments, understanding content in English, and grasping the concepts and ideas underpinning a topic or subject (Rassool, 2007).

Pakistan is a multilingual and multicultural country. It has no fewer than 75 languages out of which 25 are major languages (Rahman, 1995). Hence, issues faced by the country since independence regarding the choice of language of instruction/medium of instruction and development of an effective language-in-education policy. Pakistan has faced the issue of language-in-education policy that remains unresolved to date since its independence from British colonial rulers in 1947. To understand Pakistan's language-in-education policy, there is the need to explore and understand its historical background.

Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, the three South Asian countries that previously constituted the sub-continent, better known as British India, together share a long colonial past, the same pre-independence history and almost similar struggle for freedom from the colonial rule. Although there exist a number of socio-political and demographic differences in the three states, there are some notable similarities that are shared by the three nations due to the colonial history. One outstanding similarity is the linguistic diversity that dates back in history and has been one of the distinguished attributes of the multilingual and multicultural sub-continent.

Languages in the sub-continent have been serving the important purpose of linking people belonging to different social, ethnic, political and religious groups in the region since times unknown. Hence, the importance of language-in-education policy and the significant role it plays in all the social and political decisions in the region can be significantly felt and valued. In this regard, the current paper attempts to have a brief overview of the historical perspective of Pakistan's language-in-education Policy which has its roots in colonial rule, and linguistic and cultural diversity; how it was influenced by the colonial language-in-education policy after independence; and the repercussions of this influence in current educational, political and societal contexts in Pakistan.

### **The British Colonial Language Policy in the Sub-continent**

Sub-continent bears a history of long rule by Mughal Emperors for three centuries, from early 15<sup>th</sup> century to early 18<sup>th</sup> century when their rule was gradually overthrown by the British. In order to review the history of language-in-education Policy in Pakistan, one needs to take up a journey into the history of language-in-education policy in India (sub-continent). In this regard, the current paper will focus on the language-in-education Policy introduced by the British colonial rulers in the British India and its link to the language-in-education policy adopted by Pakistani rulers after independence.

According to Kachru (1981), in 1765 by the time when the East India Company had been successful in gaining power in the sub-continent, a controversy regarding the future education and the formulation of the first British language policy in India raised its head between two groups, namely the Orientalist and the Anglicist (Occidental) groups. The Orientals were in favour of native while the Anglicists were in favour of non-native education policy for the Indian people. Kachru (1981) reports that

the Anglicist group included influential people such as Charles Grant (1746-1823) Lord Moira (1754-1826), and the architect of the policy, T.B. Macaulay. The Orientalists were led by H.T. Prinsep (1792-1878), who disagreed with the Englishisation of Indian education (pp.62-63).

Kachru further relates that despite strong opposition by the Orientalists, the Lord Macaulay “Minute” was passed on February 2, 1835 and with it came the language policy which sowed the seed of bilingualism in the sub-continent which is still holding strong roots in the region to date and has been the cause of drawing lines among various groups in the society in the three independent states. The bilingual policy had a lasting effect in Pakistan as it influenced the language policy introduced in the country after independence from the British colonial rule in 1947. In fact, the language policies adopted in Pakistan after independence to date can be linked back to the language policy introduced by the British rulers in 1835.

Rahman (1995) states that before the implication of Lord Macaulay ‘Minute’ in 1835, the Orientalist language policy had been prevalent in British India between 1780-1835 which favoured the teaching of the indigenous languages like ‘Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic to Indians as well as the British civil servants who were supposed to rule them’ (p.7). Rahman further explains that ‘in 1835, English was given the status of the language of higher administration, judiciary and education’ (p.7). Rahman opines that ‘both policies were meant to consolidate the imperial rule’ (p.7), the only difference being that the Orientalists policy aimed at ‘conciliating the native elites’ (p.8), whereas the Anglicists focused on westernising the Indian elite to gain their loyalty towards the British rulers. In short, both apparently opposite policies actually had the similar aim, that of supporting imperialism.

