

Medium of Instruction in Education: Perceptions of Teachers and Students from Pakistani School, College and University

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Pakistan is a multilingual country with more than 72 living languages. Language choice for medium of instruction (MOI), especially in a linguistically diversified country like Pakistan, is not an easy task. MOI plays a significant role in classroom practices and, therefore, any decision regarding the MOI must be taken into consideration with the opinion of the directly involved stakeholders, i. e. teachers and students. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to take teachers and students perceptions about MOI. Data were collected from 139 students and 36 teachers from three public sector institutions one school, one college and one university through semi-structured questionnaires. The tool was checked for self- and expert- validity before piloting. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers and students prefer Urdu language as MOI and for classroom interaction. However, the participants acknowledge the international status and significance of English language. Teacher respondents also state that students' weak English language skills are a major barrier in implementing English as MOI.

Keywords: medium of instruction, education, teachers' perceptions, students' perceptions. English as MOI, Urdu as MOI.

Language Policy and Planning

Language functions both symbolically and instrumentally (Hoffmann, 2014) from communication to exercise power and control within different domains of society. Education is also one of the domains where language serves this instrumental role. Education is spinal for the growth and development of a country and to disseminate it the choice of language is indispensable. Civan and Coşkun (2016) argue that the language choice for education hamper learning process hence MOI should be the language in which learners are fluent. Education therefore, must accommodate learners' 'social needs' by providing them 'language-shelter' enhancing mother tongue and facilitating multilingualism in the process especially in multilingual polities (García, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Torres-Guzmán, 2006). Thus, it demands to ascertain a language policy that describes the language choice for education as MOI which is an imperative part of the decision.

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1. Dr Muhammad Fareed initiated the research idea, identified the suitable research method, and supervised the data collection, data analysis and overall writing process.

2. Ms. Almas Ashraf collected the data partially and analysed the data along with writing method, results, discussion sections.

3. Ms. Shazia Mushtaque collected the data partially, reviewed the literature, and contributed introduction and literature review sections.

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Language policy specifically in a multilingual context is a planned and legislated act adopted by a government to determine language use in public context, and for disseminating the required knowledge and skills within the context (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2015). It not only concerns with uplifting the educational process but also determines access to partake in social, economic and political spheres (Tollefson , 2015) at inter and international levels. Socio-historical backgrounds are also crucial for identifying language policies for medium of instruction (MOI) as it “originates within a policy that has a socio-historical identity” (Hamid, Nguyen & Baldauf, 2013, p.4). Ferguson (2006) suggests that language policy specifically addressing language planning in education concentrates on the four issues:

medium of instruction choice for various levels of education system, role of mother tongue in educational process, selection of second or foreign language as curricular (or compulsory) subject and the choice of variety as a norm for teaching purposes in case of English or other pluri-centric languages (pp. 34-35).

Medium of Instruction and its Impact

MOI is defined as a “vehicle for teaching and learning” (Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013, p.144). It is the language used to impart knowledge, skills and values, and the language of interaction between teacher and learner (Islam, Mushtaq, Alam, & Bukhari, 2015). It is, therefore, required to have full command over the language in which learning takes place (Shahzad, et al., 2013). Highlighting the role of mother tongue in education and learning processes, mother tongue-based literacy programmes were conducted in multiple countries of Asia by UNESCO in 2007. The programme stressed on the significance of mother tongue for better cognition and learning processes as it allows learning and education in natural ways. Once an individual becomes able to learn and read, additional languages can be learned afterwards. Contrary to the situation, the issue of English as MOI due to its global significance is heated in countries struggling to improve their capacities of using English language (Hamid et al., 2013).

