

Languages In Education: Improving Schooling Outcomes For Poverty Reduction In Pakistan

Tayyaba Tamim, University of Cambridge

Abstract

Language is central to social activity, participation and the enhancement of individual and social agency. Conversely, it has also been linked to issues of exclusion and marginalization (Robinson, 1996). In education, language can be a subtle but powerful tool of discrimination, if access to languages that hold symbolic value is limited to only privileged classes or if the language of the dominated class is devalued (Bourdieu, 1991). However, the issue of languages in education is seldom discussed in relation to the millennium development goals. This policy brief is based on the findings of a 3-year RECOUP funded research project. The study compared the many ways in which language policy in education, and how languages are taught and learned in Pakistan's schools, had affected people's participation and empowerment. It suggests a need to enrich teacher training programmes, so as to provide greater sensitization towards class and linguistic diversity for more inclusive and positive teaching/ learning experiences.

Context

The international goals of educational achievement set by Education for All (EFA) in terms of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) miss out on the local and contextual features of education which might affect the educational outcomes for those involved. Research has indicated that there is no 'automatic trajectory of progress' in educational settings (Walker, 2006:16) that ensures equal opportunities for the achievement of either the educational or instrumental goals of Education to All. Education access and entitlement, if not equitable, can lead to a deepening of social stratification and divisiveness.

Language not only mediates education but is a part of education itself. However, situated within social, cultural and historical contexts, it is 'intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structures in

society' (Gee, 1989: 20) and can act as a subtle but potent means of exclusion of gender and ethnic groups from socioeconomic development processes (Robinson, 1996). This may also explain why the poorest populations are also linguistically most marginalized (Ibid.). The dominance of privileged groups is often reinforced by language policy and mediated through educational institutions (Bourdieu, 1991). Language policy within education configures power structures within institutions in relation to wider power structures and can reinforce the marginalization of dominated groups, rather than offer equal opportunity to them, by devaluing their languages (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). This marginalization may also be affected by privileged groups restricting their acquisition of dominant languages (Bourdieu, 1991). The choice of languages in education and teaching/ learning of languages, though driven by political, social, economic and pragmatic concerns, have strong implications for issues of poverty and inequality. Since language filters control access to resources and demarcates the horizons of what is knowable and achievable, it inevitably affects freedom of choice and participation.

Unless languages distributed by schooling are acceptable in the dominant structures, educational outcomes in terms of participation and empowerment are bound to be limited. On the one hand, this makes equitable distribution of dominant languages crucially important. On the other hand, if local languages are excluded from education and devalued by dominant structures, people are unable to draw 'on traditional philosophies, local resources and skills to confront and ameliorate problems', adversely affecting sustainability of socioeconomic development initiatives (Melkote, 1991: 204). Literacy embedded in local cultures is embodied in their languages which are pivotal in the interpretation of and construction of new knowledge (Ferdman, 1991) and the adoption of more efficient practices. If development is to be seen as a step towards 'self actualization', what is needed is to ensure a 'two-way communication' and participation rather than a 'top-down intervention' (Dubbeldam, 1984 in Robinson, 1996: 45). However, despite its significance the question of languages in education is hardly raised in EFA reports or evaluations. The issue of language becomes highly important in multilingual countries like Pakistan where a dual schooling system exists, capitalizing on different languages.

Pakistan has no less than 25 languages (Mansoor, 2005), a national language, Urdu and an official language English. Official language policy demonstrates a strong commitment to promote Urdu in favour of regional languages but is ambiguous regarding the relative status of Urdu and English. Despite Urdu being declared a national language, it is the use of English that is pervasive in government bureaucracy, the higher judiciary, higher education and almost all official business. Nearly all private schools in urban areas that charge fees use English as a medium of subject study and offer Urdu as a subject. The quality of English language teaching/ learning in these schools often coincides with their fee structure. The free government schools which offer the only educational opportunity for the poor teach in Urdu or, in some cases, regional languages (however, none of the latter were part of the sample for the current study) whilst English is taught as a subject. The poor teaching/learning of English and other languages and subjects in the majority of government schools is well documented.

The question that this policy brief addresses is how does this configuration of languages and the poor teaching/ learning of languages in government schools affect educational outcomes for the children from disadvantaged backgrounds in such schools, in terms of their widening participation and empowerment?

