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ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A TOP-DOWN REGIONAL-LANGUAGE POLICY IN PAKISTAN: "I WILL NOT BE READY TO HANDLE IT"

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Abstract

This study explores the attitudes of significant stakeholders (parents, teachers, students) towards the implementation of a language-in-education policy in English-medium schools in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in Pakistan. While the state's official policy supports the regional languages at school level, the de facto policy privileges English and to some extent Urdu and neglects the regional languages, Pashto in the case of this study. Interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders reveal that there is some support for the introduction of Pashto in schools, but there is general scepticism about the feasibility and suitability of this initiative. Many of the stakeholders doubt the government's intentions and believe that the new policy is politically motivated. Implications for regions beyond Pakistan are discussed.

Keywords: Language-in-education policy, attitudes, Pashto, English-medium, Pakistan

Introduction

The study of language attitudes is important in multilingual contexts where some languages are dominant and others marginalized. While positive attitudes play an important role in the maintenance and revitalization of a marginalized language, negative attitudes make it extremely difficult to affect change with regard to the status of that language (Bell, 2013). In schools, Baker (2006) adds that the promotion of minority languages is significantly affected by the attitudes of children, teachers, administrators, and policy-makers. In 2011, the government of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in Pakistan passed a law that made the teaching of the students' regional language compulsory in schools from Class 1 to 12 (students aged approximately 6 to 17). In this context, the regional or indigenous (Rahman, n.d.) language is Pashto, and thus the language of participants in this research community (who referred to Pashto as their 'mother tongue'). The decision received conflicting responses from different stakeholders,

including parents, teachers and students. This article reports on a study of their attitudes towards the implementation of this official (top-down) language-in-education policy, specifically in elite English-medium schools. These educational-cum-commercial institutions are important actors in language-in-education planning in Pakistan due to their significant role in acquisition and status planning (Cooper, 1989), particularly with regard to English. Errihani (2008) says that for a language policy to succeed, there must be "harmonious concurrence between the top-down and grassroots levels of the community on the worth of the policy and the importance of working together" (p. 412).

The aim in this study is to explore what lies behind the language preferences of the stakeholders at the grassroots level. The article first provides some contextual background regarding language policy and planning in Pakistan, and then briefly outlines the methodology used in this study. The findings consider the positive attitudes towards implementation as well as the scepticism expressed by the stakeholders. The role in this process of English learning as a foreign language is also considered. The research question which guides this study is as follows: What are the attitudes of significant stakeholders (parents, teachers, students) towards the implementation of the regional-language policy in English-medium schools in KP? The findings of the study have implications for other regions in Pakistan, and also beyond, and a brief example is provided.

Language Policy and Planning

Early work on language policy and planning was based on the premise that language planning processes, which took place at the level of the nation-state, were geared towards a policy of monolingual hegemony based on a single national language and a rejection of any serious role for minority languages (Spolsky, 2009). The underlying assumption was that "linguistic diversity presented obstacles for national development, while linguistic homogeneity was associated with modernism" (Ricento, 2000, p. 198). As a former colony of the British Empire, Pakistan too pursued a policy of giving a dominant role to English in education and in the administration of state institutions, such as the armed forces and the judiciary. The status of Urdu has been enhanced by making it the national language. Pakistan's regional languages, however, have until relatively recently seen few serious and substantial measures taken for their preservation and promotion.

Language policy and planning in the 1980s saw the beginning of a paradigm shift under the influence of critical and postmodern theories. Questions were raised about social, linguistic and economic inequalities (Ricento, 2000), the standardization of students' linguistic behavior by educational systems (Harris, 1981), and language practices and attitudes of communities being ignored in

national language policy (Tollefson, 2002). Commenting on attitudes, Austin and Sallabank (2013) argue that "Negative attitudes towards minority … languages by both the speaker communities themselves and by speakers of the larger languages within which they are embedded are well documented and are both an outcome and a cause of shift to dominant languages" (p. 313). This has direct relevance to our study, which reveals the positions of the participants with regard to both regional and dominant languages.

