

## The Status of Language in Pakistan

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### Abstract:

*The present study takes a survey of the status of English in Pakistan. It begins with the general description of status of education in the country, moving towards a discussion about the condition of language in the country in general, leading to the place of English language in the education system of Pakistan with special reference to the government education policy regarding English. In the end, the historical roots of English language in Pakistan and its importance has been highlighted with its relevance to the current situation of English in the country. The conclusion reached is that due to linguistic diversity and lack of political will, it is difficult to minimise the role of English language in the country.*

**Key words:** English in Pakistan, education system, government education policy, historical roots

Pakistan is one of the large and rapidly growing population countries. But it is not clear how much the actual population is, as three different organizations have given different estimates about the population of Pakistan with huge differences between them. Figure.1 gives the estimates of World Bank (WB) United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) United Nations (UN) and Government of Pakistan from 2007 to 2030 which widely differ in their assessments of the population of the country.

Year	Population (in millions)		
		266	
2030		UN	
	169		185
2010	Govt. of Pakistan		UN
		166	
2008		World Bank	
	163	164	173
2007	World Bank	UNESCO	UNDP

**Table 1 Population Estimate of Pakistan by Different Agencies**

Adopted from Lewis (2010), "Teaching and Learning in Pakistan: The Role of Language in Education"

In UNDP's Human development Index for 2009, Pakistan ranks as one of the lowest ranking country in the group of developing countries (141<sup>st</sup> in a list of 182 countries). There is a huge disparity between the rich and the poor with a Gini index of 31.2. Such a disparity creates a huge difference in the education system between the affluent and poor class of the society. Most of the population of Pakistan is very young. One third of its population's age ranges from 0-14; half of the people are below the age of twenty and; two third are below the age of 31(Lewis 2010).

These demographic facts have serious implications for the education system of the country. Almost half of the population is school going which needs to be educated while bearing in mind the financial resources of their parents which is an influential factor in determining the educational journey of a child. Good health and good nourishment are also interrelated factors with the financial conditions of the parents. Due to such poor conditions of the country, participation in

education is very low in Pakistan which is 66% at primary level, 32% at secondary and only 5% at tertiary level (Lewis, 2010). According to official statistics, literacy rate in Pakistan is 46% which includes all those who can just read and write.

Pakistan is a multilingual country where one has to learn many languages to survive. Enjoying the benefits of being a multilingual, Bepsi Sidhwa, the novelist, rightly says:

Although I speak Gujrati at home and am relatively fluent in Urdu and understand Punjabi, English is the language I choose to write in. Fortunately, I dream and think in all four languages (Sidhwa 1993, 1988).

The researcher's own example would be as much appropriate as that of Sidhwa. I speak Pashto at home; use Urdu as a lingua franca when out of my own city; have been using English when I entered my academic career, and I have, necessarily to understand (if can't speak them) Punjabi and Saraiki where I am studying at the university and doing my research work. Urdu is the national language of the country; English is used in academic institutions; four major languages, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi and Balochi are spoken in the four provinces of the country. There have also been 50 other languages that have been spoken in different parts of the country. (Rahman 2003).

English is mainly an academic language in Pakistan, therefore, the educational policies of the country plays a vital role in promoting the language. There is no uniform system of education in Pakistan and different kinds of schools systems teach different kinds of syllabuses. Below a brief overview of the Pakistani education system has been presented.

## **1. Educational setup in Pakistan**

Coleman (2010) has divided Pakistani education system into four categories:

1. private elite English medium schools
2. private non-elite 'English medium' schools

3. government Urdu medium schools
4. *dini madaris (madrasas)*

### **1.1. Private Elite English Medium Schools**

These institutes are for the education of elites or upper class of the country. These schools/colleges/universities are very few in the country and a few people can afford to send their children to such places. They hire highly qualified teaching staff, sometimes even foreign faculty whose academic and intellectual achievements are known on national level. These institutes charge very high fees that a middle class man cannot even think of getting his children admitted there. They include institutes like Atchison College Lahore, Institute of Business and Management (IBM), LUMS, GIK, Sadiq Public School etc.

### **1.2. Private Non-elite 'English Medium' Schools**

Families with moderate income send their children to such institutes. These institutes are very rapidly increasing in the country and are so popular that more than half of the school - going population studies in these schools. Their so called claims are that they use English as the medium of instructions in their schools. They charge affordable fees which makes it attractive for the masses. Private non-elite 'English medium' schools mostly hire less qualified and untrained teachers with minimum wages.

### **1.3. Government Urdu Medium Schools**

Government Urdu Medium schools can be found everywhere in both rural and urban Pakistan. In contrast to private non-elite 'English medium' schools, Government Urdu medium schools have better qualified and trained teachers. They provide free education to children including free books and sometimes even scholarships. But government Urdu medium schools suffer from the teachers' absentees and laziness. According to Coleman (2010) these schools, along with *madrasas*, are the only option for the poor masses of Pakistan to educate their children. But

despite facilities like qualified, trained teachers and better classrooms environment, these schools give a very poor outcomes. Coleman (2010) observes:

A child in a government school will need a further 1.5 years to achieve what a child in year 3 in a private non-elite school has achieved in mathematics in Urdu, whilst the government school pupil needs a further 2.5 years to achieve what a Year 3 pupil in a private non-elite school can do in English.

