

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

*English is the language of power and status in Pakistan. The ability to communicate in English is a prerequisite for all important jobs both in civil and military bureaucracy. While English has been retained as the official language of Pakistan along with Urdu, the national language; the state has failed to provide equal opportunities of quality education in English. Far from removing inequalities, the state has been responsible for creating parallel systems of education; one for the poor and other for the rich. Furthermore, there has been a power struggle between English and Urdu on the one hand, and between Urdu and the regional (provincial) languages, on the other hand. State-run government schools impart education in Urdu or regional languages, and English is the medium of instruction in private expensive schools. Consequently, quality education in English is available to those who can afford it. Parallel systems of education have widened the gap between rich and poor in Pakistan, as more often than not, students from government-run institutions cannot compete with students from private English medium institutions. The state must do away with parallel systems of education and provide equal opportunities of education and economic development to all its citizens.*

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the status of English language in Pakistan. A brief survey of English language institutions and parallel systems of education is presented. This paper argues that English has been retained as an official language without providing equal opportunities of learning English. It is argued that people at the helm of affairs are not interested in changing the status quo and providing genuine opportunities to people for intellectual and economic development. Parallel systems of education are maintained, one for the poor and other for the rich, in order to perpetuate their hold on power. It is suggested that equal opportunities of education, especially in English, should be given

to all people so that they can avail themselves of prospects of economic and intellectual development.

### **ENGLISH IN PAKISTAN**

English is the official language and symbol of status in Pakistan. Haque (1983:7) writes that "English in Pakistan is more the language of Macaulay than of Shakespeare". The workings of federal and provincial governments, proceedings of courts, and communications in the fields of science, technology, information, industrial and business sector are carried out in English. English, as the language of educated elite, promises better career opportunities and serves as a stepping stone in an individual's economic progress (Shamim). English medium education is increasingly considered to be quality education and in the last two decades there has been huge growth in private English medium institutions, even in small towns of Pakistan. Pakistan does not have one universal system of education catering for the needs of all irrespective of the economic class or background. Shamim argues that parallel system of education – English medium and vernacular medium – in Pakistan is the continuation of British colonial education system. Despite the fact that successive governments in Pakistan have retained English as an official language and English language skills are mandatory for all important jobs both in public and private sectors, parallel systems of education have widened the gap between the ruling elite and the masses (Rahman 2001). The following section will help in understanding the parallel systems of education in Pakistan.

### **PARALLEL SYSTEMS OF EDUCATIONS IN PAKISTAN**

There are three major types of English medium schools in Pakistan. They are: (1) state-influenced elite public schools; (2) private elite schools; (3) non-elite schools. Federal government public schools, armed forces public schools and cadet colleges and public schools run by federal government institution, e.g. PIA, Customs, armed forces, come under the category of state-influenced elitist public schools. In the post-independence education scenario private elite schools were run by the missionaries. Saint Mary's (Rawalpindi), Presentation Convent (Murree), Burn Hall (Abbottabad) are the two examples mentioned

in Rahman (2001). Such schools operated, after independence, and still continue to impart education in English language in major cities of Pakistan. Rahman (2001) elaborates that students of these schools are not only taught in English but they use it informally outside the classroom as well. In the current situation these convents schools are not really considered the most elite of the English medium schools. Now the private Pakistani schools such as Beacon House and City School, to name two examples, are categorized as private elite English medium schools. These private elitist English medium schools charge high tuition fees ranging from Rs.1500 (£12) to Rs.7000 (£54) per month; this expensive education is beyond the reach of poor class and even large part of Pakistani middle class. Rahman (2001:248) maintains "English, always an elite preserve in South Asia, is still available to the elite of money and power." The common people find difficulty in having access to it.

Rahman (*Ibid*) explains that most private non-elitist English medium schools are "English medium only in name". The demand for English medium education in Pakistan is so enormous that even in small towns one can witness the mushrooming growth of such schools. The tuition fees of these schools range from Rs 50 (40 pence) to Rs.1500 (£12) per month, which is significantly higher than the fees of state-run vernacular schools and lower than private elite English medium schools. Rahman (2001) elaborates that contrary to claims of English medium instruction, in most of these schools, only mathematics and science subjects are taught in English and all other subjects in Urdu. Rahman (2001) maintains that teachers in these schools are neither educated through English medium schools and nor professionally trained to teach in English; "teacher write answers of all subjects on the board which students faithfully copy, memorize and reproduce in the examination".

In vernacular-medium schools, both Urdu and Sindhi, English is not a second language but a foreign language; and it is a source of worries for both teachers, because they are not well-versed in it, and for students. Rahman (*Ibid.*) referring to a 1982 report on vernacular schools of Lahore, states that "students could not speak or understand English" and at most they could "read their lessons and simple sentences" in English. It is argued that students of vernacular-medium schools, coming from poor

backgrounds, do not get the opportunity to interact with or through English except in textbooks and classrooms, therefore it is hardly surprising that they fail to learn English. Rahman points out that successive governments have failed to implement a uniform policy vis-à-vis beginning English as a subject in vernacular-medium schools; some schools start from class 1 (age 5-6 years) while others from class 6 (age 11-12 years).

State-run vernacular schools, which in most cases use Urdu as the medium of instruction except in Sindh province, especially in rural Sindh where Sindhi is also used as medium of instruction, get "step-motherly treatment in the allocation of funds, maintenance of buildings, quality of teachers, provision of resource material and so on" (Rahman 2001:245). It is argued that far from removing inequality from academic education, the state is responsible for creating parallel systems of education; one for the rich elite and other for the masses. He maintains that these elite schools and colleges are operated at huge cost and public money is used to maintain these elite institutions and thereby parallel systems of education.

