

ROLE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN LEARNING AT PRIMARY LEVEL IN BALOCHISTAN

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Abstract:

The aim of this research paper is to explore and evaluate one of the much debated issues pertaining to the role of the mother tongue while imparting education at primary level in Balochistan, and analytically evaluate the obstacles in learning and the implementation of this concept. Balochistan is a multilingual province where Urdu, although not a mother tongue of any ethnic group, is widely spoken and understood all over the province. Similarly, English, no matter how rudimentary, is also generally understood and spoken amongst a fairly large number of people. Urdu and English words have since long been adopted by every ethnic group and now stand integrated in local languages and are freely used by every ethnic group while speaking their local languages. Urdu and English have been the basic medium of instructions in schools in rural and urban areas since Independence. Regional languages are taught as optional subjects. Lack of employing mother tongue as an initial medium of instructions has come under criticism and often blamed for poor assimilation of the very young students, especially in the rural areas. This paper attempts to explore the prevailing situation of cognitive effectiveness through mother tongue at early grades in Balochistan. Its aim is to focus on research-based data to evaluate this issue and thus help the policy makers, administrators and educationists, to make well considered, logical and realistic decisions regarding medium of instructions at primary level. This research is based on qualitative method. Primary and secondary data was used to find out the answers to the research-questions. Focused group discussions and interviews from educationists, administrators, parents and young learners were conducted to acquire the reliable and up-to-date data on the topic. Finally, it has been concluded that young learners are more comfortable in learning new things in their mother tongues at during the early two or three grades. Students at primary level found it harder to interpret and comprehend the things being taught in Urdu, much less in English, when compared with

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the medium of their mother tongues. The Balochistan Provincial Assembly Act, 2014 introduced “The Balochistan Introduction of mother languages as compulsory additional subject at primary level” (Government of Balochistan, 2014). The good intentions which prompted initiation of this Act notwithstanding, some hurdles and issues have now emerged and identified in the implementation of this Policy. In order to comprehend the dynamics, do ability, access and impact on the quality of education while keeping the spirit of the initiative alive, the research has suggested some implementation measures as alternatives to introduce and implement this policy for the very young learners, indeed, the beginners in Balochistan.

Key Words: Mother tongue, Cognitive Effectiveness, EFA, Learning, Primary Education.

Introduction:

According to UNESCO 2008, there are 50 to 75 percent children out of school in the world. Majority of the marginalized children are those whose medium of instructions is in languages other than the language they speak at home. Empirical researches have indicated that languages used in early grades are of great importance. One of the reasons of dropouts at early grades is the use of language in instructions other than the mother tongue (UNESCO, 2008).

Indeed, learning at any level of education requires fair grasp of the medium of communication. In order to receive any new knowledge, it is indispensable to understand the medium of exchange and then develop the connection from the known / previous knowledge with the new knowledge. For a child, language plays very important role for him to grasp new things, languages, ideas and to assimilate and retain these new things in his mind.

Keeping in view this fact, many countries, Philippine to name one, included mother tongue in Education policies. This reaffirms the need and interest of many societies around the globe to promote mother tongue and secure their heritage. Researchers like Kosonen, 2005, stated that in Parent-Teacher Interaction, the parents found it more convenient to communicate with teachers in their mother tongues to foster the learning of their children. Many researchers like (Benson, 2002) were of the opinion that especially in the rural areas, small children taught in their mother language are less likely to repeat grades. Furthermore, it is now widely believed that the goals of Education-for-All are more likely to be achieved in those countries where the medium of instructions is in the mother tongue. (Benson and Kosonen, 2013). Having said that, this approach is perfectly adoptable and apparently needs no review where there is only one mother tongue, such as in many countries of Europe and US. However, its application becomes challenging when there are dozens of mother tongues with multiple dialects such as in Pakistan, especially in Balochistan. This, then ceases to be a simple approach. Passing an Act of Assembly in itself cannot produce desired results unless suitable ways

and means are formulated to tackle the ground situations, latent issues and modes of application. This warrants a well-considered evaluation of the obstacles confronting the implementation of the Act.

Status of Urdu and English in Pakistan

Pakistan is a developing country in South Asia, committed to achieve Millennium Development Goals, Education being one of them. Pakistan happens to be located at the crossroads of many old civilizations and political/geographical matrix. In Pakistan, every few miles in any direction, the language and/or the dialects change. We are thus blessed with dozens of languages and dialects. The only language, which actually does not belong to any area but is commonly spoken and indeed, integrates all ethnic groups, is Urdu. Quite rightly, immediately after Independence, it was declared to be the National Language. English language, which was inherited as the official language on Independence, continues to remain the official language, albeit, with Urdu slowly moving in also and emerging as the official language at least at the lower levels of administration. However, Urdu has never been a court language. Therefore, it has limited vocabulary and given the rapid advances in science and technology, it will not be easy or even expedient to nudge away English and introduce Urdu in quick time as the official language of Pakistan. In any case, English has now widely spread and acquired the status of being the global language, rather than belonging only to Britain or the US for that matter.