Some scholars have termed the dominance of English in the post-colonial world "linguistic imperialism" and called for safeguarding "linguistic human rights" (Phillipson, 1997), and others have perceived language loss to be "a manifestation of asymmetrical power relations based on social structures and ideologies that position groups – and their languages – hierarchically within a society" (Ricento, 2006, p. 15). Indigenous languages were increasingly seen not only as a personal resource but also as a societal and national resource in the face of globalisation (Brecht & Ingold, 1998). Drawing inspiration from these ideological positions, this study set in the context of elite English-medium schools in the KP province of Pakistan views language policy and planning as the product of history and social context; that is, combining the past with current language policy and practices, both at the macro and micro-levels.

Language Policy and Planning in Pakistan

When Pakistan came into being in 1947, the continuation of the British system in many spheres of the state was unavoidable. However, education policy, especially with respect to language, has been a matter of controversy, division, and class-based discrimination. According to Rahman (2002), the British left behind a legacy of three streams of education roughly divided along socio-economic lines: the Madrassas (religious schools) catered for rural and very poor children; vernacular medium schooling for working and lower-middle class children; and English-medium schools for the middle and upper classes. This system, Rahman notes, continues until today.

In 1948, Urdu became the national language of Pakistan, with the intention that it serve as a bridge between peoples of different provinces (Khalique, 2008). This policy, however, was not without problems, both ethno-linguistic and social. According to the 2001 census, Urdu is the mother tongue of about 7.5% of the state's population (Government of Pakistan, 2001) comprising Muslims who migrated to Pakistan after the partition of India and settled mostly in the urban centres of Karachi and Hyderabad in Sind province. The presence of this large migrant community, known as Mohajirs, and the state's Urdu-centric language policy have always fuelled ethnic and linguistic tensions in Sind (Khalique, 2008).

While language policy and planning at the national level, and particularly in Sind and Bengal, was marred by controversies and tensions, people in KP remained largely content with the policy dominated by Urdu and/or English. Pashtun nationalists are regarded as the only custodians of Pashto as a marker of Pashtun identity in KP, and when they came into power in the province in 2008, they were able to take some significant measures to promote the regional languages of the province, which had been declining due to the dominance of Urdu and English. This was made possible by the 18th constitutional amendment (19 April 2010), which delegated education to provincial responsibility. The KP government made the teaching of major regional languages (i.e., Pashto, Hindko, Saraiki, Kohistani and Khowar) compulsory in schools. Later, in August 2011, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Regional Languages Authority was formed to streamline the promotion of these languages (Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2011). To implement the new policy, the KP government announced a phased plan according to which both government and private schools of the province would teach Pashto as a compulsory subject from Class 1 to 12, and thus, according to the timeline, by 2017-18 all educational institutions in the province would have the students' mother tongue as a compulsory subject up to Class 12.

The policy decision was purely top-down since it came from the provincial government; no evidence could be found to show that stakeholders at the grassroots level were consulted. Although the policy was apparently based on general popular support for the promotion of regional languages in the province, this study found that stakeholders associated with the elite schools are mostly ambivalent.

The Study

This investigation is significant because private English-medium schools are at the forefront of acquisition and prestige planning for English on one hand, and the marginalisation of the minority, regional languages on the other. These schools have excluded the latter languages (including Urdu to an extent) from the school domain and have encouraged instead the use of English (even outside the school domain), a strategy which to some is considered a selling point to attract students. Two schools were selected as research sites in Peshawar, the capital of KP province. Pashto is the main language of the community and the mother tongue of the participants in the study. These two schools were chosen using established personal contacts within the schools, and we therefore do not claim representation across similar schools in the region. The schools are similar in terms of their curriculum, the language teaching philosophy, the qualifications of teachers, and the socioeconomic background of the students (considered to be solidly middle class). The schools are affiliated with the University of Cambridge

Local Examinations Syndicate (O Level and A Level). Two similar schools (rather than one school, for example) were selected to provide a broader and more in-depth perspective on the same research problem, and the aim was not therefore to compare and contrast the schools.