Talking about the Indian response to Lord Macaulay’s ‘Minute’, Rahman (1996), elaborates that it was only the Muslims who openly rejected the language policy whereas the Hindu response was a mix one which ‘was sharply divided between those who approved of westernisation and the traditionalists’ (p.35) and those who did not. The same type of divided Indian response carried on throughout the British colonial rule in India. Another aspect of Anglicist policy highlighted by Rahman (1996) is the increase in ‘the use of English in all domains of power’ (p.36) and elimination

of ‘the use of Persian which had been prevalent’ (p.36) in power domains during the Muslim rule during the Mughal empire. This change had a direct effect on Indian Muslims and their cultural ascendancy. Rahman (1996) draws our attention towards another significant effect of an official language change which helped the vernacular languages in being ‘officially recognised and strengthened’ (p.37). This situation led to various language speaking groups emerging as ‘nationalities’ (p.37), hence forming language ethnic groups in the sub-continent.

The Indian vernacular languages had a long history of existence and were considered a vital part of Indian culture. According to Rahman (1996), it was the British rulers who promoted these languages through ‘printing and marketing’ and their use in the power domains for the first time in Indian history (p.39). Rahman further says that ‘language planning activities-the choice of a single dialect, the choice of spellings, the choice of an orthographic system, the writing of dictionaries’ was also brought about by the colonial rulers (p.39). In this regard, the credit of the creation of the modern vernaculars in the sub-continent goes to the British rulers who contributed a significant effort in the promotion of Indian vernacular languages.

Another great contribution of the British rulers to the language culture in the sub-continent was the promotion of a new language, “Hindustani” (Hindi/Urdu) which was built up by combining vernacular languages (during the seventeenth century) with the aim to link Indian people belonging to various language speaking groups through a ‘standard language’ (p.39). The British rulers also started formal education in the Hindustani/Urdu language (Rahman, 2002).

The status of Hindustani/Urdu was further raised by using it for official purposes during the British rule (Rahman, 1996). Hence the British rulers patronised the Hindustani/Urdu language and made successful contribution to help it achieve the status of a recognised language which later on became an identity of Indian Muslims so much so that after independence it was ultimately chosen as the national language of Pakistan.

According to Rassool (2007), ‘the colonial government sought to win over the local elites and to incorporate them into the colonial project’ (p.21). And in order to achieve this purpose, the British rulers used a political strategy and paid great attention to ‘the study, learning, and teaching of Indian vernacular languages, religions and culture’ (p.21). Rassool (2007) further contends that another big aim of the colonial rulers was to attain hegemonic support of the Indian elite which could only be attained through ‘winning’ their ‘consent’ through ‘the political approach of accommodation and conciliation’ (p.21). This policy further helped the rulers in gaining the support of the Indian elite who had the knowledge of local rules, languages, culture and traditions, and trade and property laws.

Hence the British rulers succeeded in creating a local bureaucracy which Rassool (2007) calls ‘a new Anglicized gentry’ which comprised of ‘aspiring middle classes’ which served ‘as a buffer class between the rulers and the aristocratic elite’ (pp.21-22).

Rahman (1997a) reports that it was after the arrival of the ‘British rule’ and ‘modernity’ that language became ‘an important symbol of identity’ (p.835) in the sub-continent. He further elucidates that modernity increases interaction between various communities, and in this regard language in any form either oral or written is the greatest source of interaction. Hence, language acquires an important place after religion, in determining a group’s identity and converting it into an ethnic group based on linguistic and cultural affiliation. Rahman states (1997a) that the rulers use “language-based ethnicity” to “pursue political power” (p.835). The same theory of language-based ethnicity was adopted by the British rulers to gain and maintain power in the sub-continent. Thus, they succeeded in achieving their political goals by making vernacular languages an important part of the language policy which was in favour of promoting the vernacular languages through the provision of instruction in them.

### **The British Colonial Language in Education Policy in the Sub-continent**

The underdeveloped countries, such as Pakistan, Malaysia, Kenya and many more; majority of which are postcolonial, multilingual and multicultural, are confronted with the unresolved issue ‘regarding the choice of language(s) of teaching and learning’ (Rassool, 2007, p.15). Powell (2002) holds that colonialism itself is the biggest constraint behind the language-in-education (policy) issue in such countries because English language and education in English is a legacy of British colonial rulers (Watson, 1999; 2007).

British colonial rulers replaced the Persian language with English as MOI in British India during the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Powell 2002). The reasons behind this decision were both economic and political: it led to the production of a local elite class which would help the rulers in running the colonial project (Rahman, 1995; Rassool, 2007); to create the idea of the vast colonial state in the world; to show their power through the spread of their language; and to dispense the message of unity that is, British India (Rahman, 1995). However, the English language education and English MOI was only made available in major urban schools and higher education institutions while the education of the rest of the locals was imparted in vernacular languages such as Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil (Rahman, 2002; Rassool, 2007), thus dividing the society on the right and access to learn English language (Rahman 1995).

