

The Use of English in Pakistani Universities: Implications for Students

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes the use of the English language in Pakistani universities and its implications for students. The data for this paper is drawn from qualitative research conducted in two universities in Islamabad - the federal capital of Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 56 participants including teachers and students. The findings illustrate that students struggled to learn and use English in the academic spaces. This was especially true for students from rural backgrounds and those trained in public schools. Yet, despite such difficulties, English was believed to be a powerful language and its significance was acknowledged in order for them to operate as global citizens. Nevertheless, besides the promises associated with the English language, the threats and dangers to the local culture and local languages were also a concern for some participants. It was believed that the foreign culture in the academic spaces was promoting linguistic and cultural hegemony. The paper emphasises the need to make efforts for the maintenance and promotion of the Urdu language despite the dynamics introduced by the hegemony of the English language.

Keywords

English; Language; Culture; Education system; Linguistic Hegemony

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Introduction

The use of English as a global language has received the attention of academia in recent years (Anam, 2018; Al-Haq & Al-Masa'ed, 2009; Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Lee & Norton, 2009; Pennycook, 2001; Phillipson, 2003). A key debate has been the linguistic hegemony of English and the threat to local languages. This has largely been associated with the historical legacy of colonialism and the recent interconnectedness of the world as a result of globalization. Language is considered a very important factor in either preserving or challenging the leading ideologies for the people who once remained colonized (Hopson, 2003). The process of globalization has further contributed to the introduction and spread of languages in different parts of the world (Otasevic, 2013). This poses the need to investigate the spread of the English language in societies, its relevance in the era of global transformations, and its implications for local cultures.

In Pakistan, despite Urdu being the national language, English remains the official language and has attained a special status in both social and economic areas (Kachru, 1997; Manan et al., 2016; Rahman, 1997b; Rasool & Mansoor, 2007). It is extensively used in all domains of life including higher education, media, industries, science, and technology, and has also become a youth culture in elite spaces (Gulzar & Qadir, 2010; Rahman, 2004). The history of the use of the English language can be traced back long before the creation of Pakistan when it was introduced in the 16th century in the Sub-continent by British rulers (Mahboob, 2009). It became prominent in all spheres of society due to its connection of economic and social mobility (Mahboob 2009; Rahman, 1996). Later after the partition of the sub-continent, English was adopted as the official language in Pakistan too. The founder and first Governor-General, Quaid-e-Azam delivered his first speech in English to the first constituent assembly at the time of the independence pinpointing its significance for the nation (Mahboob, 2009).

English language in Pakistan is considered a source of opportunity, knowledge, success, education, respect, and a symbol of literacy. Moreover, as the English language has elite, cultural, and ideological power so consciously or unconsciously people consider it as a symbol of modernity and elite culture and it is linked to social status and power (Ashraf, 2006; Crystal, 2003; Kachru, 1997; Rasool & Mansoor, 2009). It is also considered a source of upward social mobility (Mansoor, 2002). The ruling elites use the English language for making their entry easy into the international job market and for executive positions (Rahman, 2004).

The linguistic hegemony of the English language as a global language and the survival of the other languages of the world has been addressed in many contexts especially those having experienced colonialism (e.g. Becket & Yan 2007; Tsuda, 2012). Context-sensitive and pragmatic mechanisms for resistance have also been called for by many for the revival of local languages (e.g. Mustapha, 2014). However, in the context of Pakistan, the role of linguistic hegemony under the influence of globalization and the historical legacy of colonialism has been largely overlooked. This paper attempts to address this gap through a discussion of the use of the English language in Pakistani universities.

To begin with, the education system in Pakistan is not uniform and it comprises public and private schools, colleges, and universities. This makes the use of English problematic, especially in universities, as large percentages of students in public universities come from government schools where the medium of instruction is Urdu and English is introduced as a second language at a later stage. This is unlike the elite and non-elite private schools where English is used right from the elementary level. Hence, when the students of the government and private schools enter the higher education arena there are inequalities among them as a result of their preliminary training and use of the English language. These inequalities are further strengthened in the higher educational spaces as those well versed with the English language are prioritized and they can easily fit in the academic culture which supports proficiency and excellence in the English language. The idea of power, status, respect, and modernism is attached to those who use this language thus giving them an upper hand. The ability to adopt English thus gives a unique identity to its users and they identify themselves as belonging to a distinct global culture, while those having low English language proficiency struggle to overcome the language barriers.

