

Banishing Urdu as a Medium of Instruction from Pakistan: An Appraisal of Loss and Gain

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Abstract

The controversy of the medium of instruction in Pakistan is old and its roots date back to the pre-Independence Colonial period. Pakistan inherited an educational structure from the British Empire which was later largely modified but its certain essential features are in place to date. The banishment of Urdu and, in its stead, the inclusion of English as a medium of instruction is one such feature which, in its own right, is a well-recognized colonial relic. The use of English as a medium of instruction in Pakistan has its defenders as well as detractors. However, what is crucially missing in this debate, is the expert opinion and the evidence-based technical and dispassionate analysis of the problem at hand. A large number of the people who usually participate in this debate tend to come up with unsubstantiated claims and opinion-based generalizations. This paper intends to make a well substantiated appraisal of the loss and gain of the medium of instruction, and examines the relevance and value of the first language (in our case, Urdu) in the context of the medium of instruction. Finally, the paper expects to bring about an informed understanding of the process, context, objectives, and outcomes of the medium of instruction from the perspective of language pedagogy and planning.

Keywords: *Urdu, medium of instruction, English, Pakistan, education.*

“The medium is the message”ⁱ, said Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher and intellectual. What McLuhan meant was that the form of a medium embeds itself in any message it would transmit or convey, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived.ⁱⁱ A medium of instruction is a language used in formalized settings for instructional purposes. In a somewhat more technical sense, it is the means whereby a message is transmitted with reference to speech and writing.ⁱⁱⁱ Since the 1980s, a renewal of interest in language-planning research has created an increased awareness as to the fact that the medium-of-instruction question in education has decisive impact not only upon the academic output of students, but also on several kinds of social and economic (in) equalities.

Furthermore, because academic institutions play such a vital part in defining and constructing societal hierarchies, economic opportunity, and political power, the medium-of-instruction policies therefore play a critical part in forming social identities and political systems.^{iv} The question of the medium of instruction is crucial in any talk of education and language policy. There is a near consensus among educationists, psychologists and academicians that students are best instructed in their own language (in our case regional languages) or at least in that language with which they have social and cultural intimacy (in our case Urdu).^v Some of the expert opinions are quoted to this effect:

1. However, research findings consistently show that learners benefit from using their home language in education in early grade years (ahead of a late primary transition stage).^{vi}
2. If the language of instruction is the same as the child's mother tongue, there is a better chance for the child to 'fit in' and continue with education.^{vii}
3. Parents will feel they can actually make a difference in their child's education if they are freely able to communicate with teachers and be able to help at home.^{viii}
4. Recent research strongly supports bilingual education and shows that students who speak, read, and write their first language well are more apt to succeed academically.^{ix,x,xi}

5. Education or more properly internalization of knowledge is a highly complex process and cannot take place so long as the child remains pestered by the intricacies of medium.^{xii}

6. It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the best system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.^{xiii}

7. Many studies have found that cognitive and academic development in the first language has an extremely important and positive effect on second language schooling.^{xiv}

So much about the importance of the first language as the medium of instruction. All the points mentioned above underscore the value of the first language as the medium of instruction. At the same time if there are those who emphasize the use of the first language as the medium of instruction, there are also those who criticize the imposition of English as a medium of instruction.^{xv} Yvonne Freeman and David Freeman in their valuable book, *ESL/EFL Teaching: Principles for Success*(1998) have expressed serious reservations as to the use of English as a medium of instruction:

...although learning is natural and happens all the time, we cannot learn what we do not understand. Learning involves demonstrations (we see people doing things), engagement (we decide we want to do those things), and sensitivity (nothing is done or said that convinces us we can't do those things). When the demonstration is given in English to nonnative speakers, they may not understand what they are seeing or hearing. If they don't understand the demonstration, they probably won't choose to engage in the activity. And if they don't understand what the teacher says, they may become convinced that they can't learn. At all three stages, instruction in English simply may not be comprehensible enough for learning to take place.^{xvi}

