

Language, Teaching and Learning in Punjab Schools: Are we on the right track to `destination English`?

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Executive summary.....	2
Introduction	5
Methodology.....	6
Desk Review	6
Field Findings	10
Teacher and Head Teacher Interviews	10
Influencer Interviews	15
Conclusion.....	19
Bibliography	21

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Executive summary

1. A key finding of the report was the significant variance between the views of parents and teachers on the policy of employing English as the medium of instruction (MoI). A majority of teachers were of the view that the policy was difficult to implement in the classroom in the early grades. The parents on the other hand were, for the most part, strongly in favour of the policy and in their opinion their children had benefitted from it and were learning English.
2. A majority of the teachers and head teachers interviewed held the view that the EMI policy was not working for a number of reasons:
 - a) Many teachers were not sufficiently proficient in English.
 - b) While younger, recently recruited science teachers had a better grasp of English, they were not qualified or trained to teach English as a second language.
 - c) The duration of the trainings provided under the Punjab Education and English Learning Initiative (PEELI), and the Directorate of Staff Development (DSD), now known as the Quaid-i-Azam Academy for Educational Development (QAED) was too limited.
 - d) Students in government schools almost inevitably came from an English-poor environment which is to say that they had very little exposure to the language in any form and few opportunities to express themselves in English. Coupled with the fact that the school setting was also not particularly supportive in this context, students found it hard to learn English and to learn other subjects in English. Most teachers effectively rely on the translation method when teaching English. To revert now and then to the child's first language by way of strategic code-switching is generally regarded as a useful aid to helping children learn. However, consistently translating whole sentences or paragraphs as is often the case here or using only some words or short phrases in English does not achieve the objective of getting the child to learn the language.
3. A majority of the parents believed that the EMI policy was the right one for a variety of reasons:
 - a) That English being taught to their children not only as a subject but also being employed as a MoI in government schools led parents to believe that their children were learning English just as, in their

- perception, children in private schools were doing.
- b) That their children often spoke words and short phrases in English at home was taken by parents to be a clear sign that they were learning English. But, since they often did not understand the language they were in no position to ascertain that their children did.
 - c) The EMI policy was perceived as a concentrated focus on English bound to be helpful in learning the language.
 - d) Starting with an EMI policy early on was seen as a good idea indicating better preparation for the children.
4. Another key finding was the significant divergence between the perceptions of teachers and parents with regard to the place of Punjabi or the mother tongue and Urdu in the classroom. A majority of teachers spoke about the frequent recourse to the mother tongue and Urdu in the process of explanation and getting children to understand different concepts. In some cases, teachers said even Urdu was difficult to follow for the children so using their mother tongue was the only option. In any case, the language of communication among the children was usually the mother tongue. Parents on the other hand, for the most part, saw little value in using the mother tongue or Urdu in the classroom. They appear to be working on the premise that the time devoted to, say, Punjabi or Urdu in the early grades is effectively time taken away from the acquisition of the high-value English. This is, of course, contrary to the experts' opinion on the issue which essentially holds that language skills are transferable and that when the child acquires fluency in one language it will help him or her to learn another.
5. The government appears to be seriously considering bringing in Urdu again as the Mol in the primary grades. This would be a positive move in the light of what teachers and head teachers have told us as part of this research, and going by what previous reports have found going on in the classrooms,]. However, it is important also to keep in mind parents' perceptions and sensitivities highlighted in this report and to address these prior to effecting such a change.
 6. A number of teachers also brought up the difficulty that children have in Urdu, especially in the rural areas. Effectively, that could mean teaching Urdu as a second language and with teachers actually trained to do so.

This also indicates the need for the delineating the space for the mother tongue in the early grades.

7. A carefully deliberated language policy should clearly delineate the space for English, Urdu and Punjabi or the relevant mother tongue depending on the region. Which language is to be taught in what measure, at which grade level and whether as a medium or subject are matters that need careful

consideration, technical support and appropriate marshalling of resources. Alongside, the important issues of language transition and bilingualism also have to be addressed. Language is essentially the lens through which children gain access to and articulate subject knowledge and ideas. If we don't get the former right our children will not be able to get very far in the latter.

