

The Introduction of English as Mol in the Early Grades:

**A brief based on the research findings and recommendations
relating to teaching and learning in Punjab's schools (2012-2017)**

Introduction

Across the globe, competence in English is widely perceived as an asset. The situation is no different in the case of Pakistan. It is not surprising, then, that in the context of education most parents here place a high premium on the acquisition of English language skills and view it as an element of their children's education. It is in the light of this societal demand that private schools that have mushroomed in Pakistan in recent years particularly emphasise their characteristic of being English medium schools. It is in this setting that the GoP decided some years ago to take the leap from teaching English as a subject in the early years of schooling to employing it as a Medium of Instruction (MoI).

After the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2009, the Government of Punjab (GoP) decided to introduce English as the Medium of Instruction for the subjects of Math and Science, from Grade 1 onwards. The remaining subjects could be taught as before. The policy was to be introduced in a phased manner with 588 high schools as well as other selected schools converted to English medium schools in the first phase. The plan was to similarly convert the remaining schools over a period of four years. However, the decision was taken to make this switch by 2011. This policy also saw support from the Schools Reform Roadmap of the same year which sought to bring major improvements to both, quality as well as access to education. In early 2014, the government decided to modify the policy: English to be taught as a subject up to Grade 3 and other subjects taught in Urdu; and from Grade 4 onwards all subjects to be taught in English. Along with

providing equitable education opportunities, the policy also aimed at drawing back students and parents who had moved out of the public education sphere towards low-fee private schools that offered English medium education.

Over time this ambitious effort has generated some research on the effectiveness of this policy with regard to the learning of English on the part of students as well as their ability to study different subjects in that language. As a part of ongoing research, the key studies that have been reviewed for the purpose of this brief are 'Transition to English Medium Instruction in Punjab: A Curriculum Gap?' Australian Council for Education Research (ACER 2017), 'Policy & Practice: Teaching and Learning in English in Punjab Primary Schools' Society for the Advancement of education (SAHE 2013), 'Language in Education in Pakistan: Recommendations for Policy and Practice, 'Coleman and Capstick (British Council, 2012), and 'Punjab Education and English Language Initiative (PEELI, British Council 2013). A summary account of their key findings and recommendations is as follows:

Common findings

- a) Most teachers themselves are ill equipped to communicate and teach in English. As a result, other locally used languages (Urdu and regional languages) that the teachers and students are comfortable in are used extensively in the classroom. Classroom observations indicate that in most cases this is different from the strategic use of local language for purposes of clarification and makes the learning of English, infrequently

used by teachers and students, more difficult. Use of English is generally relegated to 'safe-talk' or a set of standard terms and phrases that in turn require a standard response; for example 'sit down', 'stand up', 'open your books' etc. A teacher from southern Punjab summarized the dilemma in these words, "We are Seraiki, we understand first in Seraiki, then Urdu and in the end in English, and in all this we move nowhere" (Rashid A. Muzaffar I., Butt S., Awan A., Bashiruddin A., 2013, p. 51).

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- b) The task of becoming proficient in English appears to become particularly difficult for a majority of students coming from low-income households who do not enjoy the benefit of a home or neighbourhood environment that allows for communication in English and supports learning of the language.
- c) Where greater use is being made of English in the classroom, it is mostly relegated to reading the course books instead of engaging in meaningful interaction. As to the lack of use of English in the

classrooms, one of the studies reports that less than 15% of the teachers are teaching exclusively in English (PEELI Report, 2013, p. 2).

- d) Lack of proficiency in English on the part of teachers appears to be coupled with insufficient training to prepare them to adopt English as Mol. A respondent in one of the studies observed, "Teachers are motivated to teach English, provided they have proper resources and adequate training." (PEELI Report, 2013, p. 18). On the matter of training, another teacher in a different study also shared a suggestion; "The government should carry out refresher courses for teachers so that they can teach better in English medium." (Transition to English Medium Instruction in Punjab: A Curriculum Gap?, 2017, p. 71)
- e) The duration of training appears to be an issue. In one instance, the teachers were reportedly engaged in a 15-day training program before they were expected to implement the EMI policy. According to some of them, this training may have been very useful for teachers who may themselves have studied in an English medium environment, but it did not help the rest of the teachers. In other words, apparently, only those who have had a reasonably strong grounding in the language benefit from the given training (Rashid et al., 2013, p. 52).
- f) By way of an equity argument, the supporters of an EMI policy from the very early stage at school see it

as a socio-economic leveller that helps improve the students' chances of getting higher education and going on to more successful careers and social advancement.

- g) Parents, for their part, are strongly inclined to view proficiency in English as being critical to a better future for their children. And, according to one study, a great majority of them see the early adoption of English as Mol as an important step in acquiring that proficiency. Even the relatively small numbers of parents who express reservations with regard to the policy were more concerned with the problems that arose from the manner in which it was implemented. (Rashid et al., 2013, p. 52).

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- h) Similarly, according to another study, a significant number of teachers who do not support the current EMI policy aren't opposed to English medium instruction per se, but rather they are sceptical about the way the current policy has been implemented (PEELI Report, 2013). This method of introducing the language may have worked well for students from well-off households and some exceptionally gifted children, but for the vast

majority of students from low-income backgrounds, having to study different subjects in English has not helped make them become proficient in English nor has it enhanced their learning in other subjects. The English language curriculum in class 3 especially has been cited in one report as not being sufficiently advanced to prepare students for comprehensively adopting English as the Mol in key subjects from grade-4 onwards. The language in Science books in particular has been categorised as very difficult. The curriculum has also been cited as being unreasonably lengthy, with one teacher saying, "The curriculum is too lengthy, because of which the teachers have to rush through the course, making it difficult for the kids to understand" (PEELI Report, 2013, p. 19).

