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Translanguaging in Pakistani Higher Education: A Neglected Perspective!

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore avenues to use translanguaging in Pakistani higher education. Data for this study were collected from the natives of Gilgit-Baltistan, especially from students and teachers, and most of the respondents were either university teachers or students. The researchers developed a questionnaire on Google forms containing both qualitative and quantitative statements and questions, later on, it was used to collect the data for the present study. The questionnaire was disseminated among the participants through emails and social media platforms, and in total the researchers received 324 responses. The findings of the study reveal that in a number of universities in the country, teachers and students are making use of more than two languages, i.e., Urdu and English, and their mother tongue while delivering lectures and discussing in the classroom. The third language is usually the regional language or the mother tongues of the students, but its use along with the officially accepted media of instruction is quite a few and rare in the universities. Only particular teachers and students in particular programs make use of the regional languages or mother tongues of the students on a need basis. The findings have pertinent implications for higher education in Pakistan and elsewhere in a similar context.

Keywords: Multilingualism, Translanguaging, Higher Education, Language Medium of Instruction, Inequality

Introduction

The prime purpose of educational institutions, across the globe, is to enable the students to grow intellectually and approach real-world problems with critical thinking and deep comprehension followed by problem-solving skills gained throughout their educational career (Garcia & Wei, 2014). A number of factors are involved in enabling and disabling a student to achieve their educational goals, and the language(s) medium of education is one of them (Pennycook, 1998). Countries with a history of colonization use the language of their masters as the language medium of instruction in most cases, and Pakistan, being an ex-colony of British, uses English as the language medium of instruction especially in its higher education (Crystal, 2003). The use of a new language, in addition to a number of other factors, turns the learners into bilingual or multilingual (Romaine, 2008; Matras, 2009). Furthermore, a basic rule of educating students in two languages is that they learn better in the language that they understand completely (Wright, 2013). However, it is not always the case, the language contact phenomenon usually is not favourable for the language(s) spoken by the students especially if it is a minority one (Fishman, 2001). Such conditions give rise to 'subtractive bilingualism' where the educational institutions take away the native minoritized language of the students and substitute it with a dominant or a majority language (Garcia & Wei, 2015). Therefore, the pupils who are unable to use the language medium of "instruction are at disadvantage..." (Mansoor, 2005, p.102). Because, in Pakistan, only a few proportions of the masses can communicate in English (Phillipson, 1992, p. 26). Thus, this phenomenon has grave implications for a great majority of the students in the country. The difference in their home language and the language medium of instruction at the university results in poor learning on the part of the students. The imposition of an alien language in education and negligence of students' mother tongue results in subtractive bilingualism resulting in inequality in learning which leads the students to 'capacity deprivation' (Mohanty et al., 2009).

This alienated teaching and learning condition greatly reduce learning on the part of the students, and the scholars believe that it is not due to the “language deficit but from language difference” (Maybin, 2007). In addition to the language difference, mostly the very different language is chosen to be the language medium of instruction, especially at the tertiary level, because of which the students have to compromise on their learning which consequently affects the quality of education at the tertiary level (Mansoor, 2005). One of the reasons for the decline in the standards in higher education is the use of an unknown language medium of instruction where the students first try to learn the language and then the content, but, meanwhile, the amount of the content to be learned exceeds beyond their capacity with the passage of time and they cannot cope up with both the things at a time and they are neither able to learn the language nor the content of the courses (Hussain, 2016). Thus, if the students are exposed to translanguaging in higher education in Pakistan, it may greatly uplift their pace of learning and the standards of education at the same time.

Translanguaging is an approach which “...not only creates the possibility that bilingual students could use their full linguistic and semiotic repertoire to make meaning, but also that teachers would “take it up” as a legitimate pedagogical practice” (Garcia & Wei, 2015, pp. 226-227). Translanguaging liberates both the teacher and students, they may employ any language available to them in their immediate environment that is the teacher and the students would use the range of linguistic repertoire available to them. This phenomenon helps both the teacher and the students to achieve the objectives of each lesson easily with maximum understanding and participation from each and every pupil.

