THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION DIVIDE IN PAKISTAN-IMPACT ON LEARNERS' PROFILE

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Abstract

Both English and Urdu are widely being spoken and written in various fields in Pakistan-the former as an official and the latter as a national language. The education sector is no exception. This fact has created a linguistic divide in academia-primarily referred to as Urdu and English medium. Since the inception of Pakistan, both the systems are being run parallelly. The Urdu medium schools are state-run and usually provide free education, while the English medium schools are privately run and charge fees from learners. The children from high middle and elite class study in English medium schools. These two mediums are more than systems when analyzed with the learners now gaining higher education in colleges and universities. They constitute a profile and signal a future based upon them-all due to the level of English proficiency. This qualitative study was conducted to understand better their current academic and future professional profile built by the two types of learners enrolled in a college or a university for their higher education. The findings highlight the impact of linguistic inequality being practiced in the country on the students' self-image and future career. The study recommends the need for a uniformed medium, a uniformed language policy, and the engagement of language practitioners with the national policymakers.

Keywords: English, Urdu, medium of instruction, profile, language policy, linguistic inequality, educational and professional career

The Medium of Instruction Divide in Pakistan-Impact on Learners' Self-Profile

With the existing 74 languages being used in written or spoken form, Pakistan is a diverse country linguistically (Simons & Charles, 2018). The now implemented constitution (1973) of Pakistan clearly states English as an official and Urdu as a national language. It also acknowledges the indigenous languages; however, no precise regulation about their usage is passed. Today, when the constitution has grown over 46 years, there are Urdu and English – two languages – widely used in Pakistan (Simons & Charles, 2018). Together they constitute the linguistic capital in the Linguistic spheres in Pakistan. While Urdu's use is quite wide across the nation, English being the language of the privileged and the elite is immensely used in bureaucratic circles and military institutions (Rahman, 2004). Thus, without any doubt, English proficiency is considered to be a ticket to entry in quality higher education and white color jobs. Although the National Education Policy (NEP, 2009) acknowledges the significance of local dialects, they remain at the bottom of the country's language hierarchy and are confined to the limited family circles (Manan & David, 2014; Rahman, 2003).

The education sector in Pakistan is torn between the three parallel systems-state-run Urdu medium schools, Privately-run English medium schools, and religious schools (Coleman, 2010; Rahman, 2004; NEP, 2009). The paper focuses on the first two types only. The privately-run English medium schools are further divided into non-elite private

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schools and the elite English medium schools. This sub-division is based on the facilities rendered to the learners and the fee structure (Harlech, Baig & Sajid, 2005; Khattak, 2014; Rehman, 2004; Shamim, 2008).

The high fee structure schools follow Cambridge while the all the other systems follow the federal or provincial track- matric and intermediate. English is claimed to be the medium of instruction (Shamim, 2011); however, Urdu or both languages are used in some public sector colleges and universities as a medium of instruction (Mansoor, 2005).

Table 1

Medium of instruction- facts and figures (NEP, 2009, p.71)

Medium of instruction	Percentage
Urdu	65%
Sindhi	15.5%
English	10.4%
Other languages	9.5%

Hence, this fundamental divide in the medium and examination track owes much to the linguistic and ultimately social inequality rampant in the country (Mansoor, 2005; Rahman, 1999). The whole Urdu medium and English medium are not only two separate educational systems but also carry the complete profile of learners who help them see their past, present, and future from a particular perspective. These terms are enough to determine someone's current status and prospect in the country (Warwick & Reimers, 2005). In this way, these tags are known as identity markers; English- medium is thought to be another name for an affluent section of society whose persona is more near akin to the western lifestyle and are liberated in their thoughts and manners. In contrast, the Urdu medium is perceived as relatively less prosperous, less groomed in their dressing and styles, and more fundamental in their faith and values (Ahmed, 2016; Rehman, 2004).

This paper attempts to investigate how this medium divide at schools in Pakistan affects the self-image of the learners studying in higher education institutions and how they see themselves in their future professional lives. Thus, the questions guiding this research are as follows:

1. How do college and university students in Pakistan see their experience of a medium divide in their schools?
2. What impact does that experience have on their self-profile, and how do they think it affects their professional life in the future?

The paper begins with a review of the literature related too medium controversy in Pakistan. Then it presents the method and findings to conclude. The article is completed with a few proposals for bringing a change in language policy and current practices.