Introduction

Competence in one of the most widely used languages across the globe is generally perceived as an asset. One such language happens to be English, and in keeping with most of the world, it is not surprising that in Pakistan the situation is no different. It is also not surprising then that most parents in Pakistan place a high premium on acquiring English language skills, especially pertaining to the education of their children. In recent years this societal demand has been tapped by private schools, characterizing themselves as English medium that have been mushrooming across the country. Given this setting, the Government of Punjab decided to take a leap from teaching English simply as a subject to adopting it as the medium of instruction (Mol) in the early years of schooling.

With the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2009, the decision to make English the Mol for Math and Science from Grade 1 was taken by the Government of Punjab. The initial plan was to introduce this policy in a phased manner with 588 high schools and other selected schools converted to English medium in the first phase, and the remaining schools to be converted over a

period of four years. But the decision to expedite the implementation of this policy was taken and this switch was made by 2011. This policy was also supported by the School Reforms Roadmap the same year which aimed to bring major improvements in terms of access to and quality of education. A modification was made to the policy in 2014: up to Grade 3 English would be taught as a subject while the rest of the subjects were to be taught in Urdu; and all subjects would be taught in English from Grade 4, onwards. This policy, projected in terms of providing equitable education opportunities, also aimed to draw parents and students, who opt for private low-fee schools due to the English as the medium of instruction (EMI) factor, to give due consideration to government schools as well.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which the policy worked in the context of enhanced enrolment and retention of students in government schools. However, some of the key research studies carried out over the last five years, over the period of this policy's implementation, suggest that it has not been supportive of the dynamic of teaching and learning in Punjab's schools. Key findings of these studies are provided in the Desk Review section of this report.

Methodology

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews of key influencers, teachers and head teachers and through focus group discussions (FGDs) with parents. Key research reports relating to Mol/EMI were reviewed.

The study sought to investigate the mode and extent of the implementation of the policy of EMI in the early grades in government schools in Punjab, the perceptions of the key stakeholders in this regard and whether it supported the teaching and learning of English and other subjects.

To this end, the main stakeholders including teachers, head teachers, master trainers and parents were asked to share their perceptions and views in the three districts of Multan, Lahore and Rawalpindi.

A total of 33 teachers, 18 head teachers, four master trainers as well as 25 policy influencers were interviewed. Seven focus group discussions comprising parents, including both fathers and mothers, were held in two districts in which a total of 40 participants took part.

Desk Review

As a part of the desk research the four key reports that have been reviewed for the purpose of this study are 'Transition to English Medium Instruction in Punjab: A Curriculum Gap?' Australian Council for Education Research (ACER 2017); 'Policy & Practice: Teaching and Learning in English in Punjab Primary Schools' Society for the Advancement of education (SAHE 2013); 'Language in Education in Pakistan: Recommendations for Policy and Practice, Coleman and Capstick (British Council, 2012); and 'Punjab Education and English Language Initiative (PEELI, British Council 2013).

Some of the main findings and related issues that have been highlighted in these reports are as follows:

1. Most teachers themselves are ill equipped to communicate and teach in English. As a result, other locally used languages (Urdu and regional languages) that the teachers and students are comfortable in are used extensively in the classroom. Classroom observations indicate that in most cases this is different from the strategic use of local language for purposes of clarification and makes the learning of English, infrequently used by teachers and students, more difficult. Use of English is generally relegated to 'safe-talk' or a set of standard terms and phrases that in

turn require a standard response; for example 'sit down', 'stand up', 'open your books' etc. (Rashid A., Muzaffar I., Butt S., Awan A., Bashiruddin A., 2013, p. 51).

2. Lack of proficiency in English on the part of teachers appears to be coupled with insufficient training to prepare them to adopt English as Mol. A respondent in one of the studies observed, "Teachers are motivated to teach English, provided they have proper resources and adequate training." (*PEELI Report*, 2013, p. 18). On the matter of training, another teacher in a different study also shared a suggestion; "The government should carry out refresher courses for teachers so that they can teach better in English medium." (*Transition to English Medium Instruction in Punjab: A Curriculum Gap?*, 2017, p. 71)
3. The duration of training appears to be an issue. In one instance, the teachers were reportedly engaged in a 15-day training program before they were expected to implement the EMI policy. According to some of them, this training may have been very useful for teachers who may themselves have studied in an English medium environment, but it did not help the rest of the teachers. In other words, it seems that only those who

have had a reasonably strong grounding in the language benefit from the given training (Rashid et al., 2013, p. 52).