Results from the Aptis test, conducted by The British Council to gauge the English language proficiency of teachers, 62% of private school teachers fall in the lowest band of the test. On the other hand, the proportion of government school teachers falling in the same band is 56%.

- i) On the whole, districts in and around divisional headquarters have been seen to have staff that is better skilled in English in comparison with secondary districts (which are more likely to be dominated by a rural environment). Another distinction is seen within districts between teachers from

public and private schools, where a larger proportion of private school teachers were apparently more comfortable with the English curricula. Whether they are actually more proficient in English is, of course, another matter. Results from the Aptis test, conducted by The British Council to gauge the English language proficiency of teachers, 62% of private school teachers fall in the lowest band of the test. On the other hand, the proportion of government school teachers falling in the same band is 56% (PEELI 2013, p. 1).

- j) A further distinction is noted between younger and senior teachers. *Younger teachers* (21-35 years of age) are noted to be keen to learn new teaching strategies and have been using English as the Mol during Math and Science classes to a considerable extent. With senior teachers (50 years and above), this number drops considerably (PEELI Report, 2013, p. 22). Whether this is also making a significant difference to student learning has to be ascertained.
- k) There is support for Urdu as Mol among teachers. Most reports indicate that it is the medium generally employed in teaching. Because of the very real limitations they face in the classroom. Notwithstanding the value they see in English medium education, about 50% of the teachers according to one report, are of the opinion that Urdu should be retained as the Mol. Another 25% suggested that a

bilingual policy might be more helpful in propagating learning while still continuing to improve English language skills. In its current form, public school teachers feel that English is being imposed on them and the students (PEELI Report, 2013, p. 23). According to a respondent, “My students are much better because they are taught in Urdu – Urdu can teach all children” (*Transition to English Medium Instruction in Punjab: A Curriculum Gap?*, 2017, p. 71).

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- l) The low level of student achievement over the last few years reflected in assessments carried out by assessment regimes such as the National Education Assessment System (NEAS), the Punjab Examination Commission (PEC) and Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), would suggest that one of the key areas for review would be the language in education policy. However, it continues to enjoy support in the policy sphere. Some appear to think that things will eventually work out will others appear concerned about the possible political fallout as a consequence of any attempted change in policy.

Key recommendations

- a) In order to address the barriers and limitations being faced in effective implementation of EMI, various recommendations have also been made in the different reports. One recommendation that has been put forth by most of the reports is to allow the use of the mother tongue, or/and a language of common use, within the classroom environment to enable learning. This suggestion is also based on the findings of various international studies that show that using the mother tongue or first language (the language in which students have the highest fluency), as the medium of instruction is the most effective way to help students learn any subject in the early years. While some reports suggest that the first language (Urdu or the mother tongue) should remain the MoI for the first few years of schooling (Rashid et al, 2013, p. 55), others also suggest that a multilingual approach incorporating regional languages to be used in the classrooms might be more helpful (Language in education in Pakistan: Recommendations for Policy and Practice, 2012). Some respondents have also suggested that books for the curricula being taught in English should be bilingual so as to help students understand concepts in the first or familiar language while simultaneously learning these concepts etc. in the second language (English). (PEELI, 2013, ps. 23, 24)
- b) What all the reports agree upon is that introducing English as a medium of instruction in class 1 and then switching to English as MoI for Math, Science and Social Science in class 4 does not appear to be conducive to either learning English as a language or learning other subjects in English. The appropriate conditions for students to learn English are not there. And, it follows, that they are simply not fluent enough in English within these first few years for them to switch to English as MoI. The implication is that more time is needed before the transition to English as MoI and further that English has to be properly taught as a subject, i.e. second language, preferably by those trained to do so.
- c) There is an emphasis on more effective and sustained training of teachers to enhance their skill to a level that is adequate for English medium instruction. Teachers need to be trained in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language.
- d) One study suggests that prior to putting in place a language policy, a large scale and in-depth study needs to be conducted. This should include original research to assess pre- and in-service training being provided to teachers, the points at which English and Urdu are being introduced, evidence of impact on children's comprehension where the local language is employed and the language attitudes and expectations of parents, school managers, teachers and other stakeholders.

The data should inform the design of an effective language policy. (*Language in education in Pakistan: Recommendations for Policy and Practice*; 2012, Chapter 12)

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These studies provide us with considerable insight into the present state of English Medium Education in Punjab, and there are a number of points upon which most or all are in agreement: Introducing English as the Medium of Instruction prior to ensuring that both teachers and students have attained a certain level of proficiency in the language has been discouraged by all the studies. This is largely to avoid burdening the child with the dual task of learning a particular subject as well as an additional language at the same time. Such an approach often tends to result in the child not being able to accomplish either. Emphasis has also been placed on the proper training of teachers. This training not only refers to bringing their English language skills up to an adequate level but also enhancing their pedagogical skills. All the studies acknowledge that the first language/mother tongue, is the most effective medium for early-grades education because of the students' and teachers' fluency in the medium. While teaching and learning in the first or familiar language has been cited as a way to help students understand various subjects and concepts, experts also emphasise that fluency in a given language serves as a firm

foundation or scaffolding for learning a second or third language.

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The desire to educate every child in English, a key language of the modern world, to ensure that he or she is not left behind in life is highly commendable. Introducing a policy that is meant to fulfil this desire should also be lauded. But is the policy achieving its objectives? Our review of the major studies over the last five years that have sought to gauge the effectiveness of the English as Mol policy in Punjab's schools is aimed at summarising their findings and recommendations. It is part of an effort to provide some assistance in the formidable task of devising an appropriate language policy for the education sector, particularly by reference to English but by no means limited to it.

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