Literature Review

Language of Academia in Pakistan

The currently practiced constitution of Pakistan (1973) mentions Urdu as the

national language and English as the offices' language until the arrangements be made to substitute it with the national language. The then government roughly estimated 15 years were sufficient to make arrangements for giving Urdu a status of official language.

However, since then, English, due to being the language of elite civil servants and military, is given a relatively far higher status than Urdu. Thus, it is considered a means to acquire a higher personal and professional level (Mahboob, 2002; Shamim, 2011). It is widely observed that English proficiency is regarded as the first step in the ultimate success in competitive exams, which leads to the white-collar jobs in Pakistan.

Given the English Urdu medium divide being practiced at school level in Pakistan and the growing awareness of the importance of international language, parents and students seem to be more inclined towards getting admission in English medium schools. However, the middle and lower-middle-class cannot afford the high fee demanded by elite private schools. This reality has given rise to a mushroom growth of so-called English medium schools in every nook and corner of the country (Harlech, Baig & Sajid, 2005; Manan, Dumanig & David, 2015; Rahman, 2004). Nevertheless, they are unable to attain the status of high standard English medium schools, and the quality of English education is highly questionable there (Fareed, Jawed & Awan, 2018; Manan, David & Dumanig, 2016).

It was almost a decade ago that the medium divide rampant at schools started at the college level. If we go ten years back, the concept of private and elite private colleges was alien to the nation. However, continuing the school convention, a divide at higher educational institutions also started giving birth to umpteen number of private colleges and universities (Waseem & Asadullah, 2013).

The medium of instruction in Higher Education Institutions broadly vary. The subjects such as International Relations, Medical Sciences, Engineering, and Information Technology are taught in English. Simultaneously, the humanities and Arts are considered low-prestige subjects, and the medium of instruction is also Urdu (Mustafa, 2015; Rehman, 2004).

Identity and Linguistic Capital

In Linguistic and TESOL, the term identity denotes the understanding of self by some individual and how he/she related oneself to the world. This understanding includes the chances for prospects (Norton, 1997). He explains that whenever the learners of a particular language utter some words, they can be said to be communicating and exchanging the information with the people in front of them and building and rebuilding the knowledge about their profile and how the world perceives that. Put sumply, while communicating, they are actively engaged in building their identity (Norton, 1997, p. 410). This translates into the active status of identity. It establishes that the definition of self changes with the changing social and economic conditions one is exposed too.

Bourdieu (1991) terms this concept of self-identity as linguistic capital, which refers to the linguistic asset one carries in oneself. This linguistic capital is exchanged among the individuals in formal or informal settings, and they decide the development stages on would pass through in his/her future.

In educational institutions, this linguistic capital has the utmost significance as it makes the learners build a self-linguistic profile about them and help them determine their future. Owing to its importance, the language experts and policymakers should sit together to see how the learners are building their self linguistic profile and what is the role of English Urdu divide on the self-image and how this unequal linguistic treatment is forcing them to create a mostly different profile of their personality while living in the same country.

Method

The study is exploratory and makes use of a qualitative method to collect data. The subjects for the study were chosen using purposive sampling. They included three female and three male students from The University of Education Department of English and Mass Communication. The researchers ensured that the sample had the students from all the three kinds of schools widely popular in Pakistan. Two students named Zakia and Fahad were the elite private English medium schools' product while Ali and Hamdan hailed from a medium Urdu background. The third pair, Annie and Sara, was schooled in a non-elite private English medium school in their vicinity.

As for their current medium of instruction at the university level, the English department has only English as the language of instruction while in the Mass Communication Department, two parallel streams, Urdu and English, are there.

Three qualitative questions of their past, present, and future were prepared and asked the participants. Their responses to the questions were audio-recorded and coded to deduce patterns. The questions asked are given as under:

1- How do you look back at the experience of learning English at school?
2- What do you think is your current level of English proficiency, and how do you identify linguistic self at the university level?
3- Where do you think you would be after passing university years? Which kind of professional career do you expect with your current level of English proficiency?

The interviews were conducted in a friendly way. One of the participants was approached in a restaurant and shared his experience and the profile he has built for himself for his English language competence in a conducive environment. The interviewer took special care to switch between Urdu and English to make the respondents feel comfortable.

After the collection of data, a thematic analysis was conducted, which helped the researchers identify patterns.