The choice of MOI is linked with language planning and policy making, which make affective impact on masses perceptions for that language (Channa, Memon, & Bughio, 2016). It not only affects the acuity of stakeholders but also is linked with the efficacy of educational process. Owu-Ewie and Eshun (2015) argued that language used as MOI exhibits repercussions on students’ achievements, resulting to perform well who have strong understanding of language in which instruction is given. Tollefson and Tsui (2004), illustrated problems such as low achievement and high drop-out rates if home and school languages are not the same. Sonck (2005) also concluded that use of multiple languages specifically at primary level increases dropout rates and exerts cognitive burden on children.

Linguistic Profile of Pakistan

Pakistan is a multilingual and multicultural country. It is blessed with 72 indigenous living languages functioning as first language whereas English is the official language primarily used as second language (Lewis, 2009). Language has remained a controversial issue in Pakistan since independence. Article 251 of the current and operational Constitution of Pakistan (1973) proclaims that:

“National Language 251

(1) The National language of Pakistan is Urdu, and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes within fifteen years from the commencing day.

(2) Subject to clause (1), the English language may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu.

(3) Without prejudice to the status of the National language, a Provincial Assembly may by law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a provincial language in addition to the national language.” (p.149)

Major languages of Pakistan according to number of language users are: Punjabi (48.2%), Pashto (13.2%), Sindhi (11.8%), Siraiki (9.5%), Urdu (7.6%), and Balochi (3%) (Rahman, 1997). Formulating a language policy in such a multilingual country is a daunting task. Pakistan is among the countries where language policy is conflicted and fragile (Coleman, Capstick & Council, 2012). Urdu, despite being language first language to 7.6% Pakistanis was declared national language of Pakistan whereas English was selected to serve the purpose of official language until Urdu accomplishes the requisites of an official language. Consequently, English firmly positioned its roots in the country in all domains of life (Rahman, 2010).

Educational Context of Pakistan

Since independence, Pakistan has followed ancestral traits in language choice of three language formula: Urdu, English and a local language at provincial level. However, education system is chiefly divided into two types on the basis of MOI as Urdu and English medium schools, and the choice of language to proliferate education remains varied with respect to change in state authorities (Ahmed, 2011; Channa et al., 2016). Mahboob and Jain (2016) identified that absence of clear language policy for education complicates the language choice for medium of instruction. Rahman (1997) also stressed that medium of instruction controversy in Pakistan is “a part of power struggle between different pressure groups, or elitist and proto-elitist” (p. 152), as Urdu or vernacular language was used for masses and English for elitists during British rule in the continent serving a “gate keeping function” (Tollefson, 2015, p. 134) to maintain the hierarchical systems in the society. These ancestral traits have been followed in Pakistan and, as a result, English enjoys a privileged and glorified status almost in all domains of life particularly in education.

Language of Instruction in Pakistan

Pakistani private elite schools and few government elite schools use English as MOI, whereas in non-elite private schools either Urdu or local language(s) or a combination of Urdu and English is used as MOI. Most of Pakistani public schools use Urdu or local languages as MOI. Due to linguistic diversity, even in case of Urdu as MOI students receive education at primary and secondary level in their second or third language (Raja, 2014). Besides this, following the national policy, medium of instruction at most of the private universities in Pakistan is English (Mahboob & Jain, 2016; Rahman, 2008). The choice of language according to the current National Education Policy (NEP) 2009 for higher education is English. English is also to be employed for teaching mathematics and science from class VI and onwards. However, the policy empowers Provincial and Area Education Departments to select medium of instruction till class V.

Recommended Language for Instruction

Language choice for MOI has always been a heated debate in Pakistani educational context. Ahmed (2011) proposed the promotion of national language for education. Similarly, Shaheen and Tariq (2012) endorsed students' poor performance in academic achievement as a result of change in MOI from Urdu to English. English language as MOI creates a gap between the teachers and students leading to conducive learning environment (Ahmed, Zareef & Tehseen, 2013). Ahmed et al., (2013) further suggested that existence of diverse MOIs such as English, Urdu, regional languages and in some cases Arabic makes it difficult to have a single MOI across the country. On the other hand English language is the preferred choice of teachers specifically for disseminating knowledge of Science and Mathematics (Channa, 2012, Saeed, Iqbal, & Azam, 2012). English language has also gained parents' support as choice of MOI from early age for a secured and prosperous future of their children (Channa, Memon, & Bughio, 2016).