Such observations are very common about government Urdu medium schools which make such students who drop out of the school at the end of the years 3, functionally illiterate (Andrabi et al.)

#### 1.4. **Dini madaris (madrasas)**

Mostly *Dini Madaris* offer Islamic education with the exception of a few *Madaris* which offer secular education to very negligible level. These *Madaris* also provide food and lodging to the students and therefore, have a special attraction for the poor families. All over the country, these *Madaris* vary in syllabi and affiliation. Coleman (2010) gives the following facts about these *Madaris*:

**Age range:** Ages of the students ranges between 10 and 28, but some institutions have nursery classes while others admit only comparatively mature or advanced students.

**Size:** the number of students in a madrasa may range from a few to several thousand.

**Ideology:** madrasas are exceedingly diverse in ideology and, therefore, cannot be easily categorized. However, five different major types of *Madaris* have been identified with respect to sectarian and political affiliation: Sunni (Deobandi), Sunni (Bareili), Ahle Hadith/Salafi, Shia and Jamaat-e-Islami Coleman (2010). A Federal Madaris Education Board under the Education Ministry also exists but it is not known to

what degree it can exercise its authority over these *Madaris*.

After doing their intermediate, 5% of the students either enter colleges or universities in public sector. Here the education system is comparatively uniform all over Pakistan except some private elite universities the universities in bigger cities like Karachi, Lahore etc. which are much more advance than those smaller cities.

## **2. Pakistan Education Policy 2009**

The current education policy presented by the Ministry of Education says very little about the role of languages in the education system of the country. For instance, it stresses the importance of literacy and non-formal education but it does not explain which language would be used for this purpose. Nonetheless, National Education Policy suggests that in consultation with provincial governments and other stakeholders, a comprehensive language policy would be developed. It also states that right from class I English would be a compulsory part of the syllabus along with Urdu and one regional language. Up to class V, the provinces have the choice in the language for medium of instructions. From class V onwards, English would be the medium of instruction. This policy will remain till 2014 and from 2014 onwards, English will be used as a medium of instruction in all the classes. The rationale for introducing English language from the start of a child's educational career is to achieve proficiency in English for getting white collar jobs and thus bring the common masses on equal footing with elite class. Such an educational policy raises a number of questions which are out of the scope of the current study and which needs a separate and lengthy discussion.

Urdu is the national language of Pakistan while English enjoys the status of official language in Pakistan. However, excluding English language there are 72 languages spoken in the country. Out of these 72 languages, Aero and Gowro has the

smallest number of speakers (Aero has 150 and Gowro 200 speakers only) while Punjabi has the largest number of speakers of 61 million (Lewis 2009). The table 2 below lists seven major languages of Pakistan which at least has 1 million speakers.

The table 1 below shows an overview the status of major languages in Pakistan. After a brief talk on the table we will come to the discussion on English language.

No	Macrolanguage and language name	Speakers in (millions)	Percentage of Population
1	Lahnda (Western Panjabi, Mirpur Panjabi, Saraiki, Northern Hindko, Southern Hindko, Khetrani, Pahari-Potwari)	78.0	49.3
2	Pushto (Central Pashto, Northern Pashto, Southern Pashto)	18.19	12.0
3	Sindhi	18.5	11.7
4	Urdu	10.7	6.8
5	Baluchi (Eastern Balochi, Western Balochi, Southern Balochi)	5.7	3.6
6	Brahui	2.0	1.3
7	Farsi, Eastern	1.0	0.6
	<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>134.8</b>	<b>85.3</b>
	65 other languages	23.3	14.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>158.1</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 2. Major Languages Spoken in Pakistan, Number of Speakers with Percentages**

Adopted from Lewis (2009)

Table 2 above shows that Punjabi is the major language (spoken by 49.3 % of the population) in Pakistan. Pashto is spoken by 12% of the population, Sindhi 11.7%, Urdu 6.8%, Balochi 3.6%, Bruhi1.3%, Farsi 0.6% and other smaller languages 14.7%. None of the major languages are spoken uniformly in all the four provinces, instead; only one language is spoken by the majority in one province.

If we look at the table 2, it can be observed that Urdu which is the official language of Pakistan has only 6.8% native speakers while English which is the official language of the country has none of the native speakers. Punjabi has the largest number of speakers with 49.3% while Pashtu is the

second largest language with 12% speakers. The 7 major languages make 85.3% of the population of Pakistan while the remaining 14.7% population speak 65 minor languages (Lewis, 2009). Lewis (2009) uses the term macrolanguage for the language which has more than one dialect or varieties. For example, Punjabi is not uniformly spoken throughout the country but rather it has different dialects in different regions, like Western Panjabi, Mirpur Panjabi, Saraiki, Northern Hindko Southern Hindko, Khetranin and Pahari-Potwari.