Multitude of Mother Languages in Pakistan – The Challenges

Due to harsh weather, scanty rains, non-productivity in most of the areas, people who now comprise Pakistan, for centuries lived in tribal isolation. Not only the deserts but successive ridges of mountains and rivers of Indus Basin also became barriers to mobility. Outsiders, even neighboring clans were looked at with suspicion and tribal movement was very limited. Any incursion was fiercely contested by neighbors while trying to protect their limited grazing or cultivated lands. This inevitably gave birth to large scale variations in dialects.

Urdu as the national language notwithstanding, Pakistan's several regional languages continue to be spoken and are indeed growing as the education spreads and respective ethnic groups feel that their languages, as their pride and identity, should grow and thrive. The major languages in Pakistan are Punjabi, Sindhi (which incidentally is the only official language other than Urdu in Sindh besides English in parallel), Pashtu, Balochi, Brahui and Seraiki. In AJ & Kashmir and Gilgat-Baltistan Gojri, Balti, Shinha and Broshki are spoken. Then there are numerous dialects of each major regional language, some so distant from each other that they are barely understood by persons speaking that same language but a different dialect. The Pashtu of Banuu, called Banuch is so different that a Pashtu speaking person will find it hard to comprehend it. Similarly, Potohari and Seraiki of the northern and southern Punjab are remarkably different from each other and the Punjabi spoken in central Punjab.

Balochistan is no different from other provinces of Pakistan. Indeed, its weather and terrain are harsher than many other parts of Pakistan. Consequently, the geography of Balochistan has socially had more isolating effect. The non-productive rain-starved, river-less terrain did not allow sustenance of large groups of people in any one locality thus forcing them to live a nomadic life, shifting from one pasture land to the next within the clan-boundary. It remained a compulsion for hundreds of years. It allowed existence of only small villages in Balochistan. It was only after the British arrived some 150 years ago, that the first city, Quetta, started coming into being. Balochistan is a multi racial / multi-ethnic province with scattered and lowest density of population in Pakistan, which mostly lives in rural areas.

Historically, at the time of Independence, besides some seminaries in Federation of Kalat States, there were only 9 high schools established by the British in the so-called British-Balochistan and no college. Compared with any of the other provinces, the lands which became a province named Balochistan in 1970, was way behind in education in Pakistan. In Balochistan, therefore, the challenges of education are primarily due to the rigors of geography and baggage of history. Basically, they can be translated into two things; access and quality. The government and educators have been grappling with these challenges and making efforts to overcome these challenges.

Provincial Government's Initiatives to Tackle the Challenges

Over a period of time several policies and initiatives have been taken to address these problems. One of the debates at different levels among the Government, Policy Makers and Educators has been to develop medium of instructions which can facilitate the youngest students whose mother tongue is not Urdu, especially those coming from rural background may not have even heard Urdu.

One of the initiatives taken by the Provincial Assembly of Balochistan vide Act of 2014, was introduction of an additional compulsory subject of the mother languages at primary level. The implementation of the Act has started. However, the ground realities have highlighted many obstacles in the implementation of this Act.

The challenges to tackle the obstacles for implementation of the present policies in imparting education, keeping in view the ground realities, variety of ethnic-mix and demographic profile of various localities, capacity of the system, overheads involved and achievable goals require to be evaluated. Tactical impediments ought to be evaluated, recognized and addressed by strategic educational planning.

Following then, are the objectives of this research paper;

1. To explore the perceived importance of mother tongue in learning at primary level.
 2. To analyze the existing scenario of 'Mother language in education' in Balochistan.
 3. To assess the obstacles and suggest suitable alternatives for improvement in terms of Access and quality of Education at primary level.
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Research Questions

1. What is the role of mother tongue in learning at primary level?
2. What is the present scenario of “Mother language in education” at primary level in Balochistan?
3. What are the obstacles in the implementation of mother tongue policies in education at early grades?
4. What measures can be taken to implement the Mother tongue policies in Balochistan for the enhancement of learning environment at primary level.

Research Method and Sample

This research study was based on qualitative method, using available primary and secondary data. Interviews from educationalists, administrators, parents and teachers were conducted. Focused group discussions were employed to probe in and find a reliable, realistic and up-to-date data from the field.