The language and poverty study

This policy brief is based on the key findings of a 3- year qualitative study in two provinces in Pakistan, Punjab and Sindh. In this multiple case study, 32 participants from government and private schools in Pakistan were selected, comprising final year secondary school students and their graduated same sex elder (by 5 years or more) siblings. The aim was to study time-related processes involved in both choices of schooling, language-related schooling experiences and their impacts in terms of participation and freedom of choice specifically for participants who were from disadvantaged backgrounds in government schools and compare these with participants from more privileged backgrounds in private schools

Teaching and Learning Dominant Languages

The findings reveal that the most economically disadvantaged participants in the study were also the most disadvantaged in terms of the teaching and learning of dominant languages in schools. On the one hand, they hardly had any Urdu language skills at the end of 10

years of secondary school which severely curtailed the main benefit of education for them; literacy itself. On the other hand, their inability to use English, in contrast to the wide use of English in social, political, economic and health fields in Pakistan, restricted their participation in socio-economic development processes such as the use of internet, in higher education and in availing themselves of career opportunities etc. In addition it exacerbated their vulnerability, excluded them from important social networks, and increased their chances of being economically exploited. Poor skills in the dominant languages relegated the working class participants to manual labour or low paid jobs, invested them with a sense of their own uneducability and forced them to accept their low positioning in the social structure. Lack of English, in particular, threatened their educated identities and undermined the advantage of their education.

The greatest set back of low quality and largely unsuccessful English teaching and learning was faced by working class women since they were mostly restricted to teaching jobs where English language skills were important. This forced them to accept salaries even lower than that of an average uneducated domestic servant – consequently they could not increase their decision-making powers or status within their households. Their education therefore failed to provide them with the financial stability and independence they strongly valued and needed.

Teaching and Learning Local Languages

Knowing local languages was very important in engaging the agency of the people, and for tapping and unleashing their potential. Local languages were also dispensable for uncovering culturally embedded literacies and bridging social networks.

In terms of learning local languages, participants reported interacting with local uneducated but skilled people and accruing economic and social benefits, not only for themselves but also for those they interacted with. Where the participants did not learn local languages - the case of a majority of participants from private schools - the social stratification only increased. Private school participants reported not being able to understand issues confronting the poor because of the inability to interact with them - a serious issue when seen in the context of health professionals and also relevant to other service providers.

Local cultures and languages, when dismissed in educational settings and treated pathologically as if corrected and configured in accordance with dominant Western culture and language, led to disempowerment,

low self esteem, limited participation and affected the transformative outcome of education. Nevertheless, the study found low motivation for teaching (and learning) local languages in schools - the status given to local languages was low within educational settings and outside. Even when studying mandatory regional languages like Sindh, students were discouraged from using it, especially in all private schools, where even use of Urdu was discouraged as a matter of policy. Consequently, only one participant whose father was Sindhi reported learning the language.

Social Class Sensitization and Linguistic Diversity

Teaching styles in government schools seemed to be based on certain social class based ideas regarding the uneducability of the learners with disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, intolerance towards linguistic and cultural diversity in schools emerged to adversely affect not only participants' language learning but also dispelling the benefit of education in home languages within government schools. Participants from the poorest backgrounds were grouped in low ability classes of up to 70-80 pupils. In these schools, little space was given to the working class students to participate in discussions and class-based notions seemed to permeate teacher-student relationships. The severe corporal punishments apportioned for asking questions which were equated to a lack of knowledge by the teachers were an example of such class-based bias. As the working class participants were not allowed to engage with knowledge structures and relate these to their life, school and home remained two bounded fields where the knowledge of one had no relevance for the other. Hence they were not able to relate the clearly defined symptoms of common diseases in their science text book to the sickness they witnessed in their family.

Language Support for the Transitions

Measures need to be taken to prepare disadvantaged learners, particularly those using home languages in schooling to participate in higher education and society. Participants in the study identified language as a major factor that affected not only their participation in higher education but also in wider social life. Participants reported that the switch to the use of English in higher education, and therefore change in scientific and technical terminology inhibited them from building upon what they had learnt at school. In addition they could hardly understand English textbooks and lectures which remained largely incomprehensible. This resulted in either switching to subjects offered in Urdu, or low grades and

eventually dropping out of college.

Capability Approach Evaluations in Education

Qualitative in-depth studies using a capability approach framework for the evaluation of educational outcomes, along with other estimations provide valuable insights into the language-based disadvantages of the poor. The findings suggest that aggregated educational assessments of school attendance or enrolment etc., although important in their own right, fail to capture the complex inequities concealed in educational contexts. For example completion of secondary school education did not guarantee literacy for the poorest in a majority of cases. Similarly completing secondary school education for private and government school participants did not mean that equal opportunities had been provided for them to achieve what they valued in life. The assumption that educational outcomes for all including the poorest were equally empowering was incorrect.