Implementation of Article 251

The diverse linguistic landscape needs attention for a comprehensive and effective language policy, in general, and for education, in particular. Therefore, the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCoP) ordered (dated September 08, 2015) for the implementation of Article 251 immediately, adopting Urdu as the official language of Pakistan. Whereas, Ministry of Education and Professional Training and the Higher Education Commission (HEC) directed all public and private universities for the implementation of SC order, providing all 'public interest documents and communication resources in both languages (Sheikh, 2015).

Aim of the Study

Proclamation of SC order stirred up a debate for language choice as MOI and a call for heedful planning of language policy for cultivating education in the country. Some studies carried out in Pakistan on MOI conclude that participants support English language as medium of instruction (Channa et al., 2016; Irfan 2013; Mansoor, 2004). However, the choice of a regional language or Urdu language is strongly advocated especially for primary education in Pakistan (Coleman, 2010; Mansoor, 2004; Raja, 2014). The present study is an attempt to explore teachers' and students' perceptions about their preferred MOI in order to develop an understanding of the ground realities and needs of the key stakeholders in the domain of education, i. e. teachers and students. The study is limited to English and Urdu as MOI in three selected institutions, owing to the urban setting of the institutes and the respondents. Regional or local languages as MOI are not part of the current study.

Method

The present study followed qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of school, college and university teachers and students about MOI. This study sought to answer: What are the perceptions of school, college and university teachers and students about medium of instruction?

To answer this question, teachers and students' perceptions were collected through semi-structured questionnaires. Semi-structured questionnaire is a "powerful tool...with a clear structure, sequence and focus" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2010). The tool was checked for self, expert and pilot validity before data collection. The items on the questionnaire were revised based on the thorough discussion of the authors; it was, then, sent to three experts for review. The changes suggested by the experts were made. The tool was, then, piloted on a similar group of respondents to ensure the clarity of questions. For respondents' convenience, the tool was translated in Urdu. Inter-rater reliability of the translation (from English to Urdu) was checked through online Kappa. The online Kappa test showed an agreement of 0.85% among the raters. Similarly, Urdu responses were

translated into English and inter-rater reliability of the translation was tested. As per the online Kappa test agreement of three raters is 0.8%.

The sample of the study consisted of 139 students and 36 teachers. The sample was selected from three public sector institutions: a school, a college and university (for further division of the sample, see Table 1 and 2). Respondents were requested to participate voluntarily and their participation was taken as their consent. They were also assured of anonymity and confidentiality as well as their right of withdrawal from the study at any point as suggested by Cohen et al., (2010). The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis, a common technique used by qualitative researchers. It involves making sense of the data by observing emerging themes from the data and classifying them into thematic groups to create "larger meanings of understanding" (Creswell, 2012).

Table 1

Sample of the study based on institution

Types of institute (Public sector)	No. of students	No. of teachers
School	35	10
College	45	21
University	59	5
Total	139	36

Table 2

Sample of the study based on mother tongue

Language	No. of students (%)	No. of teachers (%)
Urdu	65.4	64
Pashto	17.9	-
Punjabi	5	5.5
Balochi	2.8	-
Sindhi	1.4	30.5
Other	7.5	-
Total	100	100

Results

Results of the study are categorized as: role of MOI in classroom, command over MOI, Urdu Language as MOI and English Language as MOI. "T" is used for teacher participant and "S" refers to student participant.