Pakistan received English language in inheritance from the British rulers. The British education policy makers decided that Urdu would be used as medium of instructions for the general masses while English for the elite class. Ghani (2002) expresses her views about English as;

English in Pakistan serves as a gateway to success, to further education and to white-collar jobs. It is the language of higher education and wider communication and not the home language of the population except in the upper strata of society where it is spoken as a status symbol (Ghani 2002).

The result of this British policy was a chaos. Urdu had very little native speakers and English had none all. The native languages speakers developed the feelings of alienation from their sociolinguistic roots because they were not given education in their native languages which were a source of linking them to their folk knowledge and culture. Willingly or unwillingly for the natives, both these languages continued to enjoy the same status till the end of the British Raj in India. Today English is a compulsory subject till graduation in Pakistan whose primary function is to prepare students for the examinations. Passing these exams opens pathways to high level of white collar employment opportunities for them. Urdu medium students then cannot think of moving up the social mobility scale.

Despite being the language of competitive and other examinations, English has no functional value. The same white collar jobs holders interact in their local languages inside and

outside their offices. Not to speak of English, even Urdu is a foreign language for those living in South Punjab, Northern parts of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa and Sindh.

Due to the importance of learning English for getting white collar jobs, every student tries hard to learn it but very few achieve the standard of making it a key for such a success. The poor conditions of learning/teaching English are many but the most important ones are the poor standard of our educational institutes, lack of competent and trained teachers, irrelevant syllabuses, lack language laboratories and no functional value of English language in the society. Another important fact, according to Shamim (2008), is the 'ritualised' manner of teaching English in Pakistan. In her ethnographic study of Pakistani English language education, she found that the teachers make a distinction between 'doing a lesson' and 'doing grammar'.

'Doing a lesson follows the following steps:

- a. A text (the 'lesson') is read aloud by the teacher or pupils
  - b. The text is explained by the teacher, often in Urdu or a local language
  - c. The meanings of 'difficult words' are given in English, Urdu or a local language
  - d. Pupils write follow-up exercises in their notebooks.
- (Shamim 2008).

'Doing a grammar' class follows similar steps. Such a method has the drawback of ignoring speaking and listening skills. It also fails to develop students' critical reading and thinking ability. Moreover, the teachers themselves do not have enough competence in English language. As a result they either teach English either in Urdu or some local language.

The British left India in 1947 but their language policy of Urdu and English still remains in the country. It has penetrated into each and every academic, official and social activity of the country. Today, a person who does not know English language cannot enjoy the status of belonging to the respectable social class. All high ranking jobs are linked with

the mastery of English language and all the competitive exams are conducted in English language which requires a high level of English proficiency on the part of the examinee.

Due the primacy and importance of English language in every walk of life, a special place is given to it in the academic programmes. But the dearth of academic expertise in the country makes it difficult for most of endeavours, in the direction of successful language learning programmes to face failure.

In spite of the wide usage of English language in the country, it still remains a foreign language for its learners. "There is often a lack of opportunity for beyond-the-classroom interaction in school foreign language programs. This lack of opportunity places learners at considerable disadvantage when confronted with the inevitable psychological, linguistic and socio-cultural obstacles in second language communication" (Savignon and Sysoyev 2002). Pakistani learners of English language confront the same 'disadvantage'; and for the same reason and they do not achieve a similar level of proficiency which a second language learner achieves by using the target language within the target language environment.

English is considered very important for career making as most of the competitive examinations are taken in English language. English is a career and status symbol in the country. According to Rahman, power is the main quality which enables the users of a language to obtain more sources of gratification for the user of that language in the form of tangible goods or intangible pleasures (Rahman (P.1). He argues that language is the major source of employment without which one cannot enter into power. The story of national and official languages in Pakistan seems to have taken the same root as pointed out by Rahman. Urdu became the national language of Pakistan as a very powerful section of the bureaucracy (Muhajirs, who migrated to Pakistan during partition) spoke Urdu as their mother tongue (Rahman p.2). The rationale for the privilege given to Urdu was that it was widely spoken in the country and

was a symbol of national unity among the different sects of the Pakistani society.

With the spread of British colonization, English was imposed upon the natives of subcontinent as their colonial legacy. During the Mughal regime, before the British Raj, Persian was the court language while Urdu was gradually strengthening its feet among the masses as a medium of communication. When Pakistani policy makers made Urdu as the national language of the country, it was also declared that at a suitable time it would replace English as an official language as well but, according to Rahman, it is the stated but not the real policy of the ruling elite to resist this shift which can be seen in the elite's patronage of English in the name of efficiency and modernisation (Rahman p.4).

## **Conclusion**

Due to the diversity of ethnic and linguistic groups in Pakistan, English will rule for a long time in the country unless some bold political decision are made in favour of some local language. But the lack of uniform educational policy and the political will never let such a thing happen in the near future. Moreover, the political and the bureaucratic elite will also not let it happen because it is the only means available to them to maintain their strong hold on the reigns of power.

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