Importantly, the use of English as a single dominant language in academic spaces overshadows the national and regional languages while diminishing their worth and significance. This is because the lack of attention and appreciation for these languages makes them redundant and the users hesitate to use these and take pride in using the global language. In the long run, this leads to the adoption of the western culture and values which are prioritized over the local ones. Nevertheless, this process of shifting from local to global is not easy terrain for many and the majority of students struggle to meet the expectations of the higher education institutions. Taking this as a point of departure, in this paper we endeavor to investigate the use of the English

language in academic spaces by students and its implications. While doing so the paper aims to examine the perceptions of students and teachers about the use of English as a medium of instruction in Pakistani universities; where English is taught as the main medium of instruction.

Theoretical framework

This paper is inspired by and builds on Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Hegemony, a term proposed by Antonio Gramsci, is the power that is applied by the ruling elites to people for maintaining their control over the means of production. Thus, according to Gramsci, people are not only ruled by force or coercion alone but by consent too (Gramsci, 1971). The concept of hegemony was extended to include ideological, cultural, and linguistic hegemony. Gramsci defined cultural hegemony as a phenomenon which comprises the viewpoint of the dominant group, and is immediately confirmed and followed by the large and common masses of the population (Jiang, 2011). According to Tietze & Dick (2012), hegemony is achieved when the subordinated group accepts the views of the dominant group as natural and they internalize the norms and ideologies of the dominant group. One of the various forms of hegemony i.e. linguistic hegemony is defined as the prevalence of a dominant language with the suppression of minority languages. It only happens when people either believe or participate in the suppression of minority languages to the dominant one.

For many linguistic scholars, the subordinated groups have a role to play. Wiley (2000) believes that such groups are convinced to believe in their failure to meet certain standards as a result of the inadequacy of their local languages. Hence, the linguistic minorities participate in the subjugation of their local languages and the survival of the dominant language (Mustapha, 2014; Suarez, 2002). Linguistic hegemony is thus a way for exerting and legitimizing power by people who use a dominant language, like English, as a tool in whatever way they choose and legitimize power.

Phillipson (1992) argued that the top language takes advantage due to impression building through its advertisements by transnational corporations and due to the connection of the English language with success and the pursuit of happiness. These symbols are strengthened by the principle which honors the dominant while stigmatizing other languages. This grading is considered normal and natural instead of being considered hegemonic. The consequences of successful linguistic hegemony are the advantage of one type of English over all others, shift in its status from a minority

language to the majority one, and ultimately loss of other languages (Rodríguez-Mojica, 2019).

The significance of English as a global language cannot be denied. English has become the dominant global language of communication, business, aviation, entertainment, diplomacy, and the internet. Governments as well as some scholars appear to be accepting such a spread of English uncritically (Becket & Yan 2007). In the academic field, English is an important medium of instruction in developing as well as underdeveloped countries around the world (Anam, 2018; Azhar et al., 2014). Even in countries like France, Germany, and Saudi Arabia, where the national languages remain dominant, English is used for instructional purposes in universities (Yoo & Namkung, 2012). In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the language of instruction as per policy is Arabic, but some universities have decided against implementing English as the medium of instruction. This shift has the support of society and the government is urged to implement the use of the English language through strategic plans and policies (Al-Kahtany et al., 2016).

While some researchers and policy-makers have embraced this shift, for others it is deeply problematic. Despite the important place it occupies, the hegemony of the English language has come under sharp criticism and resistance. Many have argued that the English language is the first formative basis of hegemonic practices (Tietze & Dicki, 2012). It has also been argued that globalization results in Englishisation and the ideological position of the language presents it as a capitalist tool that threatens the development and vitality of other languages (Awonusi, 2004). It is argued that the increasing dominance of the English language is contributing to neocolonialism by empowering the already powerful and leaving the disadvantaged further behind, an issue that needs attention (Becket & Yan 2007).