Literature Review

Many researchers like Obanya (2003) discovered that language has a fundamental place in all the situations relating to individual learning. Language is a vital instrument for thoughts and actions based on cognitive learning. Therefore language is the basic tool to impart knowledge and skills to a learner in any education system. Furthermore, in any social setting, language plays an important role to share the ideas and express feelings. Therefore, it can be considered as the basic derive force behind every action and knowledge. Human beings communicate to develop relationships by speaking and writing a particular language.

Orekan (2011) argued that mother language is necessary for individuals to think, learn and perform actions in early years of life. Moreover, thinking and conceptualizing the concepts are based on primary language or mother tongue.

What Mother Tongue is?

Dictionary definition of mother tongue is “one's native language or a language from which another language derives” (Merriam Webster.com, 2017). In other words, it means a language in which a mother communicates with her child for the very first time.

Pattanayak (2003) stated that mother tongue can be interpreted as the language of one's mother.

Ross (2004) proclaimed that the mother tongue can be defined as a language of the family or the first language of the child or the language of the community. A mother tongue can also be considered as the language the child can speak fluently before going to school. It is the verbal communication in which a kid can operate confidently in all spheres relevant to the child's life.

Why Mother Tongue is Important for learning:

According to UNESCO (2000), “*It is increasingly obvious that the language of instruction at the beginning of one's education at such a crucial moment for future learning should be the mother tongue.*” UNESCO (2000). International Conference on Education 46th Session: Final Report (p. 11). Many scholars

(Daniyal, 2003) believe that mother tongue and identity are interlinked with each other. Consequently, it results in the promotion of an individual's confident personality and healthy society

The instructional programs based on mother tongue or L1, helps the learner at early grades to learn second language L2 in bi-lingual or multi-lingual societies (Carol Benson, 2004, p. 2).

Empirical studies (Baker 2001; Cummins 2000; CAL 2001) reveal that learning through mother tongue at early years of child development helps the child to better understand the world around him or her. Furthermore, the better understanding of the basic cultural, religious and social norms and values can be developed through mother language. It further helps the child to communicate in other languages through better cognition and understanding of the concepts in mother tongue.

There are several models of language-in-education which prevail around the globe as medium of instructions. It depends on the needs of a society and economy of any country to adopt the suitable model of language for instructions. Generally, there are three possible models followed by different countries include,

1. Model of the mother tongue as medium of instructions.
2. Model of the second language as a medium of instructions.
3. Model of multilingual medium of instructions. (Zerak, 2014 p.5)

For better implementation of above mentioned models according to the needs, it is inevitable to sort out geographical regions in various groups with prevailing density of population speaking one language. The regions with 100 percent one-ethnic density are usually considered as monolingual regions, whereas, those regions with diverse ethnic composition are considered as 'Multilingual' regions. In this situation medium of instructions in mother language at early grades seems the best choice. Use of mother tongue and gradually introducing exogenous language can be a better option for further understanding of the concepts leading to quality education.

According to several researches carried out in many developing countries including Goutymalla and Cameron reveals that educational outcomes were high for those schools which used mother tongue at early grades as medium of instructions along with other exogenous languages. (Ibid)

Data Analysis/ Pros and Cons - Discussion

In the context of Balochistan, a focus-group was formulated for discussion of this issue. Twenty (8 male and 12 female) educationalists (two from policy planning and implementation unit, 10 from schools and 8 from district education department, were part of this focus-group. They considered the latest mother-language policy in Balochistan and freely shared their experience and opinions on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instructions. 10 students and 10 educationalists were also interviewed who were of the opinion that the use of mother tongue as a medium of instructions has

several advantages for students in lower grades. Majority of the respondents in focused-group-discussion agreed upon the fact that the mother tongue helps the learner to acquire second language, helpful in instructions for better comprehension, builds mutual understanding between teachers and students, develops students' self-confidence, decreases test-anxiety, enhances problem solving skills, boosts creativity, improves self-identity, facilitates student's participation thus enhancing learning environment and makes learning a joyful experience. Furthermore, learning at early childhood in mother tongue provides a greater opportunity to a child to assimilate with cultural, social and intellectual needs as he grows.

However, a few respondents were of the opinion that although the use of mother tongue at early grades brings several benefits yet there are many obstacles to overcome for the implementation of the language policy in its proper sense. Implementation of this policy requires more relevant data on spread of ethnicity, mix-of-ethnicity, prevalence and size of population with one or more mother-languages, needs and social trends to implement the mother tongue at early childhood level in Balochistan.

