
The role of English in developing countries

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English is a passport to privilege and needed for survival in Pakistan

Introduction

Research exploring the role of English in Pakistani education system usually focuses on the use of English as the medium of instruction. However, in this paper I argue that English language should also be discussed in the context of its indispensibility in social mobility and survival in Pakistan. In fact, English plays a number of crucial roles in some developing countries, of which Pakistan is one (Mansoor, 2003; Rahman, 2002). In Pakistan, English is one of the official languages and a prerequisite for professional jobs (Rahman, 2005). Because of its use in the domains of power, English can be seen as a source of self-improvement and as a means of career success (Mansoor, 2003; Rahman, 2002). Thus, the knowledge of English is a key indicator of social class and people consider it superior to other languages (Shamim, 2008). However, the use of English in education is one of the main sources of failure for many ordinary people (Bruthiaux, 2002). English is used as a control mechanism to play a gate-keeping role in access to higher education and key social positions (Coleman, 2010; Rahman, 2002). The imposition of English in education and its perceived prestige create additional problems for low socioeconomic status (SES) students who often have limited access to English.

Studies of the role of English in education in developing countries usually reach different conclusions. Some research considers learning English good for students' academic and professional development (for example, Haidar, *in press*; Vaish, 2005). Other research claims that learning English affects students' progress and conceptual clarity and thus acts as a source of failure (Bruthiaux, 2002). These studies have usually involved low or high SES students and have

claimed that English is good for high SES, but bad for low SES students. Based on the medium of instruction (MOI) and other available facilities, there are generally four types of schools in Pakistan: elite private, elite public, general private, and general public (Rahman, 2001). The current study is novel because it involves students from all classes studying in different schools in a town in Pakistan, including students from upper, middle, and lower classes. In this study, I explore participants' perspectives on the role of English and ask how participants from different SESs consider the English language necessary for students' academic, social, and professional lives in Pakistan.

The study finds that students believe that they need English to survive in academic, professional, and social life in Pakistan. Survival in this paper refers to upper social mobility along with the



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ability to meet everyday necessities. According to the participants of this study, the spread of English in Pakistan is no longer due to its colonial background, but due to practical use of the language.

Background of English in Pakistan

The British colonialists introduced English to the Indian subcontinent (Rahman, 2002). They introduced English-medium schools to educate the elite class to be administrators and professionals and serve as a bridge between the rulers and the public. The response to English was varied among the Muslims in India and later in Pakistan. Some accepted it, others rejected it, and some pragmatically utilized it (Rahman, 2002). After independence from Britain in 1947, in spite of the commitment to replace English with local languages, English language continued to remain an official language and the language of education due to the stakes of elite classes (Rahman, 2002). The education policy in Pakistan still emphasizes the introduction of English from first grade and English Medium of Instruction (EMI) from sixth grade (NEP, 2009).

However, in developing countries, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, the use of English in education and EMI is a main source of failure and inequity (Coleman, 2010). Hence, there is debate about the benefits and drawbacks of the use of English in education (for example, Bruthiaux, 2002; Vaish, 2005). Similarly, there is a great deal of research focusing on the spread of English and its role in the socioeconomic mobility of individuals. Several studies suggest that English in education helps only minority elites in the developing countries at the expense of the larger ordinary population (for example Bruthiaux, 2002; Coleman, 2010). The imposition of English in education and its perceived prestige creates additional problems for the low SES students (Bruthiaux, 2002). Henceforth, in this paper I explore teachers', administrators', and students' perceptions of the use of English in education in Pakistan.

Theoretical framework

English has symbolic power because of its association with British colonialists and because it became the language of the elites in Pakistan (Rahman, 2005). Bourdieu's (1991) theory of the symbolic power of language is relevant for understanding the role of English in education. Bourdieu (1991) explains social structures in terms of a

market, in which the social status of an individual is established through different forms of capital, such as cultural capital (knowledge and skills), symbolic capital (prestige and honor), and economic capital (wealth). Bourdieu uses *field* and *habitus*, two interdependent terms, to explain the role of cultural capital, including language, in a social hierarchy. However, due to globalization the linguistic market is fluid and messy, and different factors are involved in the dominance of a language (Saxena & Omoniyi, 2010). Therefore, along with Bourdieu's theory, I also use Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism, and Blommaert's (2010) theory of sociolinguistics of globalization.

Linguistic imperialism describes the spread of any colonial language, including English, from the centre (English-speaking countries) to the global periphery (non-English-speaking countries), as intentional, to continue the dominance of the centre (Phillipson, 1992). However, due to globalization and the advancement of communicative technologies, the distinction between the centre and the periphery is blurred. Sociolinguistics is concerned with the actual use of linguistic resources affected by the cultural, social, political, and historical context (Blommaert, 2010). Everyone uses bits and pieces of different linguistic resources which Blommaert (2010) calls the *linguistic repertoire*. People with mobile linguistic resources have more opportunities to adapt to new circumstances, both in terms of horizontal and vertical spaces. Blommaert (2010) explains these horizontal and vertical spaces through his concepts of scale, order of indexicality, and polycentricity of norms.

