LANGUAGE POLICY PLANNING IN PAKISTAN: A REVIEW

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Language policy has always been an important part of all the educational policies of Pakistan. This report gives an analysis of the language policies given by different governments since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, particularly language policy presented in the National Education Policy 2009, and to review these in terms of their effects on the socio-economic and educational life and aspirations of the people of the country.

Pakistan, with its four provinces, is ethnically, linguistically and culturally, a typical plural society, as no less than 24 languages and a number of dialects are spoken here. Urdu is the declared national language and English is the official language, and as such these are the dominant languages of the country, used in domains of power like offices, press, media, education, and employment. Given the country’s multilingual and multicultural make-up, deciding on the medium of instruction choice has never been easy. According to UNESCO 1995 (Wadi D. Haddad / Demsky), there is a definite framework for drawing policy and planning. Policy making is the first step before any implementation and evaluation procedures could be envisioned. The report gives a systematic process of designing an education policy, which consists of: selecting the desired objective; identifying the target of the objective; determining the pathway to reach that objective; designing the specific program or measure in respect of that goal; target, cost and financing; and implementing the measure and assessing its impact. However, in Pakistan educational planners, language planners and civil bureaucracy have never followed such processes.

Language planning is a highly professional activity that decides the future of a nation’s life at personal and professional levels. The planning of language policy needs to analyze a country’s ethno-linguistic, geo-political, and socio-economic situation before drawing up a language plan for its people. In Pakistan there has always been a gap in understanding these aspects as well as the aspirations and language ideologies of the people through a thorough needs assessment. At the time of Independence of Pakistan, Urdu was declared as the national language (although it was the mother tongue of only

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7.5% of the people of Pakistan), because the Muslims of the subcontinent had all along the Pakistan movement seen Urdu language as the mark of Pakistan’s identity and nationalism. The need of operational efficiency, ‘nationism’, was filled by English because the ‘elites’ were trained to do their official work in English, therefore it continued to be the official language (Haque, 1983). “Most of Pakistan’s language problems grew out of regional linguistic groups’ taking umbrage at the state’s insistence on making Urdu the national language. The overarching problem in this regard was the government’s unaccommodating language policies” (Ayres 2003: 57).

The UNESCO Report recommends the process of generating policy options, which are: systemic, incremental, ad hoc and importation. Unfortunately, in Pakistan the incremental mode has always been selected by all the education policy makers, particularly in the language policy planning. One big cause of this incremental factor has been the lack of political stability in the country, because of which no government could plan long-term practical language policy, and take consistent steps towards achieving its objectives. Despite the recommendations by all the educational policies to a switch over from English medium to Urdu, this policy has never been implemented. (From 1959 to develop Urdu to replace English within fifteen years [Sharif Commission Report] and 5-7 years in 1979. This objective was never achieved; rather, the attempts to switch to Urdu as medium of instruction resulted in reversals of language policies, which led to the deterioration of educational standards in Pakistan (Mansoor, 1983).

The report of the Karachi University Enquiry Committee (1956-1957) argued for ‘an up-to-date knowledge of Science in the universities’ but as ‘Urdu or Bengali does not contain enough literature of the physical or the social sciences’, English should be retained as the medium of instruction in the universities and that ‘the teacher can supplement his English lectures with explanations in Urdu or Bengali’ (p.14). It emphasized, however, that what was needed was ‘not highly idiomatic English, but intelligible English as it is spoken and written in every foreign country’ (p.15) It recommended that till the time the national language was developed and became the medium of education, ‘English be retained in the sphere of education’ (p.17). It also recommended ‘all efforts to be made to accelerate the transition to the adoption of national language as the medium of instruction’ (p.18).

The Report of the Sheriff Commission on National Education (1959) acknowledged the importance of Urdu as the link language, and of English as a gateway to science and knowledge acquired from the West. It regarded it equally important to develop special techniques to teach English. Primary education should be in a child’s
mother tongue till class 5; national language to be taught as the subject from class 3 onwards, and as the medium of instruction from class 6 to secondary levels and at the higher secondary levels. At the university level English would continue as Medium of Instruction, and a board of scientific terminology to be set up for the translation of terms in Urdu in 15 years time. English should be taught as a functional subject, with new teaching techniques.

The report of the Hamood Ur Rehman Commission on student problems and welfare (1965) looked at Medium of Instruction briefly and recommended that at the primary level the Medium of Instruction should be in the vernacular and the national languages (Urdu & Bengali). The decision of Medium of Instruction was largely given to the parents in certain provinces like Sindh and Peshawar.