The study design was ethnographic in nature, consisting of school and classroom observations, interviews with main stakeholders, focus group discussions with students, and the analysis of documentary and archival material. One of the authors, Ajmal Khan, who is himself a Pashto speaker, spent over three months in the region, visiting one of the schools 15 times and the other 12 times. Fifteen students were interviewed individually, some of whom also participated in focus group discussions (31 students in total). Nine English teachers and eight parents were also interviewed individually. Student participants were recruited based on their enrolment in one of the target classes (i.e., Class 9-12) in the two schools. Only those teachers who taught one of these classes were included in the study. A similar criterion was followed in recruiting the parent participants. Whilst the language of interviews with students and teachers was English, parents preferred to speak Pashto. Focus groups were conducted with two aims: first, it helped the students to participate in a natural and lively discussion, and second, they served to substantiate data from interviews. In this article, we report selected findings from the interviews and focus group discussions. All data was analysed qualitatively following the procedures of holistic content analysis which involves coding for themes, organising these into categories, looking for patterns, and making interpretations (Dörnyei, 2007). NVivo 9 was used to manage the data. Findings in this article are presented in the form of brief extracts of interview data and our commentary of those.

Findings and Discussion

Positive Attitudes Towards the Teaching of Pashto

The following comments indicate cautious optimism for the introduction of Pashto into the curriculum. One parent supports Pashto because he believes the language is experiencing language loss: “If the policy is implemented, it will be good for Pashto. At least it will slow down the decline process”. A teacher focuses particularly on literacy skills: “They [students] can speak it but they can’t write it as it is not taught in school. So, I think they will not show any resentment”. Similarly, another teacher observed that “there is nothing wrong with bringing Pashto as part of the national curriculum, like Urdu, at least in regional curriculum. It will make people come closer to the language”. Several voices among the students felt that there was nothing wrong with introducing Pashto as a subject. For instance, a focus group student supports the teaching of Pashto because she believes students need it: “Pashtun students don’t know how to write or read Pashto, so I think we should be taught here”. Further

substantiating her point, she referred to the example from Sind province and suggested their model should be followed in KP: "She [her friend in Sind] said that till 8th class they were taught Sindi, so why not Pashto here in this province".

Some students held quite positive attitudes, but they were not willing and ready to accept the language as a school subject immediately and preferred its gradual introduction in lower-level classes: "But if they start it for students in the early stage of their education then it will be good". At the time of the new policy announcement it was not clear when and how the policy was going to be implemented. This might have been the reason for the students' apprehension, since they seemed not to be prepared for the introduction of the subject, even though they supported the idea. Later when details of the policy implementation were revealed, it became clear that Pashto would be introduced into schools in a phased manner, starting from Class 1 in areas and schools where it was not already taught. The policy had thus already addressed the apprehensions of the students in the higher classes.

Scepticism about the Teaching of Pashto

The stakeholders' optimism, however, was outweighed by their rather blunt scepticism about the policy. Most opposition related to the extra burden that the policy would likely place on both parents and students. This view is embodied in the remark of one of the parents: "I will discourage totally. We have been spending money to make the teaching of quality English available to our kids. Now who on earth will be ready to learn Pashto". A student, who personally had a very positive attitude towards Pashto, was reluctant to accept its teaching in school: "I mean out of my own preference I would like to learn Pashto, but if it was something from the school like a subject, I will not be ready to handle it". As mentioned, the policy was somewhat vague when first announced; the initial understanding was that it was intended only for government schools and that private schools would be exempt. A teacher, for example, was quite happy with the policy if it applied only to government schools: "At government schools level, I don't think they would oppose the teaching of Pashto". This view was further reinforced by another teacher: "The private sector has its own set-up. It is not necessary for them because most of the students go for Cambridge".

These comments clearly reflect the divided nature of Pakistani society in terms of both the educational system (private and public) and linguistic priorities. Government and private schools are regarded as distinct worlds; different in ethos, status and goals. So strong are the forces of this social and educational polarisation in Pakistani society that neither the constitution of parliament nor successive education policies of the Ministry of Education can counter them. This implicit but powerful enactment of policy has placed all minority languages,

including Urdu to some extent, in a precarious position in the education system. Among those who were sceptical of the new policy, many believed that it was politically motivated. Several remarks by parents and teachers confirmed this attitude: "They are doing it for politics. It can lead to ethnic division and provincialism". Likewise, one teacher termed the new policy a "political decision" and doubted if parents would accept it. These comments allude to the political ideology of nationalists, who were in power in KP when this study was conducted. Provincial autonomy and promotion of Pashto and Pashtun identity are the core elements of their manifesto. Several participants looked at the decision through a political lens. The association of the promotion of Pashto in schools with provincialism and with something inimical to national unity in Pakistan emerged as a salient theme in this study.

