ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN PAKISTAN – TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT OR WEAPON OF LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

1SANDEEP KAUR CHEEMA, 2PARMINDERJEET SINGH
1Assistant Professor, M. G. K. College for Girls, Manji Sahib (Kottan), Ludhiana, India
2Ex Assistant Professor, Punjabi University, Patiala, India
E-mail: 1scheema80@yahoo.co.in, 2parminderboparai@yahoo.com

Abstract- Pakistan is one country which is often in the news for the wrong reasons. But one aspect of the country remains hidden from the casual and distant observers. That is the affinity and aspirations of its state and people for the spread of the English language in the country. Undoubtedly, a few Pakistanis have made a name for themselves on the English literary horizon. The English writing in Pakistan is being touted as the next big thing and the reputed literary magazine Granta came out with a special issue on it a few years back. In spite of this, the jury is still out to ascertain the real character of English in the country. The present paper is an attempt to investigate the impacts and implications the spread of the English language has had in Pakistan. Keeping the detrimental effects in mind, we have also come up with a few suggestions to moderate the language policy of the country.

Keywords- English Language, Linguistic Imperialism, Empowerment, Linguistic Diversity, Native Language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Once, in the 1990s, a Kabaddi match was played between the teams of India and Pakistan at a town in the Indian Punjab. Before the match started, the Pakistani Kabaddi team members were hosted by some prominent Muslim families of the town by arranging tea and snacks at their homes. During the ensuing interaction, the first author happened to overhear a bit of conversation between a team member and one of the hosts whereby they were exchanging their addresses and promising each other to be in touch by the postal mail, which happened to be the norm in those days. What has stuck in the author’s mind to this day is their confusion over the language of communication as both of them wrote Punjabi in different scripts. The first author also remembers the un-hesitated approval by the Pakistani team member when his host asked if he could write the letter in English. The Pakistani also mentioned quite confidently that ‘angrezzi to hum parhte hain’ (The English language is what we study!). This incident is quite surprising as English was not something one associated with Kabaddi players. This incident is also an indicator of the complex and complicated status of English language in the country of Pakistan.

Historically speaking, Pakistan came into being on 14th August, 1947, becoming the first country to be constituted on the basis of religion in the world history. Its formation preceded that of Israel by one year. Pakistan consisted of two wings: East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and West Pakistan (now Pakistan). Both East Pakistan and West Pakistan were situated thousands of miles apart geographically. Besides the administrative problems, the language issues starting emerging between the East and West wings right after independence. Pakistan had to face the Bhasha Andolan, the Bengali Language Movement, in 1948 and 1952. The declaration by the state that “Urdu alone would be the state language of Pakistan” led to widespread protests in East Pakistan. The Bengali Language movement was suppressed, and on February 21, 1952, some activists were killed by the police in Dhaka. According to the census of 1952, Bengali speakers formed 54% of the population, hence making them the majority. According to Tariq Rahman, a senior Bangladeshi politician, Bengali nationalism rose in response to perceived West Pakistani domination and internal colonialism, which led to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. The making of Bangladesh simplified the language situation in Pakistan, as the tussle between Urdu and Bengali was over. Present-day Pakistan has four provinces, each with a provincial language, which are Sindhi, Baluchi, Pashto and Punjabi.

In the present day Pakistan, the official language is English which is used in important seats and functions of government, the judiciary, the armed forces, commerce and higher education. The Constitution of Pakistan is codified in English. The Constitution co-relates Urdu and Pakistan on the basis of nationalism, and thus Urdu is the national language of Pakistan. It is a multilingual country where bilingualism (multilingualism) is a habitual affair even in the life of an average student and citizen. The medium of instruction in Pakistan at higher education is exclusively English. According to the Constitution of Pakistan of 1973:

- 251(1) The National Language of Pakistan is Urdu and arrangements shall be made for its being used for official and other purposes until fifteen years from the commencing day.
- 251(2) Subject to clause (1), the English language may be used for official purposes until arrangements are made for its replacement by Urdu.
- 251(3) Without prejudice to the status of the National language, a Provincial Assembly may by
law prescribe measures for the teaching, promotion and use of a Provincial language in addition to the National language.