Following the Nur Khan Report in 1969, the educational system of the elite institutes still followed the English as medium of instruction, in civil and senior administration, and in colleges and universities. The Education Policy of 1970 emphasized compulsory education up to class 5, and a decentralization of educational institutions. Two national institutes of modern languages were established but faced severe lack of resources and support due to politic disturbances, especially with the loss of East Pakistan & change of government in 1971. Following the Education Policy of 1972 during Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s government, all private schools were nationalized, resulting in more Urdu medium schools.

The National Educational Policy 1979 during General Ziaul Haq emphasized the strengthening of Urdu as the national language. Due to shortage of the professional books in Urdu, it was realized that English cannot be dismissed, but measures should be taken to upgrade Urdu, and English should phase out in 5 years time. The University Grants Commission Report 1982 proposed teaching English as a second language by taking various measures such as, teaching English functional and communication courses for professional purposes, training English teachers, providing teaching materials to pre-service and in-service language teachers.

However, the National Educational Policy of Nawaz Sharif (1998-2010) highlighted universal literacy in 15 years, without emphasizing the need of English language. A ‘white paper’ on education policy was issued in 2007 which stressed that English would be taught as a subject from grade 1, while mathematics and science are to be taught through English from grade 6. In Punjab, government had its own policy of teaching science through English from grade 10. But in both the cases mother tongue was ignored as medium of instruction.
The Language Policy given in the NEP 2009 acknowledges the importance of English language as a language of international competition, whereas Urdu as a link language connects people. It talks about the ‘Vision 2030’ which describes the reality on the ground—“the divide between the prevalent school structure and differences in levels of infrastructure and facilities, media of instruction, emolument of teachers, and even examination systems between public and private sectors. The rich send their children to privately run English medium schools which offer foreign curricula and examination systems; the public schools enroll those who are too poor to do so.” Most of the elite schools follow the Cambridge or London University O/A levels systems that have a different curriculum, assessment system and textbooks. White collar jobs ask for English language proficiency. English language has become one big source of economic and social stratification in Pakistani society.

An ambivalence regarding the medium of instruction policy, all through the 68 years of the nation’s history, has resulted in three different types of education systems in Pakistan: private, elite institutions where medium of instruction is English; government schools where Urdu is medium of instruction; and, madrassas which use Arabic and Urdu as medium of instruction. There has been a serious lack of commitment by government towards education of the people and planning of the language policy. The poor allocation of funds has resulted in a further lower literacy rate, poor quality of education, and shortage of trained teachers who could teach Urdu and English adequately. The Economist Intelligence Unit in its latest review of Pakistani education says: “Pakistan’s Education System is among the most deficient and backward in Asia, reflecting the traditional determination of the feudal ruling elite to preserve its hegemony.”

The policy option in this paper is analyzed from the perspective of its impact on various interest groups or stakeholders, compatibility with the dominant ideology and targets of economic growth, and on political development and stability. In Pakistan the language policy had been instrumental in deciding which social and linguistic groups have access to political position, economic prosperity, and in this process which groups are disenfranchised. Elites send their children to expensive English medium schools, while in government schools Urdu is the medium of instruction. The standards of education have further deteriorated because of a gap in planning a realistic language policy, with a realistic assessment of needs, ideologies and aspirations of the people of Pakistan. Most of the time language policies were guided by the whims and desires of the political leadership. This led to a failure of the policy implementation and to the reversals of language policies. Though government’s policies focused on promoting Urdu as the language of instruction,
and to be used for official purposes as Urdu has always been a symbol of national identity, English still flourishes and is the language of communication of the elite society. English has sufficiently penetrated into the academic and professional domains of the middle classes, and is used for all official purposes. Thus, only lip service is paid to promote Urdu; nothing in practical terms have been done so far to strengthen Urdu as the medium of instruction. According to Rahman (1995), there is an inherent contradiction between Pakistan’s educational policies to give Urdu the status of the official language. The actual policy supports English and maintains it for educational, professional, and social purposes and therefore will continue to be the language of power. Internationalization of trade and business, multinationals seek competent English speakers. This becomes a reason of marginalization of less competent speaker of English.

Language policies need to focus on teaching English for its instrumental value-the specific academic and professional needs. Simultaneously, the standard of Urdu language teaching should be raised. While English is realized as the language of international education, mobility and employment, Urdu as the national language should be given equal credit and value academically and professionally. The study agrees with Mansoor’s (2005) perception of ‘cultural pluralism’ to create a political and economic unity among different socio-economic groups, maintaining national identity and competing with the international standards. The present situation calls for a re-organization of processes for the planning of a consistent and realistic language policy for Pakistan.

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