
ENGLISH AS AN OBSTACLE TO GAINING KNOWLEDGE:
A CASE OF SINDH PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

English is globally accepted language which enjoys higher status at regional, national and international level in most of the countries in the world today. People equate English with power and status. Using English is taken as a symbol of prestige even though one lacks in the knowledge of relevant field. In Sindh, most of the subjects including science, mathematics, social and Pakistan studies, religion and civics, and others excepting Sindhi and Urdu are taught in English language. The instructional medium of these subjects as English becomes problematic for the learners at primary, secondary and higher secondary level. This study investigates the problems faced by students at higher secondary level to understand the subjects taught in English language. The study used qualitative approach to address the issue by conducting interviews from students in government sector who learn science, mathematics, and other subjects in English. The study found that students at higher secondary level are less proficient in English language which creates trouble for them to understand the knowledge of the subjects. They are not communicative in English. They face problems in reading, understanding and writing these subjects creatively. The study recommends that these subjects should be taught in students' mother tongue as the ultimate goal of education is to understand the knowledge of the social and natural world. Students learn best when they are taught in their mother tongue. Besides, English should be taught as a language instead of teaching it as a subject.

Keywords: English Language, Knowledge, Obstacle, Sindh, Mother Tongue

INTRODUCTION

English language plays a key role in Pakistan. It is language of education, media, government and judiciary. Most of the correspondence in these institutions is done in English language. In education, especially the curriculum prescribed for schools, colleges and universities is mostly found in English language. It is because of the status that English owes to its historical significance in the world. However, more focus on English in education in Pakistan has seen many problems regarding the understanding of subjects. The present study circles around the issue that English language acts as an obstacle to gaining knowledge. Most of the

science subjects including physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics and other humanities subjects like Pakistan Studies, history, economics etc. are also found in English. This creates a problem for the students in Sindh Pakistan at both school and college level due to incompetence in English language. In Sindh, Pakistan most of the time students are found engaged in learning English. When coming across the complexity of language in science subjects, they fail to understand the concepts thus resulting in rote learning of these subjects to pass the exams. English language, though internationally recognized, poses challenges to the Education system in country like Pakistan. For understanding of concepts in science subjects, culturally appropriate education is more needed. The children obviously understand their first language best and are most comfortable speaking it. Education in school can become a burden for children when they have to learn a new language of instruction. In Pakistan, education is a burden for most students and they seem demotivated to learn knowledge. English as a foreign language is held responsible for making education a burden for most children in Pakistan.

A Profile of English Language: English is considered to be a global/international language. The present day world status of English says Crystal (2003), is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonialism which continued toward the end of nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the 20th century. English Language Teaching (ELT) since the colonial period has been assumed to be a value-free activity and access to material progress and prosperity in the globalized world. Its hegemonic and imperialist nature as such has been neglected in the classroom situations in periphery communities. Philipson (1992:8) considers English to be an international activity with political, economic, military and cultural implications. ELT is a trillion dollar business today noted by Philipson.

English language has been said to have played a neutral role for international communication. Besides, it is assumed to be neutral in the case of ethnic-linguistic conflicts. This view as 'lingua franca' positions English in its neutral and innocent field disconnected with politics, culture and economics. Philipson (2008) mentions English to have various special purposes internationally. According to Philipson, English is a lingua economic (in business and advertising, the language of corporate neoliberalism), a lingua emotiva (in Hollywood, popular music, consumerism and hedonism), a lingua academica (in research publications, at international conferences, and as medium of content

learning in higher education), a lingua cultura (rooted in literary texts of English speaking nations and carrier of their culture), a lingua bellica (a language of wars between states), and above all a lingua Americana (due to massive economic, cultural and military impact of the USA).

The field of ELT, thus, has not to be seen in the perspective of lingua franca, but English as the carrier of special purposes in societal domains. In Pakistan, English plays more cultural and economic role than just being lingua franca.

English Language Teaching in Pakistan: English occupies a central position in public and private sector in Pakistan and most schools, colleges and universities teach English as a subject. Rehman (2002) views that teaching of English in Pakistan can be best understood in terms of institutions which use English as a dominant language in classroom instructions or teach it as a subject. Those institutions include (a) English Medium Schools, (b) Vernacular-medium Schools, (c) Madrassas, (d) English Language Teaching Institutions, and (e) Institutions of Higher Education.

