



THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IN PAKISTAN: A STUDY BASED ON ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan's educational system uses multiple languages as mediums of instruction, including Urdu, English, and various other regional languages. The choice of language can significantly influence students' academic performance, comprehension, and overall learning experience. Students often perform better when taught in their first language or a language they are proficient in. Learning in a second language can increase cognitive load, making it harder for students to grasp complex concepts and negatively impacting their academic performance. In Pakistan English-medium schools are more prevalent in urban areas, providing urban students with potential advantages in higher education and job markets. In contrast, rural students, often taught in Urdu or regional languages, may face disparities in opportunities. On the contrary, the effectiveness of instruction is closely tied to teachers' proficiency in the medium of instruction. In Pakistan, many teachers are more comfortable teaching in Urdu or regional languages than in English. However, students transitioning from Urdu or regional language instruction to English-medium higher education



often face significant challenges, affecting their performance and continuation rates in higher education. Pakistan has experienced fluctuating educational policies regarding the medium of instruction, leading to inconsistencies in implementation and educational outcomes. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the medium of instruction affects educational outcomes in Pakistan.

Keywords: language, education, regional, development, official language

INTRODUCTION

The medium of instruction (MOI) plays a pivotal role in shaping educational outcomes, influencing how students comprehend, engage with, and retain knowledge. In Pakistan, the choice of instructional language is particularly significant given the country's rich linguistic diversity and complex socio-economic landscape. Understanding the impact of the medium of instruction on educational success is crucial for developing policies that promote equitable and effective learning experiences for all students.

In Pakistan, students are instructed in a variety of languages, including Urdu, English, and regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi. Each language of instruction carries its own set of advantages and challenges. English, often associated with higher socio-economic status and better job prospects, is predominantly used in urban schools and elite educational institutions. Urdu, the national language, is more commonly used in public schools, while regional languages are typically employed in rural areas and primary education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Pakistan, the choice of MOI—whether Urdu, English, or regional languages—affects comprehension, engagement, and overall academic performance. This literature review explores

the existing body of research on the impact of MOI on educational outcomes in Pakistan, highlighting the benefits, methodologies employed, and gaps in current understanding.

The MOI can be associated with the mother tongue, national or regional language or any International language. Numerous studies emphasize the cognitive and educational benefits of mother tongue instruction. Andrabi et al. (2007) found that primary students demonstrated better comprehension and cognitive skills when taught in their first language. Similarly, Coleman (2010) argues that mother tongue education enhances student engagement and cultural identity, which are critical for effective learning. When we talk about Pakistan then Urdu, being the national language, serves as a unifying force and is widely understood across the country. Rahman (2004) suggests that Urdu-medium instruction can promote national cohesion while providing a common linguistic foundation. Shamim (2008) notes that Urdu-medium schools are more accessible to the majority, promoting educational equity. On the other hand, English is associated with better economic opportunities and global competitiveness. Mansoor (2005) highlights that English proficiency opens doors to higher education and better job prospects. Shamim and Allen (2000) point out that English-medium schools often have superior resources, contributing to improved educational outcomes.

Researchers have applied different methodologies to assess the impact. For example: quantitative methods, such as standardized testing, are commonly used to assess the impact of MOI on academic performance. Khan (2011) utilized standardized test scores to compare the academic achievements of students in different MOIs, employing statistical analyses to draw correlations. Saeed et al. (2016) conducted large-scale surveys to gather data on perceptions of MOI among students and teachers. Another is a qualitative approach, including interviews and focus groups, which provide in-depth insights into the experiences of various stakeholders. Rahman (2002)

employed these methods to explore the socio-cultural impacts of MOI. Coleman and Capstick (2012) used classroom observations to understand the dynamics of teaching and learning in different languages. Mixed-methods studies which combine quantitative and qualitative data are also employed to offer a comprehensive view of MOI's impact. Mustafa and Khan (2018) utilized this approach to assess both academic performance and attitudes towards different MOIs, providing a holistic understanding of their effectiveness.

LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan is home to over 70 languages, highlighting its cultural and linguistic diversity. (Ethnologue, 2021) As of recent estimates, Pakistan's literacy rate is around 60%. (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2020.) The medium of instruction varies across the country, with Urdu and English commonly used in urban schools, while regional languages are often the medium in rural areas. (Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2017.) Following are the facts and figures related to the languages spoken in Pakistan.