4. The task of becoming proficient in English appears to become particularly difficult for a majority of students coming from low-income households who do not enjoy the benefit of a home or neighbourhood environment that allows for communication in English and supports learning of the language.
5. Where greater use is being made of English in the classroom, it is mostly relegated to reading the course books instead of engaging in meaningful interaction. As to the lack of use of English in the classrooms, one of the studies reports that less than 15% of the teachers are teaching exclusively in English (*PEELI Report*, 2013, p. 2).
6. By way of an equity argument, the supporters of an EMI policy from the very early stage at school see it as a socio-economic leveller that helps improve the students' chances of getting higher education and going on to more successful careers and social advancement. Parents, for their part, are strongly inclined to view proficiency in English as being critical to a better future for their children. And, according to one study, a great majority of them see the early

adoption of English as MoI as an important step in acquiring that proficiency. Even the relatively small numbers of parents who express reservations with regard to the policy were more concerned with the problems that arose from the manner in which it was implemented. (Rashid et al, 2013, p. 52).

7. Similarly, according to another study, a significant number of teachers who do not support the current EMI policy aren't opposed to English medium instruction per se, but rather they are sceptical about the way the current policy has been implemented (*PEELI Report, 2013*). This method of introducing the language may have worked well for students from well-off households and some exceptionally gifted children, but for the vast majority of students from low-income backgrounds, having to study different subjects in English has not helped make them become proficient in English nor has it enhanced their learning in other subjects.
8. The English language curriculum in Grade 3 especially has been cited in one report as not being sufficiently advanced to prepare students for comprehensively adopting English as the MoI in key subjects from Grade 4 onwards. The language in Science

books in particular has been categorised as very difficult. The curriculum has also been cited as being unreasonably lengthy, with one teacher saying, "The curriculum is too lengthy, because of which the teachers have to rush through the course, making it difficult for the kids to understand" (*PEELI Report, 2013, p. 19*).

9. On the whole, districts in and around divisional headquarters have been seen to have staff that is better skilled in English in comparison with secondary districts (which are more likely to be dominated by a rural environment). Another distinction is seen within districts between teachers from public and private schools, where a larger proportion of private school teachers were apparently more comfortable with the English curricula. Whether they are actually more proficient in English is, of course, another matter. Results from the Aptis test, conducted by the British Council to gauge the English language proficiency of teachers, 62% of private school teachers fall in the lowest band of the test. On the other hand, the proportion of government school teachers falling in the same band is 56% (*PEELI 2013, p. 1*).
10. A further distinction is noted between younger and more experienced

teachers. Younger teachers (21-35 years of age) are noted to be keen to learn new teaching strategies and have been using English as the Mol during Math and Science classes to a considerable extent. With older teachers (50 years and above), this number drops considerably (*PEELI Report, 2013, p. 22*). Whether this is also making a significant difference to student learning has to be ascertained.

11. There is support for Urdu as Mol among teachers. Most reports indicate that it is the medium generally employed in teaching. Because of the very real limitations they face in the classroom. Notwithstanding the value they see in English medium education, about 50% of the teachers according to one report, are of the opinion that Urdu should be retained as the Mol. Another 25% suggested that a bilingual policy might be more helpful in promoting learning while still continuing to improve English language skills. In its current form, public school teachers feel that English is being imposed on them and the students (*PEELI Report, 2013, p. 23*). According to a respondent, “My students are much better because they are taught in Urdu – Urdu can teach all children” (*Transition to*

English Medium Instruction in Punjab: A Curriculum Gap?, 2017, p. 71).

12. The low level of student achievement over the last few years reflected in assessments carried out by assessment regimes such as the National Education Assessment System (NEAS), the Punjab Examination Commission (PEC) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), would suggest that one of the key areas for review would be the language in education policy. Of these, PEC has the largest database available pertaining to student outcomes. While the data should not be regarded as conclusive, the following table based on the Punjab Examination Commission (PEC) reports suggests the absence of significant change in student performance over the years, particularly in English.