The fact that Pashto is the mother tongue of students in this context makes the case for teaching it as a subject in schools weaker. Many students (and their parents) commented that they do not need to be taught Pashto because they already know it: "I am not that interested in Pashto as I can speak it". A student in another focus group observed similarly that "you do learn your mother tongue anyway", suggesting that there is no need to learn it in school. Opinions among the teachers and parents were similar. For instance, this teacher is content with her students' ability to speak their mother tongue: "We don't need [to teach] it. Spoken is enough, isn't it?" Preference for Urdu and English over mother tongue as subject was also reported by several parents as evidenced in this comment: "I will opt for Urdu for my children because Pashto is already used at home". One can easily discern a sense of complacency among the stakeholders as far as mother tongue teaching and learning is concerned, which is ironic since many of the students, as observed informally during the data collection period, had clear signs of language shift and even loss.

The belief that Pashto would be difficult to learn emerged as another salient theme, as the following student comment indicates: "Pashto is way too difficult, like never in my life I have read a single sentence of Pashto because it is difficult". This view was supported by a parent who believes that "Pashto is a very difficult language, especially in writing". The students generally feel comfortable speaking the language, but at the same time formally learning its grammar and orthography appears quite daunting, again as seen in the comment of a Class 10 student: "But Pashto grammar is really difficult, so I try to improve it by speaking it in my family". And another said: "It will be difficult for us because we know how to speak it but we don't know how to read and write it. Hardly anyone is going to be happy because we have all been trained for Urdu and English".

In addition to the perception of difficulty, students were also wary of having Pashto as a subject because they anticipated it would add to their school workload. A student in a focus group remarked that "they cannot take too much pressure". Another tried to find middle ground between his commitment to Pashto and his studies: "I think it should be introduced as a subject but orally, not in written form because it will put a lot of burden on us". Students regularly expressed positive attitudes regarding the value of Pashto, especially as a symbol of identity, but were less enthusiastic about its inclusion as a subject in the school curriculum: "I mean out of my own preference I would like to learn Pashto, but if it was a school subject, it would be difficult".

Support among parents and teachers for Pashto as subject, however, was minimal. For instance, this parent was sceptical about whether his child would cope with another subject: "To learn a third language along with subjects like biology, physics is going to be very difficult and not possible". The comment of the following teacher made reference to the autonomy that private schools enjoy in terms of the curriculum: "Private sector has its own setup. It is not necessary for them because most of the students go for Cambridge". Yet another teacher, who had her own children enrolled in that school, declared that "I will react very badly. I am going to take my children out of this school". An explanation regarding this point came from a teacher who felt that any attempt to impose Pashto as a subject would not yield positive results, at least in the context of the elite schools: "When you try to put too much pressure on people to speak that language [Pashto] and appreciate it more often, the people start to realise that this is something just being imposed on us".

The Role of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

The two sections above show that stakeholders in general and the teachers in particular display an overall ambivalence towards Pashto. The interviews revealed that their attitude towards Pashto aligned with their philosophy of teaching *English* as a foreign language. The comment of this teacher reflects the commonly held view that the use of the mother tongue might hinder the process of acquiring English: "I think they [mother tongue languages] do influence the English learning process. When the students feel that the teacher can speak to them in those languages, they try to approach you in that language. … They stop learning English". The idea of immersion in English, which strictly excludes the use of other languages, is encapsulated in this teacher's comment: "I believe we should provide an environment, if the environment is English she or he must talk in English. It should be the direct and communicative method. If you don't give response in Urdu or Pashto, I would be forced to respond in English". During an observation of one of her English lessons, it was noted that she indeed followed some of the tenets of communicative language teaching, such as meaning

negotiation, use of the target language, and the use of authentic material. Similarly, another teacher noted that "I will give them six different examples and eventually they will understand, although it's easier to give them a Pashto word or an Urdu one". This monolingual teaching philosophy is explained more elaborately by this teacher: "We always discourage the use of home languages in the classroom. We like them to speak English. … We help them and give them easy vocabulary so that they should be able to convey their ideas, but we strongly discourage the other languages".