The main point of interaction among these theories is the recognition of the power dynamics attached to languages and their varieties. These theories also consider the education system to be one of the main players in determining the dominance of a language and access to it.

Methodology

Social issues, such as participants' perceptions of English in education and in the life outside school, can be understood through observing the phenomenon in a natural environment (Creswell, 2012). This study adopted a phenomenological case study design in which I, as a researcher, became immersed in different school environments to observe teaching and learning processes. Phenomenology is focused on the participants' 'lived experiences' (Creswell, 2012: 76), with a focus on their understanding. It is also a multi-case

study, as I analyzed the participants' perceptions in different schools. A phenomenological case study design helped me to become an observer in the classroom setting and in the overall school environment, which allowed me to understand participants' meaning-making related to the learning and use of English. I also conducted 28 open-ended interviews to understand participants' perspectives about the role of English in education.

Research participants

The study participants were administrators, teachers, and students of four types of schools in a town in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), Pakistan, as shown in Table 1. In the elite schools, both male (M) and female (F) participants were available. In general schools, there were only male participants. To broaden my understanding of English instruction in general schools, I also interviewed administrators, teachers, and students in girls' general schools. I conducted classroom observations in a tenth-grade classroom in each of the four schools. Similarly, three students, i.e. one verbally active, one passive, and one middle-level participant in class activities, from the tenth-grade class in each school were interviewed. These students were selected based on their performance, the recommendation of the teacher, my observation, and their willingness.

Analytical framework

I adopted constructivist grounded theory as the analytical framework (Charmaz, 2014). In a nutshell this theory is based on inductive approach that advocates 'developing theories from research grounded in qualitative data rather than deducing testable hypothesis from the existing theories' (Charmaz, 2014: 6). The documentation from the data collection included a manuscript with

transcriptions of the interviews and my field notes. The analysis of that data proceeded in the following way. I assigned a descriptive category to each line of the data. That descriptive category would summarise the key idea presented in that chunk of data. For example, a section in data that would read 'English is needed for survival' would be coded with a category of SURVIVAL. These categories were inducted during the course of analysing the data. I had no preconceptions of those analytical categories. Overall, I generated 200 different categories/labels. The most frequently occurring ones were the categories of SURVIVAL, ENGLISH, SOCIAL MOBILITY, WRITING, UNDERSTANDING, and EDUCATION. I arranged these categories through various mental mapping visualisations, in order to explore the relationship among these categories. I shared my visualisations with my colleagues to gain other perspectives. Then, I collapsed the categories into four major themes occurring in the data: English as a symbol of intelligence; English as a symbol of the educated and a need for education; English as the written language; and English competence makes individuals hireable. These themes are discussed in the remaining part of this paper.

English as a symbol of intelligence

The English language is considered valuable in academic, professional, and other formal situations in Pakistan. The education system is mostly in the English medium, so if a person cannot understand English it is difficult to excel in studies. Most participants in this study, especially from general schools, stated that they considered people who spoke English to be smart. An administrator in the elite public school stated, 'If somebody speaks

Table 1: Study participants

Schools	Grade level observed	Gender of students	Administrator interviewed	Students interviewed	English teacher interviewed
Elite private	Grade 10	Male and female	Headmistress	3 (2 F, 1M)	2M
Elite public	Grade 10	Male and female	Academic coordinator	3M	2MF
General private	Grade 10	Male	Principal	3M	1M
Girls private	No observations	Female	Principal	2 F	1 F
General public	Grade 10	Male	Principal	3M	2M
General girls public	No observations	Female	In-charge headmistress	1 F	Nil

English, he is considered to be an intellectual person' (Interview AD3, 05/12/15). Hence, the local languages are evaluated as low scale when compared with the higher-scale language (Blommaert, 2010), English, and the latter has symbolic power in Pakistan (Bourdieu, 1991).

Due to a lack of educational materials in local languages, English helps in gaining access to educational resources. 'In Pakistan, a person who knows English can gain better education' (Interview SIT2, 06/12/15, trans.). Therefore, people who are competent in English have access to educational materials and are thus considered to be educated. According to the participants the superiority of English is related to its practical use. One of the participants stated, 'this is not like I would say: if somebody can speak good English, he is intelligent. But if somebody is not able to speak good English, he cannot excel in this world' (Interview AD3, 05/12/15). For academic and social development in Pakistan, English is a prerequisite. Thus, the study participants no longer considered English a problem. Because of its 'social, cultural, political, historical, (and) ideological' (Blommaert, 2010: 33) background, it has penetrated into people's lives in Pakistan.