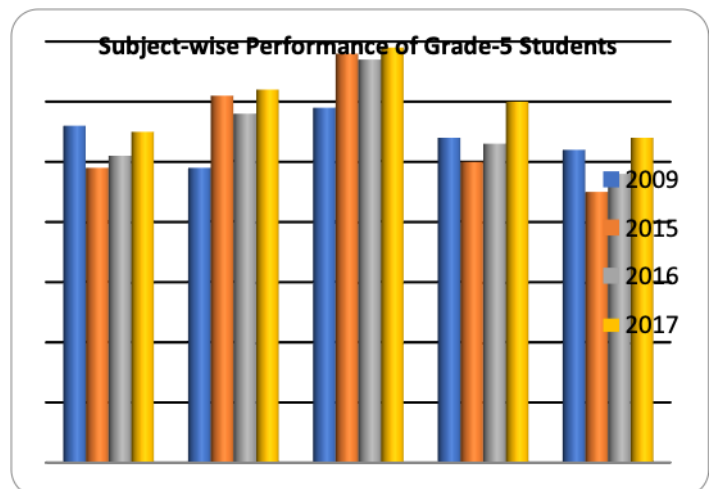


Figure 1 Sources: Yearly PEC Examination Reports 2009; 2015-17

Field Findings

The school-related field data collected for this study came from interviews with teachers, head teachers and master trainers, and focus groups discussions with parents. The responses, in particular of teachers, parents and policy influencers provide very important insights that have significant implications for language policy.

What comes through across the board is that almost no one denies the importance of English. The language is seen as being of vital importance for progress and social mobility and is therefore of particular concern to all stakeholders, none more so than the parents focused on the future prospects of their children.

Teacher and Head Teacher Interviews

While almost all teachers acknowledge the importance of teaching their students English, they also raise a number of concerns on how it is being done.

- a) Many express doubts about the wisdom of employing English as Mol at the primary level. In the words of one head teacher, “Look I would just like to submit that we are not against English. But please keep the ground realities in view. How possible is it to do this [implement English as Mol]? Before making such a policy, it would be better to consult with teachers.” This, of course, also points to the deficiency in the broader policy-making process that often

incorporates little by way of research and serious deliberation with key stakeholders prior to the implementation stage.

- b) A number of teachers expressed the view that there were simply not enough teachers with the educational background to employ English as Mol and teach different subjects in English. Even where teachers had done their master’s in English, the problem was not really addressed: according to a head teacher at a boys’ school in Lahore, “our course pertains to the language base but teachers come here after having studied literature. It is only after I did the ELT (English Language Teaching) course that I realized that teaching language is something different... we actually don’t focus on language. So, the skills are listening, speaking, reading and writing. We go in the opposite direction. We start with writing. We learn these things in PEELI but there is too little time.” So there are two key dimensions to this issue. First we simply do not have anywhere near enough teachers with a background even in English literature. Second, teaching English as a second language is in any case not something that they are equipped to do.
- c) One major concern articulated by teachers is that most of the students come from environments where they are neither well acquainted with

English nor even Urdu. A teacher phrased the issue in these words, "The children come from a Punjabi environment. They are not even comfortable in Urdu. Speaking in English is limited to some words such as sit, go, come but not by way of sentences. As to conversation [in English] in the classroom, that is zero." As the previous observation points out listening and speaking are foundational skills when it comes to learning a language. So, clearly children are not going to learn English if they are unable to converse in it.

But are the teachers themselves comfortable in English? According to a head teacher at a school on the outskirts of Lahore, "Teachers should speak to each other in English so that they get rid of their hesitation." So, when it comes to speaking in English, it is not just the students but also teachers who have a problem. It is interesting to note that in a similar study conducted in 2013, a teacher from South Punjab had this to say, "We are Saraiki, we understand first in Saraiki, then Urdu and in the end in English, and in all this we move nowhere." This is a reflection of this concern being shared consistently by teachers in the past as well as in this study.

From the teacher's perspective, mother tongue appears to play an important role. According to a teacher, "For purposes of explanation, we have to use their mother tongue for the most part. Even Urdu seems difficult, English is impossible."

Another head teacher had this to say: "Children learn gradually; we start with Punjabi, then Urdu and then we bring them towards English." This is about as clear and pithy a statement as any with regard to the three languages reality with which most teachers and students engage in the classroom and yet successive policies do not acknowledge any such thing. In a similar vein, a master trainer pointed out that, "What the child learns in the mother tongue, he or she cannot learn in any other language....better to bring the child to Urdu from the mother tongue. The basics of English should be started from the early grades. But EMI has not really worked."