The views of some of the students reflected the language teaching philosophy of their teachers. For example: "As far as English teachers are concerned they would definitely not allow Urdu, let alone Pashto, because they believe that they have to teach English only". Another student held a view concerning proficiency in English similar to that of his teachers: "Like if I don't speak English all the time, even at home, and watch English movies, listen to English music, so yeah my English will lag behind". These responses indicate that the teachers at these English-medium schools adhere to an English-only philosophy in the teaching of English, and show no awareness of the benefits associated with the teaching of and instruction in the mother tongue (Cummins, 2000; Shohamy, 2006).

The provincial KP government's initiative to make the teaching and learning of regional languages compulsory in schools resulted in ambivalent but mostly averse attitudes. The study shows that implementation of a top-down policy at the grassroots level – in schools and classrooms – is fraught with challenges, both practical and ideological (see Hult, 2014). Teachers, parents and students saw some merit in the policy, particularly with regard to staunching the loss of Pashto and bringing people close together. The opposite view was also evident, however, with one student claiming that teaching Pashto would weaken national unity: "If you put the system in Pashto here, then most certainly they will put it in Punjabi, so there will be conflict among the various provinces". Other negative attitudes related to the burden learning Pashto would place on students, the difficulty of the linguistic and writing systems of the language, and the perceptions that further learning of the language was not necessary or valued since students could already speak it. While the elite English-medium schools are opposed to the policy for academic, administrative and financial reasons, the general sense of apathy towards the policy could also be attributed to the well-entrenched influences of the history and politics of Pakistan on its language planning. These attitudes are coupled with the administrative inefficiency on the part of the provincial government, despite its apparent sincerity in promoting the regional languages.

Since multilingualism is now embraced globally as an asset (May, 2006; UNESCO, 2003), the indigenous languages deserve a genuine role in national

affairs and nation building. Coleman and Capstick (2012) emphasise the need for the state in Pakistan to change its ideological position vis-à-vis the indigenous languages. They recommend adoption of a linguistically equitable education system because discriminatory education systems lead to social division with "huge numbers of undereducated, unemployable and frustrated young people" (Coleman & Capstick, 2012, p. 74). An enhancement of the status of regional languages, as promised in the constitution of 1973, would redress the grievances of various ethnic communities and promote harmony and unity through diversity. Coleman (2010) suggests that the adoption of multiple languages in primary school education would strengthen the loyalty of ethnic minorities to the state, rather than the reverse, because all ethnic groups would then perceive themselves to be equally respected. In this regard, Coleman warns that "the long-term decline and death of indigenous languages, and ethnic marginalisation is leading to the growth of resentment among ethnic minorities. Pakistan is considered to be one of the countries most exposed to these risks" (p. 25).

Conclusion

In view of the declining status of regional languages in Pakistan, the decision of the KP government was a significant step in a positive direction. However, it did not take adequate measures to prevent the political repercussions of the new policy. The political undertones of the policy, true or perceived, appear to be a significant factor in the passive response to the policy from stakeholders, as evident in the attitudes of the participants in this study. The present and future governments could build on what the previous government achieved regarding the mother tongue teaching policy. A significant measure in this regard would be the gradual separation of the policy from politics, though this is easier said than done (see Lundberg, 2018). If the project were to be assigned to an empowered body of scholars, educationists, and linguists, rather than ministers and bureaucrats, for example, it might appeal to the masses more readily. Additionally, an advocacy and awareness campaign through print and electronic media and through holding workshops would be useful to address the confusion and misapprehension among parents, teachers and school administrators/owners. In this way, concerned stakeholders could be informed of the benefits of bilingual or multilingual education and of the potential risks associated with an assimilationist or subtractive bilingual approach. In all this work, it is important to bear in mind that, as Bell (2013) cautions, "the likelihood of negative attitudes … will always have to be factored into the planning of any programme, as such attitudes can spread and influence others" (p. 407).

It is hoped that this article has provided a glimpse into language policy implementation in practice, and that is might be of use to policymakers and

practitioners in other regions, even beyond Pakistan. In New Zealand, for instance, the National Party government in 2017 indicated its interest in developing a policy that would provide every primary school child the opportunity to learn a second language, and the proposal has gained momentum in late 2018. At the same time the Green Party, part of the new government coalition, has proposed making Te Reo Māori compulsory within certain sectors of the school system. Healthy debate regarding both proposed policies has ensued, particularly in the media (see NZ Herald, 2018).

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