In indigenous communities, such as in the context of Africa, the negative impact of the use of English has been debated. It has been argued that the hegemonic influence of the English and French languages has marginalized the African languages (Adeyemi, 2008). In Nigeria three factors are believed to have led to the exclusion of local languages including the slave trade, colonialism, and the advent of foreign religions (Mustapha, 2014). The dominance of English language is believed to have led to linguistic and communicative inequality (Tsuda, 2012). Some scholars have also characterised the dominant use of the English language as a threat to cultural identity.

As the English language takes over as a dominant language, it reshapes the values, norms, and ideologies of individuals (Mustapha, 2014; Nabea, 2009).

Others have based their arguments on the right of indigenous languages to maintain their worth and value. Kontra et al (1999) for example argue that students all over the world have the right to be educated in their mother tongue without taking into consideration their belongingness to culture or geographical location. However, at times this right is denied and the English language is imposed on them against their will and teachers are the instruments who materialize this act. Hence, some researchers have emphasized the need to establish language practices and policies that are more democratic and comprehensive (Canagarajah, 2005). They call for developing such strategies, which formulate the practices and policies enriching the local languages instead of replacing them (Guo & Beckett, 2007).

Methodology

Design

The qualitative research methodology was employed in this study and an in-depth interview method was used for data collection.

Population

The participants included students and faculty members of the social sciences departments from two universities in the federal capital of Pakistan i.e. Islamabad. These included a private and a public university. The selected departments included Pakistan Studies, Psychology, Economics, and International Relations. The names of the universities are not being disclosed to maintain the confidentiality of the teachers and students interviewed.

Sample

The non-probability sampling technique was used for the selection of the sample. A total of forty students (five from each department, resulting in 20 students from University A and 20 from University B) were selected. Quota sampling technique and purposive sampling technique were utilized. Two (2) teachers were selected through convenience sampling from each of the social sciences departments of both universities, so the total number was sixteen (16) (8 from University A and 8 from University B), and the total sample size was fifty-six (56).

Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used for data collection. Separate guides were prepared for the students and teachers.

Analysis

We used thematic analysis for the analysis of the data obtained from the respondents. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data. This analysis does not count the words and phrases, rather it identifies and explains both covert and overt ideas present in the data. As proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) the analysis started firstly with the transcription of the data obtained into written form. Then a list of ideas presented in the data was generated in the form of codes. These codes were then sorted out within different themes (concepts). These themes were further refined and finalized through close review. Themes were then defined and named according to the emerging patterns and ideas. The data was then analyzed within these themes. The analysis carried out in this research was empirical thematic analysis for which the data was analyzed based on the responses obtained from the students.

Ethical Concerns

During this research process, all measures were taken to maintain the confidentiality of participants. They were informed about the purpose of the study and their consent was obtained before the interview process. Each interview took 30-60 minutes. All interviews were recorded after seeking permission from participants. Likewise, their responses have been presented in this paper without revealing their identity.

Key Findings

Theme 1: The Challenges of Using the English Language

The education system in Pakistan is divided into three different systems, English medium private institutes, religious educational institutes (seminaries), and government educational institutes. All these are very different from each other in the use of language and curriculum. When students from these different educational institutes study together at higher educational institutes, they encounter challenges. The curriculum of the majority of courses in universities is written in English and the medium of instruction is also English. Hence students who otherwise had opted for Urdu medium till bachelors have to switch to English at postgraduate level.

When students and teachers were asked about using the English language during their academic and non-academic activities, the students explained the challenges they encountered at the beginning of their university careers. However, their skills had gradually improved, and they were able to overcome some of the challenges. Over the inability to use the English language one student expressed his views,

Every language is different and if a person wants to learn a language then he has to work hard. Like a child who learns to speak for the first time; he observes, focuses, and listens to everything very keenly then slowly he starts to learn a language. The same is the case with learning English as an adult student.

Only a few of the students had attended English medium schools and so they did not face any difficulty as such in communicating in English during classes and conveying their ideas and interacting with fellows outside the classroom spaces. The majority, however, acknowledged that they struggled to communicate their ideas in English and in expressing themselves verbally.