In each of these institutes, English plays a different role. A major dichotomy is seen in state-run (vernacular-medium schools) and English medium schools. In the former, most of the instruction is done in learner's mother tongue. The textbooks of science and other subjects like Pakistan Studies, Social Studies and Computer are available in both English and learners' mother tongue. However, more preference is given to those in English. In rural areas of Sindh, some schools still teach these subjects in Sindhi language, whereas in urban areas, these subjects are taught in English language. The scenario is quite different in private schools where from very beginning all subjects excepting Urdu and Sindhi language, are taught in English language. These textbooks are published by private agencies.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant as it addresses a very serious issue in Sindh, the province of Pakistan. The falling standards of education in Sindh can be attributed to the factor being explored in this study. English language having an international recognition hinders children's cognitive abilities in government schools in Sindh. The children are not able to grasp the concepts embedded in science a subject which in turn leads to the rote learning as to pass the exam. When children are taught in their mother tongue, they can improve in understanding science and other subjects. The study contributes to culturally appropriate education in the country where the prime purpose of education should be to understand the

concepts rather than rote learning. Besides, English language should be learnt as a language alone instead of making it a medium of instruction and materials.

OBJECTIVES

The study aims to investigate the problems faced by the students while learning science subjects, mathematics and others in English language. The following objectives were set:

- To identify the problems the students face while learning science and engineering subjects in English language at Higher Secondary Level in Sindh, Pakistan.
- To investigate if textbooks of science and engineering subjects in English language make sense to the students at Higher Secondary level in Sindh, Pakistan.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: What problems the learners at Higher Secondary Level face while learning science and engineering subjects in English language?

RQ2: Whether or not the textbooks of science and engineering in English language make sense to the students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English language is increasingly becoming the medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities. Deaden (2014) in British council project conducted a study which enforce the view that English language as a medium of instruction is growing as a global phenomenon. English is being used to teach academic subjects in most of the countries today. This reality of English language as a medium of instruction has also been questioned. Several studies have been done which reveal that learning knowledge in English or any language other than children's mother tongue creates hurdles in the way of conceptual understanding. According to UNESCO Report authored by Buhmann and Trudell (2008) children find it much more difficult to grasp basic concepts and acquire literacy when they are taught in a language they do not use at home or at least hear around them in a community.

Mackenzie and Walker (2006) in a global complaint for education note that in developing countries, about 221 million children enter the classroom unable to understand the language they are taught in. Most countries teach their children in a dominant, international or national language which the children are not much familiar with. This creates a problem for them to grasp the concepts in science and other subjects

taught in a language alien to children. This situation leaves the children in a position where they are not able to understand what they are taught. Pinnok (2009) noted that children do not learn if they cannot understand their teachers and the textbooks which use a language foreign to the learners. The report further mentions that in most countries, children are taught in a language which is not theirs. School language and a child's home language always come in conflict. However, school language becomes a strong factor affecting overall educational performance of the children. In most schools, when children go to schools, they find teachers talking to them in a language which is unintelligible for them, they just copy the teachers and memorize numbers and other things taught. In most cases, students fail to memorize and they keep repeating their classes.

Tshotsho (2013) conducted a study in African context suggests that most cognitive demanding skills be taught in children's mother tongue for a longer period of time so that student could benefit from their mother tongue. Though several efforts have been made in Africa to replace English with indigenous languages, they still face a problem as not much content is available in their indigenous languages. Such studies have also been conducted in Pakistan. Ahmed (2011) conducted a study on medium of instruction in Pakistan and mentions that Pakistan is a multilingual country and most of the knowledge is transferred and transmitted in English language. English is the center of all academic activities including curriculum. The present study is such an outcome which leads to discovering different responses regarding English as hurdle to learning in Pakistani context.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study uses qualitative approach to address the issue. Qualitative research involves the collection of extensive narrative data in order to gain insights into the phenomenon of interest. The data analysis includes the coding of data and production of narratives or descriptions. Ian Dey (1993) proposes that qualitative research has become a fashionable term which can be used for any method other than survey. It includes participant (and non-participant) observation, unstructured interviewing, group interviewing, the collection of documentary materials and the like. Chauhan (2012) maintains that qualitative research attempts to understand the meanings that people give to their deeds and social phenomenon. The present study is qualitative as it follows all notions of qualitative research and its main characteristics.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

The present study uses semi-structured interviews to collect the data from ten students taught at government colleges in Sindh Pakistan. The name(s) of institute and participants has been kept confidential for ethical reasons. Interviews according to Creswell (2008) provide detailed information to the researchers; the participants give their direct insights about certain phenomenon. There are various ways to conduct interview. These include face to face or one-on-one telephone interview, focus group interview, e-mail internet interviews. The present study uses face-to-face semi-structured interviews as the source to collect data from the students who had individually been contacted and given guarantee about their confidentiality. These semi-structured interviews use a series of open-ended questions based on the topic that the research wants to cover. This kind of interview requires a preplanning of questions. The researcher forms some questions based on the topic to be investigated and further responses are elicited during the interview.