Sometimes, in the developing and postcolonial countries like Pakistan, parents in a frantic effort to make their children speak English fluently, start using English at home. This approach has been criticized for various linguistic, psychological and cultural reasons. Linguistically, instead of giving children some genuine help, it is more likely to end in the impoverishment of communication due to an extensive exposure to substandard language. Furthermore, it is one of the major reasons for the loss of the first language. Psychologically such an immersion into an alien language which is not backed by the home culture may hinder the conceptual development of children.^{xvii} This is how this approach has been analyzed linguistically as well as culturally:

Ancestral language loss also may occur because non-English-speaking parents, in an effort to help their children acquire English quickly, talk to them in their second language, English. Sometimes, unfortunately, this practice is catalyzed by teacher pressure. Moved by the desire to have non-English speaking students acquire English as quickly as possible, well-meaning but ill-advised teachers sometimes recommend that language minority parents use English with their children at home. When this happens, the nature of the communication between parents and children tends to become impoverished. Parents, for example, may find it difficult, if not impossible, to share with their children their most subtle, rich, and intimate feelings and thoughts in a language that is alien to them.^{xviii}

In yet another book, *Language Issues in Comparative Education* (2013), Carol Benson and Kimmo Kosonen voiced the same concerns, “The idea that using English as a medium leads to improved English competence emerges as a central but totally unsubstantiated belief.”^{xix} In the light of these observations, it is very important to re-conceptualize the question of the medium of instruction in Pakistan. In Pakistan, for all intents and purposes, English is widely used as medium of instruction, especially in the institute of higher education i.e. colleges and universities. Mr. Altaf Hussain, former vice-chancellor of the Allama Iqbal Open University, stated in an interview that the official medium of

instruction at graduate as well as undergraduate level in Pakistan is just English.^{xx} Similarly, in a groundbreaking study conducted to map out the sociolinguistic landscape of language planning in Pakistan, this situation has been assessed in the following words:

Within the context of Higher Education, in *all* educational policies and reports of education commissions and committees set up between 1957 and 1998, [and to date as well] the official policy has been to maintain English as the medium of teaching and learning. It is important to note that this policy continues to be regarded as an interim arrangement.^{xxi}

However, although we have largely embraced English as a medium of instruction, there seems to be little realization on the part of the policy makers and government officials as to the loss and gain of this approach. Most of the arguments given in favor of adopting English as a medium of instruction boils down to one generalization: The global significance of English and the availability of state-of-the-art knowledge in this language. No sane person can deny the truthfulness of this claim yet mere truthfulness of a claim does not make its adoption profitable in every situation. Therefore, the real question for us in Pakistan is not whether English is globally an important language or whether there is state-of-the-art knowledge in it. Obviously the importance of English is a given. These are, indeed very significant, yet secondary questions. The real question is whether in Pakistan we have the requisite mechanism and the necessary infrastructure to teach this language and to introduce it as a medium of instruction. We must remember that the medium of instruction cannot be that language which is likely to turn out to be a formidable challenge in its own right. This would be, for all practical purposes, a case of mistaking the means for the ends. It is common knowledge that language teaching requires some sort of basic infrastructure (such as audio visual aids, language labs), a large number of qualified teachers, and a specialized knowledge base.