The teachers too believed that students from government schools and rural backgrounds had to encounter numerous problems in expressing their ideas clearly in assignments and exam papers and while giving verbal presentations. They accused the education system of Pakistan of this, which discourages creative writing and only promotes memorization, learning concepts by heart, and reproducing in exam papers. The teachers were of the view that, considering the dilemmas of the students, they attempted to facilitate students from disadvantaged areas by delivering parts of lectures in Urdu to allow their participation. One of the teachers said,

Through checking papers, assignments, or evaluating projects what I have come to know is that students are having problems when it comes to professional writing. The reason might be that students do not give importance to the basics of language and teachers also do not give much importance to it.

Another teacher explained,

Students face problems in understanding, comprehension, writing, and expressing their ideas. After one to two years, they overcome such problems, and their writing and reading skills improve. The English language is not our native language so the students face problems.

This theme thus illustrates that students faced problems in using the English language in both universities. This is especially true for those students who belonged to rural settings and were previously educated in government schools. The findings imply

that though English is an official language in Pakistan, there is a lack of systematic planning in training the youth in using it in higher education institutes. The private and public education systems in Pakistan prepare individuals according to their ideologies and vision. English is prioritized in private institutes that claim to prepare individuals to fit in the global world while the public schools and colleges fail to make any such promises. Resultantly, when these individuals, trained in two different systems, compete in higher education institutions and the job market those from the private system take an edge. One important factor for this is their proficiency in the use of language thanks to which they can communicate well and share their ideas in language which is considered important for the labor force.

Theme 2: The Power and Significance of English

The majority of the students highlighted the importance of the English language by explaining that it is a means of instruction and communication in their education system so it is required for them to have command over its use. Along with that, they explained that the English language is important to be able to compete at national as well as international levels. For example, job interviews, scholarship interviews, internships, whatever one aspires to do during their studies or after graduation demands strong interpersonal skills in English. It was believed that with the Urdu language alone, they couldn't live as global citizens. However, many participants believed that English was often used by the elite class to look down on students from a poor background and to assert themselves over others. The following excerpts explain this dilemma.

People speaking in English want to show that they are very progressive, elite, and intelligent. English is preferred for impression management.

It has become an international standard to communicate in English. If at the international level we speak Urdu, we are required to have a translator with us. English is a language, which is understood by all.

This highlights that while on the one hand English is used as a tool to demonstrate superiority, on the other hand it has also become a necessity in order to operate in the globalized world. English was also believed to be used by students to represent themselves as civilized and educated people. Its usage is linked with social status too, as one of the students mentioned,

In reference to Pakistan, the English language is not a language here rather it is a social status. Here if you do not know English then you are not socially acceptable in many places. It is also used by students as a fashion.

One of the students narrated her personal experience of the time when she went to the United States for six months on a scholarship. She believed that she was superior to other international students due to her understanding of the English language as she did not face any problems. She observed that people from other countries took English language classes to improve their language skills. She thinks if English is promoted, it will be beneficial for students. This is especially true for those who aspire to visit foreign countries for higher education and employment. They could get an edge and be more socially accepted.

Another student shared his dilemma due to his inability to communicate well in English. He had previously been to an Urdu medium government school until middle level and when he entered in new English medium school, all the science subjects were in English. Once, he was asked to bring scissors in class. He could not understand and he asked his friend for help who made fun of him and he had to face criticism and embarrassment. Regarding the use of national language, one of the students said,

We are given examples of Russia, China, France, Germany that they have developed without using English so why not us. Our mindset is colonial. When they left, they left English here. We think that we may become orphans if we abandon English.

Several respondents emphasized the need to own their local languages and to promote the use of Urdu as a national language. They were of the view that for progress at the international level, it is very important to respect one's language besides excelling in foreign languages.

From the teacher's perspective, the use of English allows for better presentation at competitive forums like interviews. They believed that Universities should train students to have a strong grip over the English language so that they may have better chances of success in their careers. Similar to the views of students, teachers too believed that it is the colonial heritage left by the British in the subcontinent; however, they acknowledged its significance and relevance in modern society. Hence, they emphasized its use. One of the teachers commented on the necessity of the English language as follows:

English is the language of science and it is a global language. Without learning this language our next generation could be handicapped. It is the need of the hour and requires the attention of educational institutions.