- a) On the issue of communication between the teachers and students and among the children, a teacher ventured, "It depends on the teacher as to what proportion he manages. But the ground reality is that it is 70/30 which is to say that it is 70% Urdu and 30% English. This is the situation in the classroom. But among themselves students are to be found conversing in either Punjabi or Pashto. "And, even the 30% may mean usage that is very limited in scope. As another teacher put it, "We use short phrases in the classroom such as 'Open your book, write this down and children use phrases such as 'May I go to drink water.'"
- b) On subjects that are most difficult to learn, the most frequent response was Math and Science. Tellingly, one

teacher added, “the rest is being managed through rote learning.”

- c) The respondents point out that they do their best to use the translation method in the classrooms to help students learn English and in many cases also Urdu. However, once the children are out of the classroom, they revert to the mother tongue which is the language they are most comfortable in i.e., Punjabi, Saraiki or any other language spoken in a given area. It is important to understand in this context that relying on translation almost entirely may help the child understand the meaning of what is said or written in English but it is of little help in learning the language. Of course, this is not to say that Urdu or Punjabi cannot be used now and then to explain the meaning, sometimes referred to as strategic code-switching, but if the language being predominantly used in class is other than English and children are unable to speak it, they are not going to be able to learn the language or learn subjects being taught in it.
- d) The children coming to government schools usually come from the lowest income background and therefore, inevitably from an English-poor environment. In the absence of any out-of-school support it is in any case very difficult to pick up English in the early stages. According to a master trainer, “The environment of the

home and the community is very different from that of the school. The parents and the community can provide no support for English.” However, he contended, “It is better to start with EMI so that there are fewer problems down the road.” This response provides us with a good example of someone who while acknowledging the significant absence of support from home and community, nevertheless feels the need to doggedly continue with EMI in the belief that starting early prepares the child better for the higher grades when English as MoI will become essential. Going by what experts in linguistics and language learning have to say, this is a widely held and erroneous belief. According to Jim Cummins theory of *common underlying proficiency*, the skills acquired in one language can be transferred to another. The important thing is for the child to become fluent in any given language which of course is likely to be the one which he or she is exposed to at home or in the neighborhood for the first five or so, years before being admitted to school. This observation should also help us reflect on the distinction between teaching language as a subject or skill and employing it as a medium of instruction. Even if English is to be taught from the early grades there is no justification for employing

it as Mol rather than teaching it as a skill.

- e) Respondents often mentioned in a positive vein, the more recently inducted, better qualified and younger teachers who had a better grasp of English. Part of the government strategy for addressing the issue of deficiency in English-language competence has been to recruit, over the last few years, teachers with a background in science whose English was deemed to be better with a view that they would be able to help children in all three subjects: Math, Science and English. As has been pointed out earlier even those who have an English literature background are not equipped to teach English as a second language. In the words of one head teacher, "Look, in my school all the teachers have been newly inducted. English is not a problem for them. The problem we have is with the children.
- f) A relatively large number of teachers made a strong case for Urdu as the Mol. Somewhat unexpectedly, however, as many teachers spoke about the important role of the mother tongue in the classroom. According to them, this is the language the children bring with them when they start school; they are comfortable in it. The teachers are already using it as a medium to help students understand their lessons; so

giving it more space would help students' comprehension and enhance their performance.

- g) Almost all teachers favour the translation method for teaching English. But, as one of the respondents pointed out, this can help the child understand the meaning of the words or sentence but it is not the way to learn English.

FDGs with Parents

- a. The majority view among teachers, however, stands in stark contrast to the opinion of an even larger majority among parents who maintain that employing English as Mol from the early grades is the right policy. This is a view that is reaffirmed when they find, in the words of one of the participants of a FDG, their children using English words and short phrases and feel that it shows that government schools are now also providing good education: "It is very nice to hear children using English words while talking to each other. In school, teachers are fully focused on this. Children are keen and enthusiastic as they attempt to converse [in English]. And, whatever instructions they have heard [from their teachers in school], they keep giving to each other." However, this apparently growing

acquaintance with the English language on the part of the children may be somewhat misleading. They are obviously trying hard to learn the language but given the circumstances, this usually boils down to memorizing a number of words and short phrases and repeating these every now and then. This has little to do with acquiring needed skills in the language. They are also strong proponents of introducing English as early as possible and teaching as many subjects as possible in English, with one in particular saying that barring Urdu and Islamiyat, all subjects should be taught in English. Nevertheless, given what parents perceive to be taking place, they emerge as strong proponents not only of teaching English in the early grades but also teaching other subjects in English which is to say using English as Mol.