Hence, if one does not know English, she/he has no language skill at all, according to education circles in Pakistan. An administrator stated, 'It's very important to have sound English skills, sound language skills' (Interview AD4, 05/26/15). Not knowing English compels individuals to be silent in socially prestigious situations (Bourdieu, 1991), since English is usually spoken in such an environment. 'All the high-ups [people in higher position]; all the important people, their whole conversation is 80% in English' (Interview AD1, 06/11/15, trans.). This also shows that English is not only high scale due to its use in the wider world, but also socially, since people in prestigious fields prefer English (Blommaert, 2010; Bourdieu, 1991). Therefore, to participate in such conversations one needs to have a good command of English.

In the education system in Pakistan, English is valued more than the local languages. It has symbolic power for being the language of educated people. Other languages are perceived to be of low value (Tamim, 2014).

English as a symbol of the educated and a need for education

English, being used in formal situations in Pakistan, has become a symbol of educated people. No language in Pakistan is able to replace English in higher

education and scientific scholarship, as local languages are not rich in information (Tickoo, 1996). In Pakistan in the 11th grade, the science subjects are in English, and at the undergraduate level most subjects are in English. 'At the higher level even political science and history subjects are not possible without English' (Interview AD2G, 08/08/15, trans.). Hence, the number of programs using other languages reduces as one advances in education. The administrator of the elite private school explained: 'When you go to university ... If your English is strong ... everything is in English, you have *better understanding*' (Interview AD4, 05/26/15, emphasis in original). Students who do not learn English at school find it hard to adjust at college.

Therefore, students who are interested in gaining admission into professional colleges need to be competent in English. Corroborating this, a student stated, 'their English will be more improved as compared to us. They will get admission anywhere' (Interview S4S1, 05/21/15). The term 'anywhere' shows that English is a high-scale language valued across social and geographical boundaries. However, only knowing English is not enough for gaining admission to professional colleges.

Moreover, with the passage of time, instead of turning towards local languages, the importance of English further increases. The government and private institutions are adopting EMI at an early stage. This leads to a situation in which a person who cannot speak English will find it difficult to gain access to education. For example, an administrator stated, 'a stage will come if somebody cannot speak English, he will be considered an uneducated person' (Interview AD3, 05/12/15). The administrator welcomed the policy of the government of introducing EMI at an early stage. English is penetrating from the centre to periphery, changing the language norms in Pakistan by devaluing the use of local languages, Urdu and Pashtu (Phillipson, 1992).

However, research studies (Coleman, 2010; Shamim, 2008) and educational experts believe that early EMI in Pakistan does not help low-SES students. These studies claim that the elite class is reluctant to replace English with Urdu or other local languages. Therefore, the government has not focused on developing local languages for education after independence, either because of the lack of resources or because it has not been given priority.

English as the written language

English, as the official and written language, is a highly valued language in Pakistan, since traditionally languages used in writing are valued more

highly than the one used orally (Halliday, 2003). A study participant stated, 'if (one) looks to the administration everything in offices is in English' (Interview S3S1, 05/13/15). Most administrative paperwork in Pakistan is in English, such as forms in banks, colleges, schools, post offices, and hospitals. A study participant student stated, 'All forms are in English' (Interview S2S1, 06/10/15, trans.). Thus, those people who are not competent in English find it hard to understand the forms or apply for a job or other public services. Hence, students feel the need to develop the linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1991) to be able to communicate in formal situations.

The use of English is not only limited to official work. English is also the dominant written language in the corporate sector in Pakistan. A study participant, while describing the abundant use of English in social life, stated, 'The writing on a medicine bottle is also not in National language; it is in English' (Interview AD1G, 08/10/15, trans.). Although the information on medicine is usually given in both English and Urdu, there is often less information in Urdu. The use of English is not only limited to medicine but is used in almost all commodities. Therefore, everyone needs to learn English, without which access to information is limited.

Thus, the study participants understand the necessity of learning English for survival in Pakistan. Turning towards other languages in education is of little help to students. It is not possible to survive with other languages as it hinders ability to understand readings on daily necessities, as these readings are usually done in English instead of local languages, Urdu or Pashtu. Most companies in Pakistan believe that the use of English enhances business and trade (Pinon & Haydon, 2010). English not only has symbolic status, but has also become a need for the people of Pakistan. Henceforth, the penetration of English into social life in Pakistan is due to globalization instead of linguistic imperialism only, as English is the language of international trade. The good command of English helps people in the job market as most job entrance tests and interviews are conducted in the English language and people use English in the offices (Coleman, 2010; Rahman, 2002).