The study revealed the failure of a commodity approach. For example, even in the rare cases where government schools had certain facilities such as a computer lab or library participants reported that these were hardly used and in some cases students were not even allowed to enter them. Some participants reported free distribution of expensive dictionaries by the government but none of the participants reported their use either with teachers in class or at home. The cost incurred only went to waste since the participants were not provided with the skill or advice for efficient use of the resources provided. Similarly although all children are offered the same curriculum and equal access to higher education, it is actually only limited to the privileged few by gate keeping through language. Hence knowledge building and transformative education is subtly denied to those who most need it. It was only when questions are raised in terms of what capabilities are being distributed, and to whom, that the important issues of inequality and injustice begin to emerge (Walker, 2006)

Policy Issues

The results from this study are relevant to other multilingual postcolonial countries with dual education systems. This policy brief argues for specific attention to be paid to the teaching and learning of dominant languages in educational initiatives if the aim is to empower the poor, so they can participate effectively in mainstream discourses. Improvement in language teaching and learning in government schools could be achieved through the following considerations:

1. Teacher training:

i) Specific emphasis on the language proficiency of the teachers during pre- and in-service teacher training

ii) Revision of language teaching curriculum, methods and examination along more functional and communicative lines that encourage use of languages being taught in class.

iii) Language teaching and learning support outside the school setting. For example opportunities for teaching English could be offered through television, radio, mobile or online courses or interactive cheaply available CDs.

iv) Class and linguistic sensitization needs to be a part of pre-and in-service teacher training programmes for an inclusive richer educational experience for the poor. The home cultures of the learners should not be seen as places to be corrected but as repositories of cultural knowledge where often crucial strategies to survive within limited means and local context are embedded and could be built upon.

2. Local languages:

i) A smooth transition from use of local languages in subject study to dominant languages needs to be ensured within schools and in higher education to prepare the learners for fuller participation in education as well as wider social life.

ii) There needs to be a gradual transition from a local language as a medium of subject study to the use of English within schools and higher education

iii) Higher education institutions should provide specific language support classes for those who enter from mainly Urdu medium education.

iv) Teacher training needs to sensitize teachers for this transition from local to dominant languages as an important part of their education.

v) Teaching/learning of local languages in educational settings needs to be encouraged and synchronized with enhancement of their status in the wider language policy. Foreseeable economic and social benefits could be attached to their use.

3. Evaluations derived from the 'capability approach' and in-depth case-studies are needed to address issues of social equity and justice in education, to understand the values and needs of the poor, and to shape educational outcomes in ways that reduce poverty and increase participation.

Conclusions

If poverty reduction is seen in terms of increasing participation, choice and control, the mediating role of language cannot be ignored in the process. The policy brief puts the case for the concurrent teaching of both dominant and local languages in education and a more inclusive wider language policy that lifts the status of local languages to empower the poor.

In addition it draws attention to the need to address the poor teaching and learning of languages in schools (specifically government schools) that prevent participants from engaging with empowering social networks and opportunities, leading to their marginalization despite their education. Lastly this policy brief stresses the need to include in-depth qualitative studies based on a 'capability-approach' framework in educational evaluations so as to reveal issues of inequality and social justice that are embedded in structures of poverty and deprivation, and which constrict the transformative impact of education for the poor.

Acknowledgements:

I am very grateful for the funding provided by RECOUP to undertake this research in Pakistan. I would like to thank Professor Madeleine Arnot for her encouragement, rigorous discussions, and insightful comments on this policy brief and Professor Christopher Colclough, Dr Michael Evans and Dr Edith Esch for their constant support during my research. Views expressed here are those of the authors and are not necessarily shared by DFID or any partner institution.

References

- Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J.C. (1977 a [1970]), *Reproduction in education, society and culture*, R. Nice (trans.) (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Bourdieu, P. (1991) *Language and symbolic power* (Cambridge, MJ: Harvard University Press).
- Dubbeldam, L. (1984) We are we, and they are different: cultural identity, in K. Epskamps (Eds) *Education and development of cultural identity: groping in the dark* (The Netherlands, CESO), 12-19.
- Ferdman, B. M. (1991), Literacy and cultural identity in M. Minami and B.P. Kennedy (Eds) *Language issues in literacy and bilingual/ multicultural education* (Cambridge, MA Harvard Educational Review), 347-390.
- Gee, J. (1989) What is literacy?, *Journal of Education*, 171, 18-25.
- Mansoor, S. (2005) *Language planning in higher education: a case study of Pakistan* (Karachi, Oxford University Press).
- Melkote, S. R. (1991) *Communication for development in the third world: theory and practice* (London, Sage).
- Robinson, C. D.W. (1996) *Language use in rural development: an African perspective* (New York, Mouton de Gruyter).
- Walker, M. (2006), Widening participation in higher education: lifelong learning as capability in David, A. (Ed.), *Philosophical perspectives on lifelong learning*, Springer, (Unpublished paper).