Another teacher explained that having bilingual or multilingual skills is very advantageous as it connects people and allows access to a wider range of opportunities. If one has a good command of English they can tell the world about their good work; otherwise, there will be no readership, messages cannot be conveyed and thus people will not be aware of their work.

While commenting on the decision of the Pakistani court order regarding the use of Urdu in official documents, one teacher expressed his dissatisfaction. He believed this would create further problems as it would be difficult to communicate with the world. He argued that the Urdu language is already composed of words from different languages and it can easily absorb the English language. So, over time, Urdu will incorporate some English words also. He believed the focus should be more on English. This is especially true for academia, where English is needed not only for learning but also for communicating.

Similar to the views of students, some teachers also believed that the use of the English language is taken as a symbol of respect. English is also used as a fashion thus it is not meeting international standards and enhancing the knowledge as expected. It was believed that one who speaks English is modern, educated, and has great worth.

To sum up, English being an international language is gaining importance in Pakistan but the participants believed this should be done with caution. Instead of just being used as a status symbol, it should also offer employment opportunities. Nevertheless, this theme also illustrates the promises associated with the use of the English language in terms of improved skills and expansion of opportunities to connect with the world. The participants had a strong belief that by limiting and minimizing the use of English the Pakistani youth would not be able to compete at the international level and in the long run, it could lead to the isolation of the nation from the other parts of the world.

Theme 3: Adoption of Foreign Culture through the English Language

Globalization and mass media are creating awareness among people of various languages. People want to learn different languages to compete in the international market. However, the foreign language also becomes the source of introduction of

foreign culture to the people who learn it by watching television shows, movies, and other programs along with professional training. One of the students expressed his views as follows:

Foreign language does bring foreign culture. For example, if you know English, or watch some English movies, you will try to implement it in your life. If there is a child who watches Pakistani cartoons, ultimately it will reflect in his personality. While watching English cartoons his personality will reflect the same as he learns from the foreign culture.

Linking the relationship between the English language and English culture, one of the respondents explained the process of transition from one culture to the other through language. He believed language has a significant role in transmitting new culture. He stated:

Halloween is a word. In past, when we heard the word, we thought of it as a festival. First, we came to know about the word, and then people got information about the concept of Halloween. Over time it is being celebrated among the elite culture in Pakistan. So, it started from a foreign word and now it has become part of our culture.

The teachers highlighted the significance of language in cultural transformations as well. While discussing this, one of the teachers presented his views as follows;

Language is a main ingredient of culture so a foreign language must bring the foreign culture with it. While using it we start adopting the habits of foreign culture. English is a universal and influential language, it is a language of science and it is a lingua franca, so it has special effects on the whole world.

Another teacher stated, "Language brings several things with it. It not only brings culture with it but it also brings ideology."

Hence, the teachers believed that the use of a foreign language leads to cultural transformations. Likewise, one of the students who was learning the Chinese language said:

You come to know about the culture unconsciously and get somewhat involved in it and thus you are influenced by it. As I am studying the Chinese language, I am influenced by it and I explore things related to it. I understand it so I can cope with its environment where it is practiced.

Some believed this interest in a foreign language is marginalizing the national language. They emphasized the role of Pakistani educationists and academics in

promoting the Urdu language. One teacher gave the example of an American Pakistani writer who often uses Urdu vignettes in his writing to represent his culture. For example, the writer mentioned the word “*Chappati*” (bread) in his novel; here language is de-nativized to show one’s own culture.

Nevertheless, some of the students and teachers argued that the usage of a foreign language does not bring foreign culture necessarily. They presented various reasons for supporting their argument as one said that it is only a means of communication and nothing else. Another student believed that it does bring foreign culture but it is not a threat to local culture as such. In support of this argument, one student mentioned foreign communication sources (for example media) to be the source of its adoption. One of them gave the example of prominent Muslim religious scholars from Pakistan like Maulana Tariq Jameel, Dr. Zakir Naik, and many others who speak English very fluently but do not adopt the foreign culture. One teacher presented his view as follows,

Adoption of a foreign language never brings foreign culture as languages are not a cultural adaptation. Languages are only used for the sake of communication. For example, Chinese have learned Urdu by living here but they have not adopted our culture, they may adopt some of our values as fun but they are not taken seriously. There are very rare examples like one woman from France- Ruth Pfau came here and lived here in Pakistan till her death and adopted our culture. Language does not affect our culture it depends on personal choices.