English competence makes individuals hireable

As already stated, in Pakistan, English is a prerequisite for most professional jobs. English-

competent individuals have more opportunities in professional fields. The administrator of the elite private school shared her experience. 'I went there to admit my child and they wanted a teacher. And since my speaking skills are good [. . .] eventually I got the job' (Interview AD4, 05/26/15). Similarly, a student stated, 'Whenever we go for an interview, when we speak English they suddenly accept us' (Interview S4S1, 05/21/15). These two examples illustrate that English helps an individual to get a professional job. However, several studies (e.g. Bruthiaux, 2002; Coleman, 2010) claim that speaking good English is not the only criterion to have a prestigious position. Indeed, other competencies including English are required in professional fields.

Consequently, low-English-proficient participants face hurdles and feelings of inferiority while performing their duties. At times people are promoted to positions due to seniority, since in the public institutions this is one of the criteria for promotion. They suffer in performing their duties due to not knowing English. For example, the administrator of a girls' public school shared her problem, 'if I receive a letter. I read it with difficulty . . . I consider it *despicable* for myself' (Interview AD1G, 08/10/15, trans., emphasis in original). People who are not competent in English feel frustrated in the offices in Pakistan for not being able to read and write in English, the official language. Moreover, the example shows that without having the valued linguistic resources (Blommaert, 2010) performing in a leading post, such as school principal or any other professional position, proves difficult (Bourdieu, 1991).

The dominance of English in Pakistan is due to globalization, since the world has become interconnected (Blommaert, 2010) and the English-speaking countries dominate most of the resources, including language. It has become a need because of its extensive use in education and practical life in Pakistan. Several studies (e. g. Bruthiaux, 2002; Coleman, 2010) have challenged the concept of English as the language of development and have argued that literacy in local languages is more important for individuals' economic and social development. However, presently in Pakistan, individual development and social mobility without English-language competence is considered impossible.

Therefore, in order to survive in academic and professional life students are compelled to learn English, whether they like it or not. English has become a basic necessity in Pakistan with the participants comparing it to food, '(English) is as important as . . . food' (Interview S3T1, 06/26/15,

emphasis in original) for survival. All the study participants, especially students, understood the necessity to learn English, since they were aware that without English, it was difficult to survive and its importance had further increased.

Conclusion and implications

Due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the study, the findings are not generalizable, but may be replicated in similar circumstances. The study participants considered English as a high-scale language, helping individuals with regard to social and geographical mobility. The predominant sentiment among students was that English was necessary for their academic survival. English language is considered a symbol of intelligence and social prestige, and applicable in high social positions. It is the most used language in offices and the written form is generally used in everyday life. Hence, English has symbolic power and is considered necessary for survival. Thus, the education system and the government impose the dominance of English by valuing the English-speaking habitus (Bourdieu, 1991).

Local languages, as MOI, are more helpful for early education (Bruthiaux, 2002; Mansoor, 2003). However, without the bringing about of a change to use local languages as MOI at higher levels and in the provision of all educational material, students are more inclined towards using English. Moreover, with the existing hierarchical structure of different languages in which English is dominant, people do not appreciate local languages. The dominance of English is rather considered a conspiracy against ordinary people, preventing them from gaining power (Rahman, 2005; Vaish, 2005). In fact, local languages in Pakistan are excluded from the domains of power, including education. Hence, the so-called deficiency of languages to be used for education results from the unequal treatment through marginalizing and keeping local languages out of the domains of power (Phillipson, 1992).

Therefore, to convince people to appreciate local languages as MOI, they should be empowered. Civil servants in Pakistan seldom use English for communication during their services, since few people understand English (Coleman, 2010). Therefore, in the selection process, people should be given the option to use local languages in these examinations and interviews. Students also need to be provided equal resources in Urdu or other local languages. Otherwise, the de facto policy of language in education currently encourages the use of English only.

Additionally, bilingual materials should be provided in all government offices and private organizations. Official documents, such as letters, forms, and other instructions, should be provided at least in two languages, that is, English and a local language. This will help non-English-competent people to have equal access to information.

This study expands Bourdieu's (1991) theory of 'the symbolic power' of language beyond the dominance/standardization of a dialect/variety of a language over other dialects/varieties of the same language to the dominance of one language over other languages. English was originally introduced into India/Pakistan as a colonial language, but it has become an integral part of life in Pakistan. In fact, after independence from Britain, the use of English has further intensified due to globalization and communication technologies. The study also makes a contribution to sociolinguistics, suggesting that fluidity of languages as part of globalization is not due to social and geographical mobility only (Blommaert, 2010). Rather, English has penetrated due to its extensive use in people's lives in Pakistan, and people are being considered language-less for not having English competence in their locality.

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