Role of MOI in Classroom

The participants outlined several key aspects of MOI in classroom while responding to the questions targeted at its significance. They emphasized that MOI plays an essential role in learning as well as teaching. They stressed that MOI is the "*medium of communication*" (T18) between teachers and students and "*an effective means to build their relationship*" (T7). They also stated that MOI is vital in the transfer of knowledge. It "*is the bridge between the teachers and students through which knowledge travels*" (T15). Consequently, if MOI is a familiar language, "*it allows better understanding and better information retention*" (T20). Moreover, one of the participants shared that MOI can be a "*tool to maintain uniformity and equality among the students from different linguistic and educational background*" (S20). "*The availability of resources and course material*" (T3) was also discussed as a factor that determines the significant role of MOI.

Command over MOI

The respondents also highlighted the issue of teachers and students' command over MOI for its effective use in classroom. Firstly, the teachers must have command over the language that is being used as MOI to impart the knowledge of the subject matter (T4, T20). If they are not well-versed in the language selected as MOI by their institutes, they may not feel comfortable or convenient (S46, S48). Additionally, students' *"interest in the course and motivation to learn may also be affected if teachers are not fluent in the selected MOI"* (T15). Likewise, students must also be proficient in the language of instruction otherwise teachers have to translate and explain the lesson content wasting their time and efforts (S19, T14). Another issue regarding command over MOI pertains to the choice of a language that caters the needs of students *"from different educational background"* (S63).

Urdu Language as MOI

The analysis of the data revealed that majority of the teachers in the sample uses Urdu as MOI for the convenience of students *"because (majority of) students understand Urdu"* (T13). Some teachers, on the other hand, switch codes between Urdu and English owing to the diversity of the students. They prefer *"both English and Urdu for the reason being that class mix is from different educational background"* (T18). Since Urdu is the mother tongue of majority of the respondents, they acknowledged that Urdu MOI provides better and quick learning (T4 & T11). Besides comprehension, it also helps the students in retaining information easily, thus *"accelerating the achievement of instructional objectives"* (T8). On the other hand, one of the teachers also highlighted that *"extensive use of Urdu as MOI makes students rely on teachers to explain everything, thus, making them teacher-dependent"* (T16).

Urdu is also preferred by most of the student respondents for classroom interaction as well as for medium of examination (MOE) since they feel more comfortable with it: *"It is easier to speak and understand"* (S3 & S7). According to the participants, they can conveniently ask questions in Urdu to clarify their concepts whereas *"they feel embarrassed or reluctant in English"* (S17).

Responding to the question regarding challenges in the use of Urdu as MOI, the participants accentuated the *"complexity of Urdu terminology"* (S1). In addition to this, *"students from English medium educational background find it difficult to attempt answers in Urdu"* (S49). Whereas, the availability of course material in English becomes a challenge for the participants who prefer Urdu MOI. As one of them stated, *"more content is available in English for exam preparation as compared to Urdu"* (S53).

English Language as MOI

As far as English is concerned, most of the teachers recommended English as MOI to emphasize the importance of English at higher education level. They favored English because of *"its global importance and use"* (T1). However, few teachers use it in their classrooms only because *"they are bound"* to teach in English by their institutes (T3). As per the teachers' views, English as MOI both facilitates and hinders the learning and teaching process. Many books, course material and resources are available locally and globally in English (T1, T6 and S53). Similarly, *"specific subject-related terminology is easier to learn and explain in English"* (T35). However, *"it only caters the students from English medium background"* (T15). The teachers also added that students with weak proficiency in English have difficulty in comprehending lectures unless translated or explained in Urdu by the teachers (T1, T3). They face similar problems in examination where *"they cannot understand the*

questions or cannot express their ideas in English” (T24). Thus, the final resort for them is “to cram the answers and reproduce them” (T7).

Some of the student respondents prefer English for interaction with their teachers in order *“to improve their language skills” (S50) and “to maintain the international standards” (S49)*. Owing to the role of MOI in learning and teaching, some participants take the use of English in classroom as an opportunity to *“learn a new language that is beneficial for higher education” (S3)*. They also reiterated the availability of course material and terminology in English as an aid (S53 & S6). However, they also reinforced the idea of incomprehensibility of instructions and inability to express ideas when English is the medium of examination (S2 & S10).