Therefore our real question is more pragmatic than pedagogic. In Pakistan we do not have even the most basic of facilities at our schools,

let alone a viable mechanism to teach an international language or to prepare our students for using English as a medium of instruction. According to a report of *News Pakistan*, a web-based newspaper:

Not surprisingly a large number of public-sector schools are lacking basic facilities, including clean drinking water and seating arrangements....Although basic education must be top priority of the governments, it is not the case in Pakistan. The condition and quality of education government primary schools providing in major areas of the country are worsening with every year. Hundreds of ghost schools have been registered to grab funds from the nation exchequer. In most of the rural areas, school buildings have been used as drawings rooms and cattle sheds by the local landowners. Students and teachers are forced to sit under trees in the open fields...There are hundreds of other educational institutions that lack infrastructure including toilets, clean drinking water, playgrounds and furniture in class rooms. Another dilemma of these schools is shortage of teaching staff.^{xxii}

In the midst of all these complicated issues and intractable problems, the irony is that the Punjab School Education Department has notified the conversion of all its schools from the Urdu medium to English medium. This decision was taken in order to compete with the “globalized world in the field of knowledge.”^{xxiii} In a similar vein, The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government made a decision to adopt English as medium of instruction in all the public-sector schools in 2014. The argument given for this move to bring the public schools at par with the private schools. Nevertheless, one feels that the provincial government did not do any hard thinking before taking this radical step. Such questions as to what the impact of this change of medium will be and what the first-rate research has to say on the subject.

Therefore, such positions are exceedingly idealized and the ones which exhibit an utter disconnect with the ground realities and the grass-root problems. How far removed for the ground realities this position is can be understood by consulting Julie Dearden’s study. In 2014, Julie

Dearden, Senior Research and Development Fellow at the University of Oxford, conducted a study titled *English as a Medium of Instruction – A Growing Global Phenomenon*. The study was sponsored by the Centre for Research and Development in English Medium Instruction, Oxford University Press and published by the British Council. The study covered 51 countries including Pakistan. It is a very insightful study which lays bare many perceptive perspectives which may help us conceptualize the problematic nature of English as medium of instruction in just in Pakistan but also in all the non-English countries, especially the developing countries. Here are some of the major findings of this study:

In many countries the educational infrastructure does not support quality English medium instruction provision: there is a shortage of linguistically qualified teachers; there are no stated expectations of English language proficiency; there appear to be few organizational or pedagogical guidelines which might lead to effective English medium instruction teaching and learning; there is little or no English medium instruction content in initial teacher education (teacher preparation) programs and continuing professional development (in-service) courses.^{xxiv}

Moreover, the study showed that the primary and secondary school teachers across Pakistan are not even minimally qualified to use English as a Medium of Instruction. The study tested the English language skills of 2008 primary and middle school teachers in public and private schools in 18 districts of Punjab using the British Council's Aptis language testing system —a modern and customizable English language proficiency test prepared to meet the varied needs of individuals and organizations the world over.^{xxv} According to the major findings:

1. 62 per cent of private school teachers and 56 per cent of government school teachers registered scores in the lowest possible band in the Aptis test, meaning they lack even basic knowledge of English, including the ability to understand and use familiar everyday expressions and simple phrases.

2. Most of the remaining teachers received scores that placed them in beginners' level.
3. Even in English medium instruction schools, 44 per cent of teachers scored in the bottom Aptis band. In all, 94 per cent of teachers in English medium instruction schools have only pre-intermediate level of English or lower.
4. Younger teachers had a much higher level of English than older colleagues. 24 per cent of teachers aged 21–35 scored in the pre-intermediate and intermediate categories, compared with just seven per cent of those aged 51 and over.^{xxvi}

These findings, which are also independently corroborated by other studies, paint an extremely bleak picture. Look at the first finding as it is somewhat counterintuitive. Usually we tend to assume that the private schools in Pakistan have better qualified teachers than the government schools. But this assumption is falsified by this finding. Even then the situation is very hopeless as 62% private schools teachers and 56% government school teachers scored lowest possible band. This is very alarming. Even the so-called English-medium schools fared poorly on the Aptis test. The age variable is also interesting here as the younger teachers performed somewhat better than their older counterparts. All in all, these findings bring about an assessment which must rightly put us on alert.