The dialects of the provincial languages vary as one moves over the length and breadth of the province. Pashtu of Gul Kachh, Qamar Din Karez, Musa Khail, Shahrig, Chaman, Murgha Faqirzai, Quetta and Panjpai all have different dialects and use of different vocabulary. Similarly, Balochi of Barkhan, Kohlu, Sangsilla, Panjgur, Mash-Khail, Mashkay, Tump, Jiwani and Dasht have remarkably different dialects and even common use words are different. Sindhi of Talli, Sibi, DMJ, Jhal Magsi, Usta Muhammad, Sohbat Pur and Bella have the same attributes. Persian, Punjabi, Urdu and Brahui are no different. Despite all the ethnic/sectarian attacks on settlers and Hazaras people who speak Persian, Punjabi and Urdu still very much live in Balochistan. Belonging to Balochistan, they enjoy the same rights as the rest of the population. Their children must also be taught in their respective mother tongues. They too would need appropriate books and teachers. If there is so much of variety of dialects, even in these comparatively urban languages, then in which dialect should the books for primary classes be printed? No one population which speaks only one dialect is really large enough to make it fit for printing books with economy of scales. Any ethnic group which finds its dialect not being used for publishing the books will agitate and another socio-political issue will come into being. Rather than facilitating the people, the government will be saddled with yet another social issue of human-rights violation.

The second most significant issue is the prevalence and homogeneity of ethnic groups in Balochistan. With the exception of remote areas where perhaps only one homogeneous ethnic group might be living, the ease of mobility, vocational/business compulsions and facilities have in themselves created unprecedented mobility in the province. This has created a mix of various ethnic groups, not only in towns but even in rural areas of bigger villages. It is not uncommon to see people of several ethnic backgrounds living and working in bigger villages. Educating in the 'mother tongue' will thus become a nightmare in such localities which are rather too many. Educators would need books in several languages and ability to speak in several mother tongues, often

within one class. The small child, rather than being facilitated, will indeed, be overloaded by listening to several languages and dialects. It will be counterproductive.

Then there is the issue of teachers. Teachers should normally be transferred from a place of duty after 2-3 years. Every teacher is not expected to speak all the major languages of Balochistan. This will restrict their mobility and thus hamper administrative practices. Perhaps female teachers would be best for initial 2-3 classes and they don't have to be transferred to other villages and towns. They could be circulated within schools if there are more than one in one place.

Some also opined that with TV and smart phones now so easily available, Urdu, indeed, even English are no more as alien as they were 20 years ago. A child starts watching TV mostly in Urdu and in families where smart phones are available, a child rather using it purposefully, plays with it thus acquiring some knowledge of Urdu and English. This knowledge understandably is very elementary but at least makes these languages non-alien when the child lands up in Grade 1. More trained teachers are required to deal with the practical issues at schools. Curricula need to be designed for higher grades to get the benefits of the out-come of language policy implementation.

Conclusion

The research clearly proved that mother tongue is indeed, more effective in teaching very young children, who are beginning the school. It has remarkable advantages. However, it is suited for homogenous societies where only one language is spoken. The child graduates from the lap of the mother to the class but he continues hearing the same language. His early and even later education continues in the 'mother tongue'. Nevertheless, this is just not do-able in multilingual societies where there are several languages, dialect and a mix of various ethnic groups such as Balochistan. In such environment, teaching in mother tongue becomes an impossible venture. Indeed, any attempt to teach in mother tongue will become non productive as the children having different mother tongue or dialect will be more confuse.

It will be rather more useful to train teachers, preferably females, who are proficient in several regional languages and dialects and let them educate the young students through the medium of Urdu as hitherto fore while also using the mother tongue of the child as best as can be, for developing comprehension and letting the new language slowly be understood.

Yet another tool can be to reduce the present several subjects up to grade 3 and merely focus on language, reading, writing and enhancing vocabulary. If the communication skills can be honed better, learning of other subjects will be facilitated and faster.

Suggestions

- While the concept of teaching in mother tongue is sound and should be retained as a concept, yet its application needs to be suitably modified as suggested by the ground realities.
 - Rather than the books in mother tongues, primary school teachers should be taught various mother tongues who should help children slowly understand
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Urdu and assimilate the words and vocabulary comparing them in their mother tongue.

- Teachers should be encouraged to learn several regional languages and suitable honorarium be allowed to motivate them for acquiring skills of various languages.
 - Education schools besides teaching the methods of instructions should run courses of regional languages for those not having those languages as mother tongues and the monetary benefit be allowed as part of salary.
 - Preference should be given to female teachers for teaching up to grade 3.
 - Where possible use of TV and video phones should be encouraged for teaching language.
 - The current research did not address issues on attitudes towards mother tongue as a medium of instruction among parents and communities. Hence, the future research on parental and community attitudes is desirable.
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