Discussion

The dilemma of language choice as MOI between English and Urdu is a complex one for a multilingual country like Pakistan. Tracking this ‘plurilingual tradition’ back to pre-independence Pakistan and India, Mahboob and Jain (2016) have also argued that the choice between indigenous languages and English as medium of instruction is not new. English cannot be ignored since it is the language of knowledge, research and power, whereas, Urdu is the language in which teachers and students both feel comfortable. However, Nyika (2015) has highlighted that mother tongue as medium of instruction has an edge over second and foreign language in terms of students’ performance and achievement.

Urdu as MOI facilitates students in the classroom interaction as well as examination. But English MOI caters only for students who have either English medium background or have good command over the language. As Islam et al., (2015) pointed out the suitability of English as medium of instruction for the ‘first class’ students only arguing that it will be difficult for the students from Urdu medium background. Consequently, English as MOI can lead to adverse effects on the academic achievement of those students who have weak English language skills. Past studies have also found that weak English language skills negatively affect Pakistani learners’ understanding, learning and performance (Ahmed, 2011; Ahmed, Zareef & Tehseen, 2013).

This paper outlined teachers and students’ perceptions on best suited language to perform classroom activities and deliver instructions. They admitted that English as MOI is beneficial for teaching science subjects and the language itself. These findings are in line with Channa (2012) whose participants reiterated that English MOI can be beneficial for science subjects and terminology. The participants in the current study acknowledged the importance and need of both Urdu and English as MOI, but most of them preferred Urdu to be used in their institutes as medium of instruction as well as of examination. Contrary to the findings of Channa et al., (2016), the respondents in the present study preferred Urdu as MOI. This variation in the preference shows how diverse a stance is taken by the parents (participants of Channa et al., study) as opposed to the teachers and students on MOI.

Since the primary objective of education is to impart knowledge, skills and values to the students, a language should be chosen in which they feel at home. Moreover, MOI is not only a means to transfer the knowledge but also a strong tool to build interactive relationship between teachers and students; it also allows teachers to perform their best. Therefore, educational institutes must respond to the changing needs, social expectations and growing demand (Ahmed, 2011) but they should not do it at the cost of learning. However, medium of instruction has been associated with the power struggle between the ‘elite and proto-elite groups’ in Pakistan as discussed by Rahman (2010). It is high time to free education from such geo-political connotation.

While responding to the items in the questionnaire, majority of the respondents, be it teachers or students from any level of education, opted for Urdu when it came to express their opinions. A similar issue was raised by Mahboob (2017) while reviewing studies on medium of instruction. He argued that the data collection tools of the reviewed studies were written in English thus ignoring the voice of respondents who lack English literacy. The participants' choice of Urdu for expression is evident of the fact that Urdu language allows them convenience and confidence to express themselves better than English. Hence, decisions regarding language and education policy need multidimensional analysis of the current practices, available expertise and anticipated consequences before implementation.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that English language as MOI is difficult both for Pakistani teachers and students of public sector institutes all three levels of education. The primary reason of English as MOI being a challenge at these Urdu-medium or non-elite institutes is teachers and students' weak English language skills, due to which the teachers are unable to effectively deliver their ideas and students find it difficult to understand the subject which also hinders them to be critical. The findings carry significant implications since the respondents are well-aware of their linguistic deficiencies as well as the consequences of ignoring English as MOI. Hence, ensuring the gradual shift from Urdu to English MOI with the help of required code-switching as per the context can improve the situation. Also, there is a need to develop teachers' English language proficiency to deal with the challenges posed by linguistic deficiency. Since English language has become a global language and most of the research based literature in the world is in English, ignoring it as MOI at all levels can create challenges to keep pace with the world, especially for higher education in national as well as international setting.

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