At the same time, we do have plenty of research-based evidence which shows that the most effective medium for school education is the language a child already possesses and the one to which he or she is naturally exposed in his or her cultural setting.^{xxvii} Moreover, research has also demonstrated that students who are taught in their first language tend to stay longer in schools and perform better in exams as well as in classrooms. And what is utterly forgotten is the fact that English is not the medium of instruction even in such developed countries as France, China, Japan, Germany, Russia and South Korea which have far more economic and educational resources than Pakistan.

Moreover, in Pakistan, today we are facing the consequences of what we sowed in the 1980s when the unimpeded burgeoning of private schools led the education system to be radically moved towards “English medium”. Setting aside the commercial motives, let us suppose that this move was motivated by the conviction that learning English is indispensable in the contemporary Anglophone world. But unfortunately the teachers recruited by such schools had extremely questionable proficiency in the English language themselves. This trend continues to date because these so-called English medium schools routinely hire underqualified teachers and pay them very meagre salaries. Even today one can easily notice the billboards pompously publicizing an English medium school with semantic, idiomatic and syntactic blunders. It is not hard to imagine the level and quality of education imparted by such schools.^{xxviii} Rauf Parekh, a distinguished Urdu lexicographer, linguist and columnist describes the complexity of the situation anecdotally:

My personal experience is that even at the university level out of a class of, say, 35 students, hardly 10 can express themselves in correct English. And, since they take pride in being educated at an English-medium school or college, they announce arrogantly that their Urdu is very poor, as if not knowing Urdu is an additional qualification. As a result, the new graduates that the colleges and universities are churning out every year know neither Urdu nor English. I am sorry to say that most of them are semi-literates though they hold degrees. Most of them cannot grasp even the basics of the discipline they claim to have graduated in as one major stumbling block is language.^{xxix}

On the other hand, it is a well-established and well-documented fact that during the 19th and 20th centuries only those nations could manage to progress industrially as well as educationally which took their own national language as the medium of instruction.^{xxx} Pakistan could also have followed in the footsteps of

Germany, France, China, Japan and other such developed nations which adopted their own national languages as mediums of instruction. But we decided to embark on a new experiment which has been failing us ever since. Shan-ul-HaqHaqjee, one of the leading lexicographers and scholars of Urdu,said in 1986: “Urdu has forcibly been kept away from the fields of science and technology ... we do not have confidence in ourselves and our language ... it has been reduced to a status which has rendered it useful for culture and literature alone.”^{xxxix}What Shan-ul-HaqHaqjee is saying is also corroborated by a report published by UNESCO in 2007 which clearly recognized thatproviding education in a child's own tongue is indeed a critical issue.^{xxxii}

To sum up, we can say that the foremost purpose of a medium of instruction is to facilitate the learning and to enable to learners to internalize the new concepts, ideas and theories. Hence a medium of instruction is a means, and not an end in itself. No doubt, English has its own value as an international language, but every country has a right to make an objective appraisal of the loss and gain of its adoption as a medium of instruction. The present researchersthemselvesare associated with the teaching of English for so many years and have no animosity towards this language. They are fully aware of its value and significance. However, the real question is whether in Pakistan we have some viable mechanism to make our students proficient in this language so that they use it functionally as a medium of instruction. The answer to this question is simply ‘no’. Unfortunately, we do not have such basic facilities in our schools as drinking water, boundary walls, qualified teachers, let alone English language teaching technology.

Moreover, it has also been noted that students learn better in their first language. Plentiful evidence has been marshal to make this point. Psychologically, culturally and linguistically, the use of the first language as a medium of instruction is far more profitable and pragmatic. In Pakistan we are nowhere near having even the most rudimentary infrastructure to teach English in thousands of schools scattered in the width and breadth of this country. Therefore, in the light of this

discussion, it is recommended that the State should make arrangements for the parallel introduction of Urdu medium instruction at all levels. We should not abolish English medium but we must also furnish the alternative Urdu medium option to those who cannot cope with the intricacies of English. Parallel mediums of instruction are not uncommon in the world and we can also try this in Pakistan.

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