Findings

This study aimed to investigate the experience of university students with their medium of instruction at school. It was further aimed to explore the self-perception they built according to their English proficiency level and the prospect they expect for them according to their English proficiency.

The thematic patterns deduced from the data reveal significant discrimination in schools and their influence on the identities as perceived by the learners. These three themes will be elaborated in detail in the following.

Learners' Self Perceptions of Their Social Class, School Type, and Linguistic Ability

Learners' self-perception of their linguistic ability is greatly influenced by the importance rendered to the languages by their listeners in the linguistic environment (Bourdieu, 1991).

Learners see their linguistic ability as a commodity that they inherited from the school they were sent to. As Zakia, who was the product of an elite private school, stated:

> *"When I look back to my school years, I feel immensely thankful to my teachers who taught me very well and encouraged me to speak and write English from the beginning. As a result, I became a wonderful reader and writer in English. This is the reason that my English is far better than my class fellows in my university. Now, everybody looks at me when our professor asks the class to read something aloud. I do not feel any difficulty to express myself [in English.]My family, who lives abroad, also played a great role in it [proficiency in English]. I feel I am blessed to have that school as I can see my future better than my fellows."*

Sara, who was educated in a non-elite English medium school, stated:

> *"I feel I am better than many university students in my English language [skills]. I know sometimes I get stuck and cannot make appropriate sentences. However, I can write English well. Whenever our professor gives us something to write in the class, the students are looking right and leave while I fill the whole page quickly. Although I do commit errors in making sentences, I feel I can at least write. Had there been a better schooling, I would have stood with the toppers in my class."*

Sara further told me that one learns a language at the school level. And it is quite essential to choose the best school because your language skill is developed in schools.

On the other hand, Fahad, who came from a Medium Urdu background, stated that he could not afford to go to an English medium school and that made a difference and the precious time which his teachers and parents should have utilized guiding him to learn English was gone, and he was an utter loser now. In his own words:

> *"Hum ne hamesha Urdu medium school mein he parha hy. Matric mein English parhi to bohat mushkil lagi, lakin khulasay se sb kuch yaad ker k imtehaan achay numberon se paas ker lia. Masla ab ye hy k university mein hamain khud likhna hota hyo or mein English mein likhnay lagon to sirf Urdu k alfaaz meray zehan mein atay hain or mein sochta hun meray waldain or teachers ne mujy bilkul guide nahin kia k mein apni English improve kerta. Ab to bohat mushkil hy, itna time nahin hy k mein koi course krun. Meray bhai ne meray waldain ko kaha tha aik dfa k mujy English medium mein krwa dain lakin unhon ne inkaar kia kun k baki behan bhayon ke fees bhi daini hoti the. [I just went to an Urdu medium school and never studied English till matriculation. I had to cram everything from a keybook to pass matriculation exam with good marks, but the problem now in the university is that We have to write everything on our own and whenever I try to think in English, only Urdu words pop into my mind and regretfully look back to my school years when nobody guided me to learn English. Now the time is passed, and I don't get enough time to enroll myself in an English-speaking course to improve my*

proficiency. The fact was that my parents couldn't afford to send all the siblings to an English medium school.]

He further mentioned that whenever he tried to write or speak in English, and was unable to, he felt deficient about himself and so the other also looked down upon him for not being able to write and speak appropriate English. He had lost his confidence, and he wanted to start all over again from grade 1 and wanted to learn English well.

Perception of their Current and Prediction about their Future Status

The divide is perceived by the students at the university level too, and they base their future on the current status they are given by their university. For instance, Fahad shared that his competence in Urdu was never tested in any exam. Since he is studying Mass Communication in his university, he said that a competitive test to shuffle the students in Urdu and English medium sections was conducted, and the test only assessed the learners for their competence in English, which he failed. However, he regretfully told that no test was conducted to assess Urdu skills and the leftover students were placed in the Urdu section, which is clearly seen as a base section of slow learners.

Zakia, who is in the English department, stated:

> *"I feel I am at an advantage because of my English competence as they [teachers] always like to discuss the aspects of a literary piece they deliver a a lecture in the class with someone who can well converse in English. They also give me a chance to participate in various activities held in the university."*

Fahad told me that he had to work a lot to minimize the gap with the good in English. He knew he would improve if he befriends any of the O/A levels guys but he said they had a separate group in the class, and they didn't like to include him in their group, and he didn't have the confidence to talk to them.