To conclude this sub-section, there is a relationship between a foreign language and foreign culture. When one attempts to learn and adopt a foreign language then they also learn and adopt the culture associated with that language. This happens unconsciously as one internalizes the values and norms associated with the foreign culture. During this process of internalization and learning, the media plays an important role. In this regard, the role of movies and dramas in transmitting foreign culture was highlighted by the participants. Nevertheless, the data also illustrates that there are ways through which local languages and local cultures can be preserved. The role of prominent scholars and leaders was highlighted to signify their role in promoting their culture locally and internationally.

Implications and Conclusion

The importance of the use of English and the perception of people about its usage has been indicated by previous research. It has been argued that power is implemented by the language which is an essential element of linguistic hegemony (Zaidi et al., 2016). As the English language has ideological, cultural, and elitist power (Kachru, 1997) so English is given importance by the ruling elite economically, politically, culturally, and socially. Due to this reason, it has become a very important language attaining unique status (Rahman, 1997a; Sadiq, 2015). In an attempt to gain competency in this language, the linguistic minorities participate in the subjugation of their local languages and the survival of the dominant language (Suarez, 2002). Similar responses were shared by the participants of this study. Since the English language is attached to status and prestige, students felt obliged to learn it. In Pakistan, it is attached to status and power (Ashraf, 2006) and considered a means of upward social mobility (Mansoor, 2002). It is seen as the language of victory, social prestige, prosperity, and source of literacy (Sadiq, 2015). It is because of this reason that people use it consciously and unconsciously to prove themselves as educated, civilized and modern individuals (Crystal, 2003; Phillipson, 2010).

Hence, this paper highlights the dilemmas of those students who use the English language not only to comply with the demands of the education system but also as a symbol of status, power, modernism, and respect. However, while doing this, the students had to struggle to prove themselves as global citizens. This was especially difficult for students from rural backgrounds and those who had attended government schools where the use of English is not emphasized as is done in the private school system in Pakistan. The findings show that though the students preferred to speak their mother tongue and Urdu mostly, they were compelled to learn and use the English language because of the value attached to it. It is given importance as it is the working language in universities and the official language in Pakistan along with being an international language. The English language was considered the need of the hour and not a choice if one wants to acquire a reputable job at the national or international level. Hence, the youth of Pakistan do not see their survival in the market economy with limited or no English proficiency. As a result, the participants made efforts to learn it despite the difficulties they encountered. This highlights the linguistic hegemony of the English language. People are willingly contributing to the extinction of their local

languages by accepting and adopting English as a dominant language to survive in the globalized world.

The paper also discussed the consequences related to the adoption of English as a dominant language. We especially highlighted the threat to Pakistani values and norms by the use of the English language in the form of the adoption of western culture. Nevertheless, from the data discussed above the positive implication for the use of a global language also emerged. For instance, English is also being used by Pakistani scholars and role models to reach out to the international communities and share their values and perspectives with them. Additionally, Pakistani scholars abroad are making efforts to promote the Urdu language as well. This evidences the promises associated with the English language despite the threats. Hence, completely excluding an international language is not a solution if the Pakistani youth desires to engage with the world community. Instead, what is needed is to embrace English as a working language but to appreciate and acknowledge the significance of local languages and to make efforts to prevent them from extinction. By highlighting the significance of English we are not denying the value of Urdu. Both languages should be understood and used in their true spirit. These are not in competition with each other; instead they can complement each other if used skillfully. The findings of this paper allow us to rethink the significance of the use of English in contemporary Pakistan. If we aim to produce global citizens who can easily operate in the world economy as agents of globalization then we agree that we cannot deny the importance of command over the use of the English language.

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