II. ENGLISH AS A PERCEIVED TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT

English has dominated the political and official landscape in Pakistan as in other developing countries for a long time as the language for development. More recently, the discourse of increased literacy in Millennium Development Goals and the upsurge in the use of English in the global market have added a universalistic dimension to the teaching-learning of English in Pakistan, thus making it a complex policy issue in relation to resource distribution and achieving quality in English language education. ‘English is the key to national progress’ and ‘English is the passport to success and upward social mobility’ are some common clichés that are interspersed in the formal discourse of government planning and policy meetings; more importantly, these clichés reflect the perception of many people – both rich and poor – in discussing future life opportunities for their children.

In Pakistan, English is viewed mainly as the language for development at both the individual and national levels. Indeed, the race for individual prosperity and economic development at the national level seems to have overtaken issues of class, identity and fear of cultural invasion from an erstwhile colonial language. This clamor for English has undoubtedly resulted in substantial changes for Pakistan in many fields.

2.1 Political Factors

Pakistan is a society having a multitude of languages and cultures. The linguistic map of Pakistan is quite complex with a myriad of languages; each of the four provinces has one or more dominantly major languages and a number of minority languages. The emblematic status of English, due to its historical association with the elite has helped in making it a language associated with prestige. English is the language of power in comparison with Urdu, the national language, and other regional languages of Pakistan. Every new elected government soon after assuming power announces its policy of teaching English to the masses as a way of achieving its proclaimed democratic ideals of equality of opportunity. As this decision is politically motivated, it comes as no surprise that implementation efforts fall short of the supposedly democratic intent of the policy. This official rhetoric of providing ‘equal’ opportunities for learning of English as a potential tool to level differences among the social classes, without a study of current provision and teachers’ ability to teach English effectively, does not match the objectives of education policy in Pakistan.

2.2 Economic Factors

In the present age, economic dimension of a nation is becoming more and more dominant in the geopolitical scenario. Economics has come to play an increasingly important role in the popular aspirations of the people of a country in comparison to nationalism or politics. A former Education Minister of Pakistan once articulated these feelings in the following words:

“When we subscribe to the experts’ view that the economic future of Pakistan is linked with the expansion of information technology, it means that we are recognising the need for making the comprehension and use of English as widespread as possible. This is now an urgent public requirement, and the government takes it as its duty to fulfil this requirement.”

The above view has resulted in the English for All policy, under which the government has instructed all public sector schools to start teaching English from class I without taking into account the feasibility of this policy decision or the steps and resources required for its successful implementation. There was a news item relating to such government steps in the October 22, 2013 issue of Dawn titled ‘Government schools to switch over to English medium’. The report gives the details of plans of the provincial government for all the government schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to switch over from Urdu to English medium gradually in a period of four to five years, according to officials. Apart from this, Pakistan's Higher Education Commission’s English Language Teaching (ELT) Reform Project aims at improving the quality of teaching-learning of English in higher education institutions in the country. This project endeavors to revolutionize 'the socio-economic indicators of Pakistan' and 'contribute considerably to supplement the efforts of government to improve the standard of higher education and scientific learning'. Furthermore, improving the teaching and learning of English 'will help the graduates of public sector universities and institutions of higher learning to compete for good jobs in Pakistan'.

Improvements in the quality of English are explicitly linked to technological development, particularly in the field of information and communication technology (ICT). However, the crux of argument focuses on learning English in pursuit of long-term economic gains. The government's viewpoint is in consonance with the current global clamor of promoting education for poverty alleviation, a discourse initiated by development agencies and also embodied in the Millennium Development Goals. The popular opinion in Pakistan also subscribes to the view that English is the tool for individual and national economic prosperity and progress. These beliefs are in complete disagreement with the arguments put forward in the favor of using the mother tongue for economic development, particularly in rural and tribal communities in third world countries.
III. ENGLISH AS A WEAPON OF LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

In the year 1992, a revelatory book titled 'Linguistic Imperialism' appeared in the field of applied linguistics. The author, Robert Phillipson, enunciated that the global teaching and spread of English was an act of linguistic imperialism. One of the major arguments in Linguistic Imperialism was that the spread of English, much of which had occurred through its prominence in global language education, has served to undermine the rights of other languages and to even marginalize the opportunities that should have existed for widespread multilingual education. Since the 18th century, Phillipson argued, the spread of English has accompanied the political and economic intentions of English-speaking nations to conquer other countries. He claims this endangers their cultural ideals, their ways of life and their indigenous languages. While rummaging through the history of India under the British rule, we could see the truth behind some of his propositions after having gone through Macaulay's Minute. Collectively, English language teaching and its major agencies, like the British Council, have been implicated in churning out and perpetuating myths about the significance and necessity of learning English and in ensuring that English has outstripped the teaching of other languages worldwide.