Rahman (2001) argues that students from elite English medium schools are very fluent in English not only because they are taught through English, but it is also used in outside classroom interaction with teachers and classmates; and as these students come from affluent backgrounds and their parents are also educated so English is also used at home. It is argued that the use of English outside the classroom both at school and at home is the major difference, in terms of competence and performance of English, between students of elite English medium schools and private non-elite English medium schools and vernacular-medium school, where English is taught only as subject, and where students get very little opportunity to use English at school and almost never at home.

Rahman argues that, apart from English and vernacular medium of education, thousands of students study in Islamic seminaries (madrassas). Mostly these students come from poor backgrounds and have families with a religious orientation. The education in these seminaries is free and food is served at meal times. It is argued that generally English is perceived as a language of western people, and in the strict sense of the terms of non-



believers by the Ulemas (religious leaders). Pakistan has a history in which policy of teaching English in these seminaries has been resented and resisted. However, some religious sects support and have introduced at least English as a subject in their curriculum; but the quality of teaching and learning is far from satisfactory.

English is the medium of instruction in 'elitist schools', private and expensive English medium schools, and in indirectly state-run cadet colleges. English is taught as a subject in state-controlled 'vernacular medium' schools and to a very small number of students in madrassas. It is argued that English should not only remain the medium of instruction in 'elitist schools' but it should be taught to all children (in state-run schools) in the same manner. It is explained that English is almost a first language for a few rich and highly Anglicised Pakistanis; second language for a large number of rich and highly educated people and foreign language for all educated people (Rahman 2001).

### **ENGLISH, URDU AND REGIONAL LANGUAGES**

English is the language of power and status in Pakistan, whereas Urdu is the national language and symbol of national unity. Supporters of Urdu (called pro-elite in Rahman, 'The Medium of Instruction Controversy in Pakistan') want English to be replaced by Urdu and used in all official business and communication in and as the medium of instruction in academic institutions. Urdu is the mother tongue of 7.57% people in Pakistan, Punjabi 44.15%, Pushto 15.42%, Sindhi 14.1%, Balochi 3.57%, Saraiki 10.53% and others 4.66% (Shamim 2008). Despite official patronage of Urdu, English has remained the language of power and of influential people in Pakistan and its status still remains unchallenged. While pro-elite supporters seek a greater role for Urdu in the name of national interest and unity; ethno-nationalists want regional languages to flourish and to be used as the media of instruction and official business in their respective provinces (Rahman 1997). The table below shows the individual languages with over 1,000,000 first language speakers in Pakistan.

No.	Language	Speakers (Millions)	% of Population
1	Panjabi (Western)	60.6	38.3
2	Sindhi	18.5	11.7
3	Siraiki	13.8	8.7
4	Urdu	10.7	6.8
5	Pashto (Northern)	9.6	6.1
6	Pashto (Central)	7.9	5.0
7	Balochi (Southern)	2.8	1.8
8	Brahui	2.0	1.3
9	Hindko (Northern)	1.9	1.2
10	Balochi (Eastern)	1.8	1.1
11	Pashto (Southern)	1.4	0.9
13	Balochi (Western)	1.1	0.7
13	Farsi (Eastern)	1.0	0.6
14	Panjabi (Mirpur)	1.0	0.6
	Sub-total	134.1	84.8
	58 other languages	24.0	15.2
	Total	158.1	100.0

**Source:** *British Council Report* (2010).

Regional languages of Pakistan do not get official patronage in education, at any level, especially in higher education. Since independence in 1947, the official policy has been to promote Urdu as an official language; "it is a symbol of national identity and integration to help avoid regional autonomy and separation" (Mansoor 2004:335). Despite this pro-Urdu policy, English continues to grow and is considered the language of power in Pakistan (Rahman 1996). English is also the language of both civil and military bureaucracy and the language of the upper class; and it is the key to most influential and high paid jobs in Pakistan (Mansoor 2004). However, Urdu flourishes because of official support; regional languages i.e. Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Siraiki, are neglected in the education sector, especially in higher education. The constitution of Pakistan of 1973 clearly states in article 251(3) that "without prejudice to the status of 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" (*Ibid*).

## CONCLUSION

This paper highlights two important points that (i) English has been retained as an official language of Pakistan, yet English language education is only available to the rich and inaccessible to the large majority of Pakistan; (2) regional languages of Pakistan are neglected owing to the English-Urdu controversy. It can be seen that quality English language education, both in elite public schools and private elite schools, is affordable only by the rich elite. Students from poor background either study in non-elite private English medium schools or in vernacular-medium schools; in these schools students do not get quality education (Rahman 2001). There appears to be a willful neglect on the part of ruling elite in Pakistan to keep the masses under-educated, because that serves their purposes. Poor illiterate masses are kept out of any meaningful political process, and fooled in the name of religion, nationalism, language and culture (Rahman 1996). An enlightened and educated populace would challenge the status-quo. Parallel systems of education perpetuate power in the hands of ruling elite: students from affluent background get quality education and as a result obtain high paid and important jobs; students from poor background study in vernacular medium schools and get low paid clerical jobs, with few exceptions. Parallel systems of education have widened the gap between rich and poor in Pakistan. Since the state has failed to provide equal opportunities of education and English language learning to all, it would not be wise to suggest, considering the global importance of English, that the government should scrap English as the official language and replace it with Urdu. Pakistan can emulate the examples of China and India in education: if Pakistan has to progress, that has to take place through education; and English language skills are essential in the competitive world of 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is suggested that local languages should be promoted and the government must do away with parallel education systems and introduce a uniform education system promising equal opportunities of education and English language learning to all people.

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