This indicates the social divide as a result of the medium divide.

Learner Investment in Learning English/Future Aspirations

As for their future, the learners with proficiency in English sounded confident about their prospect while the others at a lower or middle end had uncertainty about getting a survival job.

Discussion

There has been a debate in Pakistan's academic circles for introducing a uniformed medium of instruction for all the public and private schools. Many politicians also have been urging the need to make English a medium of education in the state-run schools so that each child in the state be given an equal opportunity to develop linguistically and may be able to have a bright future (Jalal, 2004). If to read the article dealing with the medium of instruction in the current National Education Policy (NEP, 2009 p.28), it clearly states that English will be the medium of instruction for the subjects like Science and Mathematics from grade IV onwards while English as a subject will be taught from grade 1 onward. The policymakers did not bring the Urdu English medium institutional divide into discussion at all. And the fact of the matter is that the current divide which has seeped through the system over the decades is due to the institutions.

And these mediums, as mentioned earlier, are not mere tags. They speak of one's socio-economic background and widen the gap between the elite and bourgeois and determine their prospect. In sum, this seemingly simple binary of medium strengthens the

class discrimination in society (Khattak, 2014; Mustafa, 2015; Rehman, 2004). Hence, the choice of school predicts the level of success in English proficiency and the type of profession the learner will be employed in after completing his/her education (Jafri, Zai, Arain & Soomro, 2013).

The participants' English proficiency in this study appears to correlate the type of school they were schooled in directly. And their schooling ultimately affected their perception of their identity. Those who received education in Urdu medium or non-elite English medium schools seem to marginalize themselves.

They feel a low self-esteem attached to their persona just due to their inability to write and speak English appropriately. As they shared that people and themselves judge them on a single parameter, which is their level of English. Therefore, the medium they had in their school decide not only their worth in their eyes but also their worth in the eyes of other people. And this affects their job-seeking process too adversely. The job market values English proficiency more than any other skill (Norton, 1997). This is what the interviews conducted with Ali, and Hamdan indicate.

The results further reveal that Pakistani school systems play an agent responsible for reproducing a particular culture (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This system primarily supports those who are affluent and helps them increase their chances of success in their future. While the same system is oppressing with the learners coming from the lessor underprivileged social class (Vaish & Tan, 2008).

The same divide continues when it comes to colleges and universities. The learners who belong to an elite socio-economic stratum of society and hence afforded admission in elite schools pass the competitive exams due to their linguistic competence and thus secure admission in the top programs in higher education (Ayre, 2012). The account of the six subjects interviewed reiterates that the medium divide in Pakistan endows the rich with an education corpus that pens up great linguistic opportunities for them and equips them with a linguistic weapon with which they leave the poor behind in future career too. Thus, the divide keeps widening, and the affluent are getting employed in better jobs while the less privileged are only getting survival jobs. The policy and the practice restrict the poor from getting equal educational opportunities and stand shoulder to shoulder with the elite economically, socially, and culturally.

Again, the policy and the practice perpetuate these inequalities (Manan, David & Dumanig, 2016; Pavlenko, 2001).

Conclusion and Recommendations

English Urdu medium divide, is continuously widening in Pakistan, and unfortunately, there is no debate on many forums to nip this inequality in the bud. The failure of making English a medium of instruction in the province of Punjab is an evidence that the decisions regarding the uniformed medium f instruction are not only complicated but are multidimensional (Bashir & Batool, 2017). They are deeply woven in the age-old class discrimination in the country. Therefore, they cannot only be fixed by issuing an order or by the inclusion of an article about it in the policy (Jalal, 2004). A complete change requires further research and higher-level thoughts on how first to undo this system so that the uniformed medium may automatically flow from within.

The study proposes the following recommendations:

1. A uniformed education system should be introduced across the country, propounding equal opportunities and facilities for first learning through the mother tongue and then switching to the second language (Coleman, 2010).
2. The issues related to language policies and practices should be a prime focus of ELT in Pakistan. The language teachers and advisors should have a say in policymaking, too, as their current focus is on the pedagogical side.
3. Policymakers should facilitate the language practitioners in making arrangements to undo the medium divide, deeply embedded into the roots of our educational system. Only then can we hope of bringing the medium uniformed policy into practice.

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