Linguistic imperialism is an ever-present threat arising from the global spread of English, even when English is welcomed as a lingua franca, a global language. Phillipson’s off-hand, operational definition of linguistic imperialism is that 'the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages'. According to Phillipson's prescription, language teachers should teach their students in a manner that English does not exert a hegemonic influence over local cultures. The spread of English causes language change, often to the extent that indigenous languages are 'killed'.

The most recent and predominant example of Linguistic Imperialism came to the fore when, in 2014, the Russian President Vladimir Putin justified his annexation of Crimea on the ground that he owed protection to Russian language speakers everywhere in the world. The issue of The Economist dated May 10th, 2014 mocked his assertion by redrawing the boundaries of the world to the delight of a hardcore linguistic imperialist. Therein, Portugal got to reclaim Brazil, Spain most of the rest of Central and South America and France most of western part of Africa. A unified Arabia was shown stretching from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. The two Koreas became one, which might be a good thing—or not, depending on which system prevailed. Britain would regain its empire, including—since it spoke English first—the United States.

Zubeida Mustafa, an independent journalist based in Karachi, in her book ‘Tyranny of Language in Education: The Problem and its Solution’ asserts that the country is in a state of linguistic confusion. She reinforces it by stating that on the one hand, people are desperate to be seen as being proficient in English when they are actually not. At the same time they are ashamed of their own language though that is the only language they can communicate in properly. The ambiguity of the language of instruction policy allows schools to make their own choices, which has contributed to the present crisis in education in Pakistan. English language has been glorified in Pakistan to such an extent that all logic has been put aside. With the exception of a small minority of children who are bilingual due to their environment at home, teaching children in a language other than their mother tongue in the early years causes them harm, no matter how good their teachers may be. This approach deprives the child of the natural advantage she has in her home language.

Robert Phillipson wrote in The Guardian (March 13th 2012) an article headlined ‘Linguistic imperialism alive and kicking’. He admitted that his worries were triggered by reports like “Language myth cripples Pakistan's schools”. He reassured that the US and UK policy to promote English language teaching expertise around the world is undermining multilingualism and education opportunities.

There have also been other detrimental effects of educating students in English. Introduction of the English language to children in early childhood has, in many cases, proved to be an ineffective way to develop language proficiency. This can obstruct children’s learning and may threaten local languages as shown in some southeastern Asian countries like Malaysia and the Philippines, which have high primary school dropout rates. Malaysia had to go back to using Malay in educational instruction since 2012 as a result of failure of a large number of poor and rural Malaysian children in learning Science and Math through English. Moreover, teachers who have the ability to teach two subjects in English were limited.

Keeping the linguistic variety of the country, the appropriate and effective way to present English as a lingua franca to Pakistan students without endangering local languages and cultures is through the development of mother tongue and national language proficiencies in childhood before presenting English language. The principle of English language learning in a multilingual environment is suggested as the following:
1. Use mother tongue as an instructional language.
2. Introduce English later in the curricula towards the end of primary school.
3. Students’ English proficiency goal should be multilingual performance and proficiency, not native proficiency.
This type of multilingual policy is necessary for promoting literacy as well as other important cognitive functioning that develops while learning to read in one’s native language.

CONCLUSION

Hence, the English language in Pakistan has proved to be more of a weapon of linguistic imperialism and less of a tool of empowerment and development. Except for the elite classes of the country, it has perpetuated a state of confusion in students in particular and people in general. Its aggressive implementation has also resulted in many long term adverse consequences like loss to diversity and indigenous cultures of the country. The language policy of the country should be tweaked so that the English language should evolve by itself and not be forced upon the people of Pakistan.

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