SAMPLING

The present study used *purposive sampling* to recruit the participants conducting research. The purposive sampling helps the researchers to choose the participants based on his/her own knowledge and judgment which serve the purpose. Total ten participants ($n=10$) were selected from one of the government colleges, Hyderabad. Participants were equally chosen by taking five of them from First year class and five from Intermediate class. Besides, gender ratio was also balanced. The participants aged between 15-18 and belonged to rural and urban Sindh currently based in Hyderabad and Jamshoro.

DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

The study used qualitative interviews which were conducted through one-on-one sitting. The interviews were recorded. We heard them several times and transcribed them. The study used content analysis to interpret the data as it helps the researchers to divide the descriptive data into themes and categories (Creswell, 2008).

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The data was collected from ten college ($n=10$) students in Hyderabad Sindh Pakistan. For interview, the present researchers made some dominant questions which the students were informed before the interview could actually begin. The other questions were made from these dominant questions as a further investigation into the study. The result is

presented with respect to categories constructed out of questions used in interview.

TABLE-1
THEMES, SUBTHEMES AND SAMPLE RESPONSES
AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

Theme	Sample Response
Theme 1: English as an obstacle to understanding science and engineering subjects	
Conceptual understanding	'I cannot understand all things in chemistry, physics and biology, because, difficult language is used there.'
Non-native language	Since English isn't my native language, it is particularly difficult to understand some concepts specially the ones that are related to physical sciences such as Physics, Chemistry, biology, etc.
Poor language skills	'We have not developed such base of English or language skills at our middle class level'.
Theme 2: Language Problems	
Semantic issues	'Of course, words and their meanings are problems.'
Syntactical issues	'Mostly complex Structures create a problem.'
Morphological issues	'New terminology of science and the language structure create a problem for me.'
Theme 3: Learning Knowledge in mother tongue	
Child's mother tongue	'I feel very easy when I learn in Sindhi or Urdu even.'

ENGLISH AS AN OBSTACLE TO UNDERSTANDING OF KNOWLEDGE

English language is considered as a hurdle to understanding of the concepts in science and engineering subjects. Most participants ($n=9$, 90%) agreed to the point that English language is a problem for them while understanding knowledge embedded in textbooks of physics, chemistry, biology or mathematics. Most students ($n=9$) showed concern that English is a foreign language for them and they are not competent in

it. Being non native language, it poses many challenges for them when it comes to conceptual understanding of subjects. Only one participant ($n=1$) who was a female student showed different response in this case. The participant believed that English is not an issue. It depends on the level of competence the learner has. If a learner is proficient in English, s/he can grasp the concepts easily without any confusion.

LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

The participants ($n=10$) faced language problems at different levels: morphological, syntactical and semantic level. The participants believed that they fail to understand knowledge in textbooks due to complexity of sentences structures, availability of complex terminology and meanings. Sentences are used with words which they are not familiar and due to their poor linguistic input, they cannot understand the meaning of the sentences. Thus, this creates more problems for them and finally they go for rote-learning in order to pass the examination.

LEARNING KNOWLEDGE IN MOTHER TONGUE

Most participants ($n=9$, 90%) supported their mother tongue to learn knowledge. They believed that they are familiar with their mother tongue so they can easily understand science subjects in their mother tongue. Sindhi language or Urdu in case of Sindh Pakistan serves the purpose to facilitate learning. However, this varies from student to students according to learning abilities and linguistic competence.

CONCLUSION

English language plays a vital role in the world market. Most of the everyday activities including education, job, and others are carried out in English language. Besides, English language is also considered a symbol of prestige and honor. However, in case of education English has proven to be a hurdle for L2 learners in most developing countries. In Sindh Pakistan, most subjects including physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, computer, basic science, and social studies are taught in English language. The students have diverse educational backgrounds. The students who have studied English language from earlier classes have no difficulty in understanding these subjects in English language. On the contrary, most students in government colleges have poor skills in English language which hinder their understanding of the concepts. The study shows that most college students have poor abilities in English. They feel difficulty in understanding science subjects because of complexity of structures, vocabulary and pronunciation. They feel easy to learn knowledge when they are taught in their mother tongue.

RECOMMENDATIONS & SUGGESTIONS

The present study is very significant for the policy makers, course designers, educationists and ministry of Education in Sindh. Language plays a very key role in understanding any subject. If a child is taught in a language other than his own makes him sick of it. He begins to be demotivated because of linguistic factors. Sindh is facing this grave issue today. The educational and linguistic burden upon students demotivates them to learn and contribute in the field of education, science and technology. The world is growing faster. To maintain the pace with it, we need a policy which ensures our participation in the global market. This can be achieved when our students have the knowledge in science, arts and humanities. This knowledge is possible if and only if students are taught in their mother tongue. Understanding knowledge in English can be possible only and if we improve pedagogical practices prevalent in schools and colleges in Pakistan.

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