Literature review

Pakistan as an ex-British colony uses English in its mainstream education as the language medium of instruction. It has been a trend of the colonizers all around the world that they have left behind their languages as the legacy of the rule in those countries. Similarly, the Indian-Subcontinent received English in the legacy (Crystal, 2003), where their old masters used it to “best run a colony” (Pennycook, 1998, p. 20). However, the imposition of English is not the same everywhere, some of the countries (like Japan) required the very language as a link language to communicate with the international communities, however, in some other countries this language was imposed during the colonial era and it still persists there serving a range of everyday purposes, like in Pakistan and India (Phillipson, 1992). One of the main purposes that English serves in Pakistan is its use as the language medium of instruction, especially in higher education. According to Crystal (2003) after the departure of the British colonizers from the subcontinent, the language of their masters, i.e., English quickly gained the status of the official and ‘literary language’ in the region. After a couple of decades, the very language was made the medium of instruction in higher education, consequently benefitted the ones, in education and in their professional life, who had received education in English.

The implantation of English as the medium of instruction (EMI) in education in Pakistan has a number of implications, and ineffective learning outcomes on the part of the learners are the most important ones. Furthermore, learning an alien language is costly for the poor segments of the country. In most of the ex-British colonies, the English language is employed as the language medium of instruction at primary and secondary levels, it not only affects the learning of the students, but it also proves to be economically costly for the learners (Ferguson, 2006). This difference of language medium of instruction usually benefits some and disadvantages many in Pakistani higher education. Because, the way people are classified in the colonial system, clearly exerts social inequality among the subjects as it ‘privileges some while marginalizes others’ (Shin & Kubota, 2008). The majority of students suffer from social inequality because of the language that is used to instruct them and it negatively impacts the ‘academic success of’ most of the learners (Civan & Coskun, 2016). Thus, the language policy in higher education needs to be reviewed. According to Mansoor (2005) students at the tertiary level in Pakistan encounter, many issues due to the current language in education policy, and most of the issues are related to students ‘difficulties in English’. Learners’ difficulties in learning in English can not only be witnessed in their first year at the university, rather they remain throughout their respective programs. However, the intensity of the difficulties in learning in English is higher in the first year as compared to the following years (Civan & Coskun, 2016). Students’ learning completely depends upon their comprehension of the lectures, but, if the lectures are delivered in a language that the students understand the least based on their “current English language proficiency (especially listening proficiency) . . .” (Chang 2010, p.76), then it would lead to “...high levels of

student dissatisfaction” (El-Fiki, 2012, p. 23). Thus, students' and teachers' preference of language use in higher education is important for better learning outcomes.

Students' and Teachers' Preferred Language Medium of Instruction

Human beings are divided into different nations or groups based on a number of variables and language is one of them (Wright, 2007). In addition to furnishing the identity of a group, language is one of the most influential media through which people are educated. It is considered that the mother tongue is the best for the child to receive their initial education, however, most parents want their child to receive the education in the most important language (Maybin, 2007). The prestigious language in the context of Pakistan is English. It is considered to be the most instrumental language in education and the job market. The ones with better proficiency in the English language not only obtain good grades in their tests and examinations, but they also get more opportunities for white-collar jobs as compared to the ones without it (Crystal, 2014; Shamim, 2011; Mansoor, 2003; Phillipson, 1992). Thus, in Pakistan parents, students and teachers prefer to use English as the language medium of instruction due to its instrumentality in everyday affairs. The prime purpose and preference of using English as the language medium of instruction in different educational institutions is mainly attached with its instrumentality in education and securing a good job. However, the use of Urdu is mainly integrative in nature (Mansoor, 2003).

The practicality of the English language in real-life attracts everyone living in third-world countries. Furthermore, the association of prestige with English language competency brings a notion of division in society. In society, someone who has come from an English medium educational background is deemed superior to the ones with Urdu medium educational background. The nation seems to be advancing in the direction of 'language apartheid' (Shamim, 2011). Therefore, even with a higher level of difficulty in understanding and producing speech in English, the majority of the students still prefer English as the language medium of instruction at the tertiary level in Pakistan, placing Urdu at 2nd and regional language at 3rd position in their language preference continuum (Mansoor, 2003). Students' preference of English as the language medium of instruction seems to be under the influence of its instrumentality in the real life. However, students face a number of challenges while learning an alien language which negatively affects their academic performance (Alhassan, Ali, & Ali, 2021; Hussain, 2016; Mansoor, 2003). Though most of the students prefer to learn in both Urdu and English for a better learning experience as lectures in the English language are usually beyond their comprehension (Hussain, 2016; Khan, 2013). The preference to use Urdu is not only specific to the students, teachers also prefer the Urdu language. It seems that not only the students but also some qualified faculty members of the university prefer to use Urdu instead of English to accommodate the students from different educational backgrounds (Khan, 2013). Their preference and the norms of education contradict which results in poor performance on the part of the students.