S. No.	Languages	Percentage of Population	Region(s)
1.	Urdu	7%	Nationally understood and spoken
2.	English*	10%	Urban areas, government, education
3.	Punjabi	48%	Punjab
4.	Pashto	18%	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan
5.	Sindhi	12%	Sindh
6.	Saraiki	10%	Southern Punjab
7.	Balochi	3%	Baluchistan
8.	Hindko	2%	Northern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Azad Kashmir
9.	Brahui	1%	Central Baluchistan
10.	Kashmiri	Small percentage	Azad Kashmir
11.	Other Languages	Various	Throughout Pakistan

(Source: Ethnologue 2021, * British Council Pakistan, 2013)

These figures reflect the linguistic landscape of Pakistan and provide a basis for understanding the complexity and implications of language use in education and other sectors.

DISCUSSION

The MOI is a pivotal element in the educational landscape of Pakistan, with profound implications for student comprehension, retention, engagement, and overall academic performance.

I. Comprehension and Retention:

Studies have shown that students comprehend material more effectively when taught in their mother tongue. Using a familiar language reduces cognitive load, allowing students to focus more on understanding the content rather than decoding the language. Instruction in the mother tongue often includes culturally relevant examples and contexts, making learning more relatable and easier to understand. Learning in a familiar language helps in better retention of information. According to Cummins (2000), students are more likely to remember and recall information when it is presented in their first language. Strong comprehension and retention in the mother tongue provide a solid foundation for acquiring additional languages and more complex concepts in higher education.

As the national language, Urdu is widely understood and spoken across Pakistan, which helps in creating a cohesive learning environment. Students from different linguistic backgrounds can find common ground in Urdu, aiding mutual comprehension. There is a relatively abundant availability of educational materials and textbooks in Urdu, which can aid comprehension. Since Urdu is used in many public and private schools, students who continue their education in the same language throughout their schooling are likely to retain information better due to consistent exposure. Many standardized tests and public examinations in Pakistan are conducted in Urdu, helping students to retain information that is frequently tested.

English, being a second or third language for most Pakistani students, poses significant comprehension challenges. Students often struggle with vocabulary and grammar, which can

impede their understanding of the subject matter (Shamim, 2008). The proficiency of teachers in English can vary greatly, affecting the quality of instruction and thereby the students' comprehension. Students may memorize English terms and concepts for examinations but struggle to retain them long-term due to lack of daily use and practice. Consistent exposure to English through media, higher education, and urban environments can improve retention, but this is limited for many students from rural or lower socio-economic backgrounds.

On the contrary, learning in a non-native language increases the cognitive load on students. They need to decode the language first before processing and understanding the content, which can negatively impact both comprehension and retention. The proficiency of teachers in the MOI significantly affects how well students comprehend and retain information. In many cases, teachers themselves are not adequately fluent in the language of instruction, particularly English, leading to ineffective teaching and poor student outcomes (Coleman, 2010).

There is a notable disparity in educational outcomes between students from different linguistic backgrounds and socio-economic statuses. Urban students and those from wealthier families often have better access to English-medium schools, which are perceived to offer superior education and better future opportunities, while rural and less affluent students are typically educated in Urdu or regional languages.

II. Engagement and Participation

The medium of instruction significantly impacts students' engagement and participation in the classroom. Research indicates that students taught in their mother tongue or a familiar language are more likely to engage actively and participate in classroom activities. According to Benson (2004), using the mother tongue in early education enhances students' cognitive development and classroom participation, as they can better understand the material and express themselves freely.

In Pakistan, this is evident where students in Urdu-medium schools often show higher levels of involvement compared to their peers in English-medium schools, who may struggle with language proficiency (Shamim, 2008). These students are less likely to participate actively due to fear of making mistakes or not comprehending the content fully. Additionally, Hamid, Jahan, and Islam (2013) found that language barriers in English-medium instruction can lead to reduced student engagement and participation. Addressing these issues through bilingual education models and improving teachers' language skills can create a more inclusive environment, fostering better engagement and participation across different linguistic backgrounds.

III. Teacher Effectiveness

In Pakistan, where multiple languages are in use, the proficiency and training of teachers in the chosen MOI can either enhance or hinder the learning process. For example: teaching in students' mother tongues or regional languages can significantly enhance teacher effectiveness by making lessons more relatable and easier to understand. Teachers who are native speakers of the same language can better connect with their students and address their learning needs more effectively (Andrabi et al., 2007). However, the availability of teaching materials and training programs in regional languages is often limited, posing challenges for teachers in delivering high-quality education.

Urdu as the national language is more widely understood and spoken by teachers across the country. This commonality enhances teacher effectiveness, as teachers can communicate more clearly and relate better to students. Urdu-medium instruction benefits from a larger pool of educational resources and textbooks, aiding teachers in delivering more structured and coherent lessons.

Many teachers in Pakistan are not sufficiently proficient in English, which can lead to ineffective

teaching. According to Shamim (2008), a significant number of teachers lack the necessary language skills to teach effectively in English, resulting in poor student comprehension and engagement. Limited proficiency affects teachers' confidence and competence, making it difficult for them to explain complex concepts, engage students in meaningful discussions, and manage classroom dynamics effectively (Coleman, 2010).