English medium private schools were established when the British commitment to uphold local cultures and languages melted away into a sense of moral duty to teach western values to the ‘uncivilized natives’ (Rahman, 2006). However, their emergence was also led by the pragmatics of producing an elite class that would be loyal to the British Empire and provide it with cheap labour. An incentive to join these schools was the opening of civil service positions for the local population in 1832, 41 years after the 1791 Act of Native Exclusion (Spear 1958, in Rahman, 2006, p.30), for which the main selection criteria was competence in English. The government controlled admission to these well-funded English medium private schools by high fees, while continuing education for the wider public in local languages. This satisfied the nationalists, while providing the public with an education that ‘fit them for their position in life’ and which need not lead to higher education (Education Commission 1883, in Rahman, 2006, p.53).

English language became the language of power during colonial rule as it promised better jobs, business and trade, and social and economic mobility for the locals (Rahman, 2002). The colonial language-in-education policy had long-lasting socio-economic effects in the region. It divided the already class and caste-ridden society into the privileged and non-privileged groups with those having English language knowledge rendered as elite and the others as a non-elite class (Rassool, 2007). Considering the language situation in multilingual countries, it is observed that language-in-education and MOI policies therefore play a significant role not only in education but also in creating social and economic divides in a society. This situation is a major concern in postcolonial, multilingual countries including Pakistan, even today (Tsui & Tollefson, 2004).

### **Pakistan’s Language in Education Policy**

The above discussion reveals that the language-in-education policy debate in Pakistan can be traced back to the 1780s in the country’s colonial history, and somehow remains relevant today. On the country’s independence in 1947, Urdu (a neutral language) despite it being a minority language was declared the national language of Pakistan by the founder of the nation, Muhamad Ali Jinnah. The main aim behind this was to keep coherence with a hope that it would serve as a unifying bond in the multilingual and multicultural nation where various groups spoke their own vernacular languages, for example Punjabi, Sindhi, Pushto. English was allowed to retain its colonial status as the official language until Urdu could assume the latter’s functions. The regional languages were ascribed little role, although the provinces were given the right to promote these under the constitution (Rahman, 1997a).

After independence, Urdu was introduced as the main MOI in government/public schools, though Sindhi was allowed to continue in the public schools in the Sindh province, along with English

in private English medium schools. In the early 1970s, the government nationalised private schools and imposed Urdu as the MOI. The attempt failed, as even the government's own institutions, such as those run by the Ministry of Defence, resisted the change. The policy was reversed and denationalisation in 1979 led to a surge of English medium private institutions, especially in urban areas, which charged varying levels of fees and quality of education in English MOI. The choice of the MOI was now left to the provincial governments. However, the issue remains contested as evident in the National Education Policy (Government of Pakistan, 2009) that supports and allows the continuation of parallel education system and dual language-in-education policy. On the one hand, English is advocated in the realisation of its global importance and value; on the other, the national language Urdu is emphasised as a means to enhancing conceptual understanding and the sense of national unity and integration. Fraught with pragmatic concerns, political tensions and little research, the status quo continues (Tamim, 2014) with the issue unresolved even 69 years after independence from the British colonial rule.

In Pakistan, national language-in-education policy-making has been the prerogative of the federal government, while language-in-education or MOI policy is now the domain of the provincial governments. In the absence of any separate document, language policies both national and educational are represented by statements related to language status and roles in official documents including the constitutions of Pakistan, commission reports and educational policies. Despite the constitutional commitment to replace English with Urdu, English remains a language of prestige even today, which is used by the elite, bureaucracy, military, higher judiciary, higher education and all other important official discourse (Rahman, 1997b; Tamim, 2014).

Both Urdu and English languages are considered the most important languages in Pakistan. Though Urdu was the home language and mother tongue of only a small percentage of the population at the time of independence, and was the language of the elite. Since these elite were, additionally, well versed in English, their access to coveted jobs and resources was greatly facilitated, raising much political conflict over the ascribed status of Urdu (Rahman, 2006). The ruling elite have been supporting a pro-Urdu stance since then, despite their acknowledgement of the high value held by English. The situation seems quite paradoxical as Urdu language which holds low esteem in the eyes of the ruling elite, is being used as a symbol of national integration to overcome ethno-national struggle for autonomy which has been present in Pakistani provinces since independence (Rahman, 1995).