The difference of students' mother tongues or regional languages and the language medium of instruction cause the students to suffer in terms of understanding, learning, and grades in examinations. The choice of English as the language medium of instruction in Pakistan brings linguistic imperialism to the Pakistani education system. This phenomenon not only brings inequality in education, rather it stigmatizes the minority languages and their speakers. Thus, the natives of the minority languages around the world are victims of linguistic imperialism or linguicism as their languages do not have any place in their education system and they are treated as irrelevant and a hindrance to advancement and modernity in the modern world. Furthermore, these minority languages are not allocated any funds to flourish even in their own ecosystem. Moreover, another example of linguicism is that when people with the ability to speak a particular language are given preference over others in different types of professions or employment (Phillipson, 2003).

The preference for people with competency and fluency in a specific language brings the phenomenon of inequality among the learners in an educational institution and the youth seeking employment opportunities in the country. Thus, the educational institutions, especially universities in the country, should focus on an approach that can accommodate all the learners and encourage them in participating in meaning-making and learning together undermining linguistic imperialism to promote holistic learning. One of the best proposals for the very phenomenon is translanguaging.

Translanguaging

Educational institutions in Pakistan unofficially employ both English and the national language, i.e., Urdu, while delivering the lectures and discussing different topics in the classroom. Because, a basic rule of educating students in two languages is that they learn better in the language that they understand completely (Wright, 2013). Furthermore, using two languages in education is known as 'bilingual education' and by extension, using more than two languages is called 'multilingual education' (Wright, Boun, & Garcia, 2015). In addition to the already available bilingual and multilingual education system, a new perspective in teaching and learning has emerged that employs not only specific bilingualism or multilingualism, rather it encourages to use of all the available linguistic repertoire of the students and the teacher in the classroom, known as translanguaging.

Translanguaging has been explained by many scholars as an advanced and more effective method of teaching and learning. "Translanguaging is a method of learning in which students produce an output of their learning in a language different to that of instruction" (Beres, 2015, p. 14). This means, the students may have the lectures in English, and they may use their mother tongues or regional or national language to note down the lectures, attempt papers in examinations, and discuss the topics in any language they want. This phenomenon brings a ray of hope for both the students belonging to minority groups and their vanishing minority languages in the world. Translanguaging provides a platform to use both the dominant and dominated languages in the same setting which provides a better understanding of the content at hand, and it also helps the minority or weak language to grow in relation to the dominant one being used for teaching (Caruso, 2018; Garcia & Wei, 2015). In the 21st century, the world is shifting from the conventional notion of teaching and learning and a number of transformational steps are being taken everywhere to make the process of teaching and learning easier and more fruitful. According to Baker (2011, p. 72) "more dynamic, with the hybrid, overlapping, and simultaneous use of different languages" is encouraged for better learning outcomes, thus, in this context translanguaging seems to be the most appropriate method for successful teaching and learning practices not only in schools even at a tertiary level too. A number of countries where they value the use of bilingualism in education are making use of translanguaging to sustain the bilingual practices as it is being adopted in mainstream education (Garcia & Wei, 2015, p. 225). Thus, developing countries like Pakistan should encourage translanguaging in their educational institutions for better teaching and learning experience on the part of both the teachers and students.

Currently, in Pakistani higher education, officially, the 'English-only' predominant language medium of instruction hinders successful learning on the part of the students. Almost all the students at the tertiary level in the country are either bilingual or multilingual who bring a diverse cultural and linguistic repertoire with them which the universities should make use of for optimum benefit (Bauer, Presiando, Colomer, 2017), but this perspective is not being given any importance.