- b. A point of satisfaction for parents is that government schools have now become English medium schools like schools in the private sector. According to a FDG participant, "Just as in private schools, these children are also studying in English right from the start and the standard of education has improved." The perception that private schools

teach English as well as employ it as the Mol right from the early grades to good effect is difficult to dispel. We have to keep in mind that the overwhelming majority of schools in the private sector are the low fee private schools which labor under constraints similar to those of government schools: the teachers are not sufficiently well-versed in English and the children come almost entirely from a English-poor setting with little support in terms of learning the language, from the home or neighborhood. Clearly, competent teachers play a key role in ensuring that children learn. How qualified are the teachers in private schools to employ English as Mol can also be gauged by the results of a test administered by the British Council to approximately 2000 teachers from government schools and private schools. Compared to 56% teachers of government schools who registered scores in the lowest possible band of the APTIS test, an even greater percentage, 62% from the private schools did so. In any case parents appear less focused on how English is being taught, which would then enable the child to comfortably study other subjects in that language and more concerned with spreading it across subjects,

apparently in the belief that this multiple engagement helps the child learn English as well as other subjects in English.

- c. In terms also of the place of Urdu and Punjabi or other relevant languages in the context of the teaching-learning process, the views of most parents are at considerable variance with that of the teachers. “As parents, we would prefer that more subjects should be in English as English has value, Urdu has no value and Punjabi has no value.”
- d. However, some parents questioned the need to employ English as MoI if the objective was simply for children to learn English, an objective that could be achieved if English were taught as a subject, one FDG participant voiced the minority view in these words: “It is cruel to do this [use English as MoI in the early grades. “Children here don’t know Urdu let alone English. It is our view that at the start English should be taught only as a subject and the other subjects should be in Urdu so that at least at the primary stage the child can study with comprehension.”

Influencer Interviews

A number of interviews were also conducted to gauge the understanding and perceptions of those who directly or indirectly have a bearing on policy including those who are linked to the policy circles, on the one hand, and teachers, on the other. These include senior government functionaries, personnel in the education system, academics and experts from the education and development sectors with relevant interests and experience and who interact with the government and in greater or lesser degree influence it through discussions, panels, seminars and otherwise by way of communicating their learning derived from the discharge of their duties in the sector. The interviews were semi-structured and allowed the respondents to elaborate upon their responses as they saw fit.

Here again the general consensus is that learning English as a language is indeed a valuable skill in Pakistan because it has been proven to be a significant contributor to economic prosperity in the form of better jobs, higher salaries and greater vertical professional growth. Since it is also the language of higher education, the relationship between a good command in English and the possibility of academic and professional success is further strengthened. Most of the respondents, therefore, agree that English is a necessity and does indeed need to be taught.

When it comes to the current EMI Policy, however, it is the methods being adopted to teach English rather than the desire to do so

that has generated debate. One of the academics interviewed put it this way: “What gets mixed up in Pakistan is the issue of the medium of instruction and the issue of learning languages... My feeling is that, yes, everyone wants to learn English, but what they don’t understand is that making English as a medium is not a way to learn English.”

Some other academics, an expert and a couple of government functionaries added to this observation by raising the point that while English is being treated as a subject, it should in reality be seen as a skill and taught as such. Along with being treated as a subject in the classroom the curriculum and SLOs for English are also heavily content driven and thus, in the opinion of some of our respondents, do not allow the language to be learnt because covering the content in the textbooks becomes a priority as this is what the students will actually be examined on. A few academics specifically spoke about how as a result comprehension takes a back seat and rote learning is adopted as the modus operandi. Many saw as contributing factors, the teachers’ lack of proficiency in English, the lack of an enabling environment for students, teachers’ performance being evaluated on the basis of the students’ performance in exams and the tendency towards encouraging rote learning.

