**Pakistan ruined by language myth**

Effective teaching of English is the preserve of an elite, leaving the rest of the country to linguistic confusion and educational failure

**Opinion**

Last year I wrote a book highlighting the crisis in [Pakistan](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/pakistan)'s education system caused by the way languages are used and taught. Its publication prompted one critic to remark that I was trying to "backwardise" the children of Pakistan. Another said that language was not the problem; it was what we taught that needed to be addressed.

These were typical responses from highly educated, fluent English speakers. They have glorified the English language in Pakistan to the extent that all logic has been put aside. But they wield great influence over public opinion and have even persuaded policymakers that the country's education system can be fixed by hiring teachers competent in English. Such teachers are hired by exclusive private schools, which are beyond the reach of the majority. So proficiency in English automatically becomes the preserve of the affluent.

Since I have been more concerned about the majority's problems, I have pleaded the case of the underprivileged by stating that children must initially begin their schooling in their own tongue, with which they are familiar. This will help their cognitive development and inculcate critical thinking. It will also enable them to be articulate participants in the construction of knowledge in the classroom and discourage the culture of rote learning. English should be introduced at a later stage and taught as a second language.

With the exception of a small minority of children who are bilingual even before they begin school, teaching children in a language other than their mother tongue in the early years does them harm, no matter how good their teachers may be. This approach robs the child of the natural advantage she has in her home language.

A child begins "acquiring" language from her environment soon after she is born. Children have already gained three or four years of language experience in their mother tongue when they start school. If English is to be the school language, these children lose this advantage. The benefit goes to a small minority that is bilingual from the start by virtue of their parents being the products of exclusive English-medium education.

Such is the power of myths about language in Pakistan that a public demand has been created for English. People believe that English is the magic wand that can open the door to prosperity. Policymakers, the wielders of economic power and the social elites have also perpetuated this myth to their own advantage. The door of prosperity has been opened but only for a small elite.

In a multilingual country such as Pakistan where at least eight major languages compete for supremacy, English occupies a special position by virtue of its "neutrality". But the status of English as the language of international communication exerts additional pressure. This importance is reinforced by Pakistan's employment market, which discriminates in favour of the fluent English speaker even though not every job requires an English language expert.

This language paradox has undermined our education standards. With no well-defined language as a medium of instruction policy, we have a fractured system that divides society.

There is an excellent English-based system in the private sector that is expensive and caters for a small wealthy elite. Children from the middle and lower-middle classes go to second-tier private schools charging relatively modest fees. They adopt a strange mix of languages while pretending to be English-medium. Why else would you see schools in the shantytowns of Karachi announce their Anglicised names and the fact that they are "English-medium" in Urdu script? The teachers explain in their mother tongue while teaching from English language textbooks from which the students plagiarise and memorise passages.

It is left to public-sector schools, patronised by the children of the poor, to adopt indigenous languages as the medium of instruction – rather apologetically. With the government rapidly disengaging itself from the education sector, these institutions perform dismally.

As a result, the country is in a state of linguistic confusion. On the one hand people are desperate to be seen as being proficient in English when they are actually not. At the same time they are ashamed of their own language though that is the only language they can communicate in. The ambiguity of the language of instruction policy allows schools to make their own choices, which has contributed to the present crisis in education in Pakistan. The demand for English – a trend set by the privileged elite – has put schools under pressure. Not many teachers who can teach English or teach in English are available.

That is why it would be feasible to get all schools to teach initially in the child's mother tongue while concentrating on improving standards. This would require the production of good textbooks and the training of teachers. Both of these can be done effectively in our own languages. The main challenge would be to decide judiciously which language is to be used as the medium in which region and at what stage other languages, including English, should be introduced.

Training English-as-a-second-language teachers should pose no difficulty. Such teachers can impart basic communication skills in English to their students who would be learning other subjects in their own language. Those going on to higher studies or needing greater competency in English could take up language courses that should be made widely available.

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Mustafa, Zubeida. "Pakistan Ruined by Language Myth." *Guardian.co.uk* 10 Jan. 2012: n. pag. Print.