Method

This study follows the norms of mixed methods research where through triangulation the researchers use a tool of data collection, a questionnaire, containing both qualitative and quantitative nature of questions and statements. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods helps to complement each other and to obtain a holistic view of the phenomenon in question (Creswell, 2012; Tavakoli, 2012), thus, the study uses mixed methods research.

The questionnaire for data collection was developed on Google forms and was disseminated among the respondents through emails and social media platforms. In total, the researchers received 324 responses from the natives of Gilgit-Baltistan. Most of these respondents are either university teachers or students. The researchers have used the subjective responses of the participants to "... refine, extend, or explain the general picture" (Creswell, 2012, p. 542) of the phenomenon obtained through the quantitative data. The notion of translanguaging as a core theoretical framework guides this study.

The demographic information of the respondents shows that the group is quite heterogeneous. The majority of the respondents were males (81%), while females were in minority with only 19%. The number of languages the majority speak range from two to four and 0.7% of the respondents speak five languages. A staggering number of respondents speak three languages (78.6%), while, 8.2% of them speak four languages, and 5.4% speak two languages. The rest of the 7.8% of the respondents have been placed in other.

This heterogeneous group has qualifications ranging from matriculation to Ph.D. The majority of the respondents (49.8%) are M.A or MSc degree holders, and 19.6% MS or M.Phil, 16.1% B.A or BSc, 7.7% intermediate, 4.5 Ph.D., 0.3% matriculates, and the rest of the 2% fall into the category of other.

According to the findings, the respondents speak four different languages as their mother tongues. The majority (84.1%) speak Balti as their mother tongue, while 13% speak Shina, 2.3% speak Burushaski and 0.6% of them speak Kohwar.

Results

The respondents do code-mix and code-switch while conversing in their mother tongue. The degree of their code-mixing or code-switching ranges from always to never. According to the data, the majority, i.e., 34.4%, code-mix for sometimes while conversing in their mother tongue. They choose to use the Urdu and English equivalent words even though they have words to communicate those specific ideas in their mother tongues. The second-highest number of respondents that often use Urdu and English equivalent make up 30.8% of the whole respondents, and 22% of them seldom use the equivalents. However, 8.9% of the respondents always opt for the Urdu and English equivalents and only 3.9% never use the equivalents from Urdu and English while communicating in their mother tongues. Furthermore, the trend of code-switching among the respondents is quite similar to the use of Urdu and English equivalents.

Analysis shows that 31.5% of the respondents code-switch to either Urdu or English while conversing in their mother tongue. While 30.8% often, 23.9% seldom, 12.5% always, and only 1% never code-switch to Urdu or English when they are communicating in their mother tongue.

The ratio of code-mixing that the respondents do differ between Urdu and English. It was found that 31.4% of the respondents use Urdu words, while 43.5% use English words sometimes during their conversations. However, they (39.2%) often use Urdu lexis as compared to 23.5% who opt for English words. The respondents who always use Urdu words stand at 25.5%, and only 10.5% of them always opt for English lexical items during their day-to-day communication. Similarly, 3.3% Urdu and 18.6% seldom use English words, while only 0.7% Urdu and 4% never use English words in their daily communications. This shows that the respondents code-mix more Urdu words while conversing in their mother tongue as compared to the English lexicon.

The following quotes, provided, by the respondents at the end of the questionnaire against the opened ended question regarding the use of a suitable language medium of instruction at the university level reveal that;

People prefer to use Urdu words even there is a Balti word to be used.

Using English is considered to be privileged that's why people try to use English words in their local languages and they tend to forget the several words of the local language.

The quotes given above show how the respondents prefer to use English and Urdu words instead of the lexicon of their mother tongues. Their choice of using Urdu and English words is mainly due to the great influence of these languages through a number of means. However, the trend to learn and use exotic words while communicating in the local languages negatively affects the vitality of these minority languages.

According to the analysis, when Urdu or English is used as the language medium of instruction in educational institutions, it negatively affects the local minority languages. According to the data, 66.8% of the respondents believe that Urdu and English are replacing their mother tongues in Gilgit-Baltistan. While 18.2% of them do not think so, and 15% of them are not sure whether Urdu or English are replacing local languages or not. Furthermore, the association of prosperity and the notion of ability with fluency in the English language compel the locals to get inclined towards the English language.