Many of the respondents said that the root of this issue lies in the fact that the vast majority of public sector schools in Punjab are located in rural areas and they draw upon children from the very lowest income backgrounds. Both parents and children here

lack what can be called an ‘enabling environment’ to help facilitate the process of learning a language i.e. little to no exposure to English in their day-to-day lives; they don’t hear it or speak it themselves and many don’t have access to English language media. Additionally, the teachers in these schools also have a poor command on the language as well as teaching practices to specifically teach English as a language. Given these circumstances, most of the interviewees felt that expecting the teachers to successfully conduct lessons in English, the students to learn a language that is for all intents and purposes foreign and for them to learn concepts of other key subjects in this foreign language within the first 3-4 years of their schooling is not realistic.

It was noted by some of the academics that the teachers were not only unable to teach English but also other subjects, thus putting the overall ability to teach any subject effectively into question. However, on the matter of teachers’ competence, an expert in the development sector held a very different view. According to her, it is untrue that all/most teachers are incompetent and incapable of effectively teaching their students and referred to the large number of highly qualified and capable teachers that had been inducted a few years prior and who had been very motivated when they first joined the sector. However, due to feeling disempowered they have now become demotivated and hence come across as less competent than they actually are.

A key point that has been raised by many is that there was a need to bring a familiar language (understood to be Urdu) into the classroom to support conceptual learning in the early years and to, switch to EMI at a later stage. They pointed out how in practice this was already the case with some government functionaries and experts talking about how the teachers use the local language to explain the meanings of words and concepts in their classrooms. The problem, they felt, was that in the end the textbooks, tests and exams were for the better part in English, so the students again have to resort to rote learning. An expert also shared an incident from a village in a remote area of Pakistan where a teacher explained two physics experiments with the help of props and makeshift equipment, all the while delivering the lesson in her and the children's first language. But when the time to study from the textbooks came, all the content was in English and the excitement that had been built up in the classroom because of the teacher's efforts fizzled away.

This then brings us to the matter of when how English should be taught so that students are able to successfully learn it as a language and also develop a conceptual understanding of other subjects. The overwhelming opinion brought forth by our respondents is to teach English simply as a language in the early years. Most of the responding academics and persons in the education system specifically say that it is a skill and hence should be taught as such. One school principal elaborated on this by saying that there is a natural way with which

languages are learned and it is primarily centred on listening and speaking. However, the current practice of teaching English is mostly reliant on reading and writing. If English is taught in a manner that is more aligned to the natural way of learning languages, the results are likely to be more encouraging.

The point of difference between many of the respondents came in terms of their opinion on what language should be used as the medium of instruction. A representative of the Punjab government explained that the education ministry was strongly supportive of making Urdu the MOI, owing to its status as the national as well as the common language, but for some this may not entirely address the issue. An academic did point to the smaller gap between Urdu and Punjabi as opposed to English and Punjabi in terms of the structure and vocabulary, therefore the switch to Urdu as MOI in his view made relatively more sense. But some others stood firm on even Urdu being not sufficiently familiar to the vast majority of the rural population, especially children. A representative of a Punjab government institution was in agreement with the ministry and strongly in favor of making Urdu the medium of instruction owing to its status as the national language and pointed to the importance of all Pakistanis being fluent in it.

One academic touched upon the sensitivity around the matter of MOI. His opinion was that if English is taken away from public schools in the early years and replaced with a local language, this is quite likely to feed the

narrative of deprivation that is already prevalent amongst the less privileged, i.e. it will propagate the belief that the rich want to deprive the poor of an opportunity to compete with them by not letting them learn English. He believed that the best way to mitigate this fear would be to introduce local languages in classrooms consistently across social tiers so as to make it very clear that no divisions are being made on the basis of language.

Some of the respondents spoke about research they felt was needed prior to any further change in the policy. One mentioned the need for thorough research to find out what would be the best language to use in classrooms at what stage and what would be the best time to switch to EMI. Another spoke about a large scale teacher needs-assessment to get a very clear picture of the competence of the teachers already part of the force, and thus the specific trainings that they require. The bottom line, according to both these respondents, is that a policy should be based upon scientific evidence, not, as a respondent put it, on the whim of the leadership.

Some key personnel connected to the policy realm shared their views with regard to the issue of medium of instruction off the record. A former member of the provincial parliamentary standing committee on education stated that he was certainly not in

favour of English as MoI at the primary stage of schooling but the policy was one endorsed by the leadership and so effecting any change in this context was going to be difficult.