English language has led to the birth of politico-economic inequality in Pakistan as it is accessible to the elite only (Rahman 1997,b). The ruling elite are responsible for creating this gap in

the society by carrying a dual stance toward English language. On the one hand, they openly acknowledge the role of English in development and on the other hand they favour Urdu MOI at school level in public sector, hence denying a major part of the population, access to good quality English language learning (Shamim, 2008) and education through English MOI. Public school education system is the largest education provider in Pakistan as it caters to 70 percent of the Pakistani population (Razzaq & Forde, 2014). However, the situation is completely different in the higher education which mainly follows English MOI and requires a good knowledge of English language for the students to do successful learning in university. This exposes the imbalance in the school and higher education policies in Pakistan. This appears to be a similar policy followed by the colonial rulers to reserve higher education to the elite class. The opposite policies appear to have been developed purposefully to make it difficult for the students from Urdu MOI schools to enter in and successfully complete higher education.

After independence, the newly freed government in Pakistan took a long time before it could lay down its first language-in-education policy. Without considering the long-term effects, Urdu was declared as the MOI at the primary and secondary school level. However, English MOI was decided for university education (Sultana, 2009). It was decided that Urdu should be taught as a first language and English as a second language and as compulsory subjects at secondary and higher secondary levels. It was also decided that Urdu be taught as a compulsory subject till higher secondary level and English be taught as a compulsory subject till under-graduate level (Mustafa, 2005). The same practice is being followed to date. In the English medium schools, English is taught as first language, while Urdu is taught as second language. On the contrary, in Urdu medium schools, Urdu is taught as first language, whereas English is taught as second language. This situation is leading to the production of academic bilinguals, both balanced and unbalanced. Currently, in the government schools English is introduced at levels varying from year 3 to 4. Almost all private schools—specifically in urban areas—use English as MOI. Public schools are marked by not only poor infrastructure but also by the well documented poor teaching/learning of English (Mansoor, 2005).

Due to the spread of English as global language: the economic, social and political power associated with it; and the internationalisation of higher education, English has become the preferred choice as MOI in university study programmes world over (Dang, Nguyen & Le, 2013; Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra 2011; 2013; Evans & Morrison, 2011; Huang, 2012; Marsh, 2006). However, English MOI can create problems in university for non-English background students who have had their school and college education either in their first language or bilingually (Ali, 2013; Evans & Morrison, 2011; Hamid, Jahan & Islam, 2013; Hasson, 2005; Huang, 2012; Mansoor, 2004). A majority of students entering into universities in non-native English speaking countries like Pakistan



either do not have prior experience of learning through English MOI at school or have low competency in academic English. This situation leads to problems in university learning environment that requires completing various academic tasks which need English academic skill in order to be accomplished (Evans & Morrison, 2011).

With access to English restricted on the one hand and the downplayed role of local languages on the other, marginalisation is inevitable. Pointing towards the status of English, Mansoor (2004) says that English is considered the language of power in Pakistan due to better economic and social benefits associated with it. Knowledge of English language holds the promise of economic and social mobility due to the chances of getting better paid jobs as compared to Urdu language. The colonial era social divide still exists in Pakistan where English language is associated with both political and economic gains (Shamim, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The historical perspective of Pakistan's language-in-education policy revealed that the shifts and gaps in language-in-education and medium of instruction policies have always been a hurdle in the achievement of English language education goals in Pakistan since independence from the British colonial rule. This situation has raised a continuous debate on language-in-education policy and medium of instruction in Pakistan since independence and Pakistani governments to date have been indecisive regarding this. This chaotic situation has caused a great setback to the education system in Pakistan. This paper concludes that considering the education needs of Pakistani population, there is a dire need of discarding the obsolete colonial language policies and formulating effective language-in-education policy for the achievement of language education and ultimately the education goals for the better future of the country. The first step to achieve this goal is to ensure the provision of equal opportunities to all the school-goers in Pakistan to learn English language and get education in English medium. This can be done by developing and implementing a uniform language-in-education policy that enforces English medium of instruction at both public and private schools

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 **17:8 August 2017**

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