Thus, 73.3% of the respondents believe that fluency in the English language can change the future prospects for them, i.e., the students can get better grades if they are fluent in the English language. However, 12.4% do not think that fluency in English can help them in their career, and 14.3% of the respondents are not sure whether fluency in English is helpful or not.

The practicality and instrumentality of Urdu and English are pushing the local languages to the periphery, however, on the other hand, the knowledge and fluency in Urdu and English help the people to prosper in their life. The following quotations by the respondents help to understand the very phenomenon clearly.

Local languages are weakening because no financial benefit is attached to them.

Job hunting demands learning multiple languages preferably English.

If a student wants to compete for admissions/ jobs at the international level, he/she should receive instruction in English to have a fair chance of success

The use of Urdu and English in educational institutions and elsewhere is helping these languages to prosper at the expense of the local languages. Furthermore, the local people of the region prefer to learn Urdu and English due to their instrumentality and practicality in life. People with fluency in English have higher chances of getting better grades in their educational career and good job opportunities out there in the job market.

The respondents had exposure to different languages during their schooling. Most of them (79.3%) had Urdu as the language medium of instruction, whereas 38% had their mother tongues as the media of teaching and learning. However, only 12.3% had English and 0.3% had both Urdu and their mother tongues as the media of instruction during their schooling.

During their educational career at the college level, i.e., 11th and 12th standard, 92.6% of the respondents were taught in Urdu while 31.1% had their education in English as the language medium of instruction. Only 5.8% of the respondent received their education in their mother tongues at the college level and 0.3% had both Urdu and English as the media of instruction. However, none of them received their education in Urdu and their mother tongue as a bilingual medium of teaching.

The data further reveal that 72.1% of the respondents received their education in English as the language medium of instruction at the university.

According to the respondents, they were taught in their mother tongue, Urdu, and English throughout their educational career. However, as the level of education grew, they shifted to Urdu and English only language medium of instruction. The following quotations by the respondents show how they feel about the use of exotic languages at school, college, and university levels.

Because in school we use English, therefore, we cannot promote our local language.

In school, you aren't allowed to speak local languages

Local language(s) should be used as the medium of instruction at school, college, or university level for better learning outcomes for the students

The respondents believe that the use of exotic languages as media of instruction and restricting local languages endanger the local minority languages. Thus, they think that the local languages should also be used as the media of instruction to support them flourish, which is not possible without the application of translanguaging in educational institutions.

When the respondents were asked to share their preference of the language to be used as the language medium of instruction at different educational institutions. According to the findings, 64.2% believe that Urdu should be used as the language medium of instruction at the school level, and 46.5% of them think that English as the language of instruction is fruitful in schools. However, 35% of the respondents believe that mother tongue should be used to teach the children, and the rest of the 2.4% opted for the category other.

Data show that 65% of the respondents consider Urdu as the appropriate language medium of instruction at the college level, however, 70.9% of them think that English should be used to teach the students in colleges. The proponents of mother tongue as the language medium of instruction are 14% of the whole sample and 0.9% opted for other in the questionnaire.

According to analysis, 38.7% of the respondents believe that Urdu should be used as the language medium of instruction, while 83.5% of them think that English is the most appropriate language of instruction at the university level. However, only 9% of the respondents were in favor of mother tongue to be used to teach at the university level, and the rest of the 0.6 opted for other.

The respondents almost equally support Urdu and English as the media of instruction at the university level, however, their preference towards their mother tongues is quite less. The following quotations by the respondents describe their preference for the language medium of instruction at the university level.

As I am a college student so might be I am wrong but I prefer English.

In my opinion, the English language along with Urdu and other languages should be used as the medium of instruction

National language should be used as a medium of instruction.

English and Urdu should be used as the medium of instruction at the university level.

The respondents prefer Urdu or English and in some cases Urdu and English as the preferred media of instruction at the university level. However, at the school level, their inclination is more towards Urdu and mother tongue, than towards English.