A former head of a key educational institution expressed the view that despite the difficulties there were no better options to staying with the current policy of EMI while a similarly placed official favoured change.

Another politician with a key role in the education sector said he agreed that EMI was not a good policy in the context of learning but given the premium parents placed on English medium schools, there would be heavy political cost involved in making government schools give up employing English as a MoI. And, he was not sure, he said, how any change could be made in the given situation without addressing this issue.

A former top level functionary of the government said that that the policy of English as MoI had been 'parachuted' down one fine day with hardly any consultation or research as to how it would play out in the context of government schools. However, given the support for the policy at the highest political level, he was prone to keep his own counsel.

Conclusion

The key driver for the EMI policy was the huge social demand for English. Linked to this was the pressure from private sector schools, especially the low fee private schools that strategically declared themselves to be English medium institutions. However, after more than five years of this policy being in place, there is little evidence to suggest that children are either significantly improving their English language skills or are doing better by studying other subjects in English. In fact research over the years in Pakistan and elsewhere suggests clearly that there is no point in making English the medium of instruction without first learning it adequately as a language. Many of the issues related to language and learning, unfortunately, remain the same as they were in 2013 when SAHE initially studied the issue of language and learning in Punjab schools. For instance, that teachers themselves are deficient in their knowledge of English for the most part. Similarly, the students in government schools come from an English-poor background and find little or no support from the home or the neighbourhood in terms of learning the language. Consequently, going by assessment regimes such as NEAS, PEC and ASER, learning levels in English remain fairly low.

Parents, on the other hand, continue to be enthusiastic about the EMI policy believing that it is helping children learn English. The evidence, however, seems to suggest that children, doing their best under the circumstances, simply memorize words and

short phrases and when they repeat these in the presence of their parents, the latter see it as a sign of increasing grasp over English.

So, while in the early grades most teachers favour using Urdu, Punjabi and other languages spoken locally as media of instruction, parents are mostly strong supporters of the EMI policy.

Going by some of the influencer interviews and occasional statements made by the leadership, it seems that the government is seriously considering reverting to Urdu as the Mol for the primary grades and providing for teaching language as a subject.

This would be a step in the right direction but in the context of the findings from this research the government would do well to be sensitive to how it would be perceived by parents of the children studying in government schools, in the light of the findings of this research. Prior to effecting such a change, it is imperative that parents are persuaded of the fact that English is best taught to children by teaching it properly as a subject or skill and not by making it a Mol right from the start. This calls for nothing less than a properly structured campaign at multiple for a including the electronic media. Further, our research suggests that space must also be created for the local language used in various regions where children do not have Urdu as a first language, unlike in parts of urban Punjab.

A carefully deliberated language policy should clearly delineate the space for English, Urdu and Punjabi or the relevant mother tongue depending on the region. Which

language is to be taught in what measure, at which grade level, addressing issues of language transition and bilingualism--and employed at what stage as a Mol are matters that require consideration, technical support as well as an appropriate marshalling of resources. Language is essentially the lens through which children gain access to and articulate subject knowledge and ideas. If we don't get the former right our children will not be able to get very far in the latter.

The case for the mother tongue's place in the classroom has been made by many experts the world over. Dr. Carol Benson's study conducted in Ethiopia in 2006 compared the results of students from regions where they were taught in their first language (L1) or mother tongue for 8 years with those from regions where the switch to English was made earlier. Her findings clearly show the students studying in L1 for longer perform better and her studies in Mozambique, Cambodia, Cameroon and Vietnam have also shown similar results. Even in government schools in Punjab where the mother tongue

is not given an official space and the Mol is English, the only way most teachers outside of an urban setting can help their students understand their subjects is by using their mother tongue.

The point, then, that needs to be explored is, if EMI is not helping children learn English, if it is not helping them learn other subjects, if teachers are unofficially using the mother tongue in their classes to effectively explain concepts to their students and if research from different parts of the world shows us that early education in the mother tongue helps students in the acquisition of knowledge and languages, then perhaps the roles given to English, Urdu and the mother tongue in education in the early grades need to be reviewed. What needs to be understood is that matter of language in education is not simply an implementation problem and hence it can't be solved if it is treated as such. The policy of employing English as Mol in the primary grades, in the given school setting, reflects a serious design flaw in the context of language and learning.

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