IV. Equity and Access

The choice of medium of instruction (MOI) plays a crucial role in either bridging or widening educational inequalities. When the MOI aligns with students' linguistic backgrounds, it can enhance comprehension, participation, and academic performance, thereby bridging educational gaps. According to Benson (2005), mother tongue-based instruction fosters a more inclusive learning environment, promoting equity by enabling all students to access education on equal terms. In contrast, using a foreign or second language as the MOI can exacerbate educational inequalities, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may lack exposure to the language outside school. In Pakistan, English-medium instruction often benefits urban and wealthier students, while those in rural or lower socio-economic areas struggle, resulting in widened educational disparities (Shamim, 2008). Moreover, Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) argues that when students are taught in a language they do not fully understand, it can hinder their cognitive development and academic achievement, further entrenching educational inequalities.

V. Cultural Relevance

MOI significantly impacts the cultural relevance of education, influencing students' engagement and learning outcomes. When the MOI reflects the students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it promotes a more inclusive and relatable educational experience. According to Cummins (2001), using a culturally relevant MOI helps students connect new knowledge with their existing cultural

and linguistic frameworks, enhancing comprehension and retention. In Pakistan, diverse languages and cultures coexist, implementing mother tongue or regional languages as MOI can make education more accessible and meaningful for students (Coleman, 2010). Conversely, an MOI that is detached from the students' cultural context, such as English in many Pakistani schools, can create a sense of alienation and hinder effective learning (Shamim, 2008). The incorporation of cultural relevance through the MOI not only fosters a sense of identity and pride among students but also supports better educational outcomes by aligning instructional content with their lived experiences and societal context.

VI. Shaping the Future of Learners

The medium of instruction (MOI) plays a pivotal role in shaping the future of learners by influencing their educational experiences and outcomes. A well-chosen MOI can enhance comprehension, cultural relevance, and cognitive development, providing students with a solid foundation for lifelong learning. For instance, mother tongue-based education has been shown to significantly improve early literacy and numeracy skills, which are critical for future academic success (Benson, 2005).

In Pakistan, implementing an MOI that aligns with students' linguistic backgrounds can help bridge educational inequalities, offering all students an equal opportunity to excel. Furthermore, incorporating culturally relevant content through the MOI fosters a sense of identity and belonging, encouraging students to engage more deeply with their education (Cummins, 2001). Conversely, an inappropriate MOI can alienate students and hinder their academic progress, limiting their future prospects. By prioritizing an MOI that supports linguistic and cultural diversity, educators can create inclusive learning environments that empower students to reach their full potential, ultimately shaping a more equitable and prosperous future for all learners.

VII. Issues and Challenges in the MOI

Teaching in a local language can make education more culturally relevant and foster a stronger connection to the material. Conversely, imposing a foreign language can alienate students and hinder their educational engagement and identity formation. Many students struggle with English as it is not their first language, leading to difficulties in understanding and learning. This is particularly evident in rural and underprivileged urban areas where exposure to English is limited. Similarly, the proficiency of teachers in the medium of instruction directly affects the quality of education. Many teachers are more comfortable and effective teaching in Urdu or regional languages, but are required to teach in English, which can compromise the quality of instruction. The role of teacher proficiency in the medium of instruction and its effect on educational outcomes is under-researched. Studies focusing on the correlation between teacher training and student performance in different MOIs are necessary to improve teaching effectiveness.

Inconsistent educational policies regarding the medium of instruction also have led to confusion and inefficiencies in the education system. Frequent policy changes make it difficult for schools to maintain a consistent and effective instructional approach. Despite the critical role of the medium of instruction in educational outcomes, there is a lack of comprehensive research addressing the specific impacts and challenges faced by Pakistani students.

There is a scarcity of longitudinal research tracking the long-term impact of MOI on educational outcomes. Most studies are cross-sectional, offering only a snapshot of the current situation. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into the lasting effects of different MOIs on student achievement. Research has predominantly focused on urban settings, leaving a gap in understanding the impact of MOI in rural and remote areas. Jabeen and Mehmood (2017) highlight the need for studies that address regional disparities and how they influence educational equity.

CONCLUSION

Implementing an appropriate MOI has the potential to transform the educational experiences of Pakistani students. By aligning instructional languages with students' linguistic proficiencies and cultural contexts, we can enhance comprehension, foster engagement, and improve overall academic performance. This, in turn, will prepare students for higher education and better job opportunities, contributing to the socio-economic development of the country. By reviewing the educational level of students across various regions and socio-economic backgrounds, the valuable insights through this study can lead to further research on how educational policies and practices can be optimized to promote equitable and effective education for all Pakistani pupils.

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