When the respondents were introduced to the concept of translanguaging and provided with the following statement “Translanguaging (An approach that allows and incorporates written and oral usage of different languages in the classroom) is the most appropriate medium of instruction at university level”. A huge majority of the respondents either agreed 48% or strongly agreed 7.2% with the statement. Some of the respondents disagreed with 9.8% and some strongly disagreed 6.9% with the notion of translanguaging as a method of teaching and learning at the university level. However, 22.5% of the respondents remained neutral and it was not applicable to 5.6% of the respondents as they were not university students.

Regarding translanguaging, most of the respondents think that three languages should be used as the media of instruction at the university level, i.e., the mother tongue, the national language, and the international language. The quotations are given below refine the findings of the quantitative phase of the study.

English, Urdu, and Balti respectively.

The mother tongue should also be used for better learning along with Urdu and English.

It depends on the caliber of students and choice of discipline /department. If deemed necessary a native language or a second language may be used for a better understanding of students.

The respondents think that the mother tongue of the students, the national language, i.e., Urdu, and the International language, i.e., English, all these languages should be used as the media of instruction at the university level for better understanding on the part of the students. Thus, most of the respondents without knowing the norms or name of translanguaging, prefer translanguaging as an effective method of teaching and learning at the university level.

Discussion

The use of a particular language as the medium of instruction in educational settings has grave consequences if the variables are not properly examined according to the tendencies of the learners related to their social, religious, ethnic, psychological, economic, regional, etc. priorities. The present study found that the students of Gilgit-Baltistan are bi- or multilingual. However, their preferences in education vary from person to person. Most of the respondents use words from Urdu and English while communicating in their mother tongues, which they relate to the use of these languages in education and other official and unofficial domains (Phillipson, 1992). Most of the students face issues in understanding lectures delivered in English, but still, they prefer to learn in the English language to compete for the job market (Shamim, 2011; Mansoor, 2003). The inclination of the students, their parents, and teachers towards the use of Urdu and English in educational settings for their instrumentality turn the students into bilingual and multilingual (Romaine, 2008), which as a result provide them with a new platform to explore multiple opportunities that consequently encourage them to leave their own language behind to shift to the dominant language (Crystal, 2003). The shift to other languages starts with code-mixing and code-switching to the dominant language(s) available in their immediate context.

The respondents blame their educational settings as one of the most influential factors to use Urdu and English more than their mother tongues. They had ample exposure to both of these languages through education either as the language medium of instruction or the content of the courses was in these languages (Crystal, 2003). However, most of them prefer to receive education either in Urdu or English and a considerable number of them also wish to have their mother tongues as the language medium of instruction along with Urdu and English (Garcia & Wei, 2015). The concept of using all the languages available to the students brings us to the notion of translanguaging, and a considerable number of the respondents believe that the use of a complete linguistic repertoire of the students can help them a lot in learning the concepts better as compared to the reliance on one or two exotic languages (Beres, 2015; Garcia & Wei, 2015; Baker, 2011). Thus, the use of translanguaging in Pakistani higher education can help the teachers and the students greatly in making teaching and learning easier and fun. This will ultimately have implications for the teaching of English in schools and for teacher education in the country (Khan & Butt. 2018).

Conclusion

The present study tried to explore the use of translanguaging as a sophisticated and fruitful method of teaching and learning at the tertiary level in Pakistan. The heterogeneous group of the respondents had experienced all the languages used as the media of instruction from their school through university. However, they see the exotic languages, like Urdu and English, as difficult to understand and communicate in them in an educational setting affecting their learning and grades negatively. But, the instrumentality of these languages compels them to learn and opt for them to be successful in their career. Their preference for the dominant languages and the excessive code-mixing and code-switching to these languages have greatly affected their ability to use their own mother tongues. However, the respondents have come to know the practicality of Urdu and English and their effective use in education throughout the country. They not only prefer to see Urdu and English as the main media of instruction in all the educational institutions across the country, but they believe that the use of regional languages or the mother tongues of the students can improve teaching and learn in all the educational institutions. Higher educational institutions in the country officially use English as the sole language medium of instruction, however, the unofficial use of the Urdu and mother tongues along with English already provide us with an example of an ideal teaching and learning scenario according to the changing trends in education with the advent of translanguaging as a new method of teaching. The respondents without the knowledge of translanguaging and its benefits, propose to use all the languages available to the students in teaching and learning to make the lessons more fruitful and holistic understanding of the phenomena under discussion.

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