

Re-Discovering the Destination: Understanding the Linguistic Journey of Pakistan's Children

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Many children in Pakistan experience a love-hate relationship with English—longing to speak the language but fearing stumbling with it. Their parents, on the other hand, are filled with awe of the language, swimming through the unquenched dreams of social status, economic pinnacle, and global companionship. Is it possible for these children who struggle in English to one day achieve fluency? Undoubtedly. Incentive is a key to adaption, and even prosperity, in an unfamiliar environment. But before we pursue the journey to achieving English fluency, let's stop for a second here to ask a question: Why English? Let's take a step back and broaden the question: What is the purpose of education? What is it that we strive to see in our children? *What is the destination we hope to reach?* If we want our children to be fully supported in exploring both their inner world alongside their outer world, we must shape their education journey accordingly. If we want to facilitate our children in their social, psychological, spiritual, and academic development, it is important that we invite them to develop their ability and willingness to learn. This love of learning will lead them on a journey of lifelong exploration, discovery, and growth.

Language is one of the most vital media through which we communicate, question, explore, and learn. Therefore, it is our responsibility to equip children with the language skills necessary for their learning by adopting language policies within schools that support and encourage children in their journeys. When children enter school premises, they must be encouraged to communicate their experiences, multifaceted identities, and cultures. At the same time, the classroom's teachings must be linguistically accessible to them. This two-way exchange requires that we adopt a medium which is familiar, comprehensible, and approachable to the students. If we adopt a medium of foreign or uncomfortable instruction within the classroom, we hinder our students' ability to express themselves and to engage with the classroom material.

Loss and Language in Our Schools

A school language policy that does not provide children with an apt medium of expression, communication, and learning crushes the potential of millions of children. In Pakistan, we often quote the crisis of 25 million out-of-school children (Naviwala, 2019). However, we seldom mention the 17 million children in school who are struggling and failing to read and write in almost any language, familiar or unfamiliar to them. When these children decide to no longer pursue an education, we say they "dropped out." But the truth of the matter is that, in many instances, these children are *pushed out* due to a systemic failure.

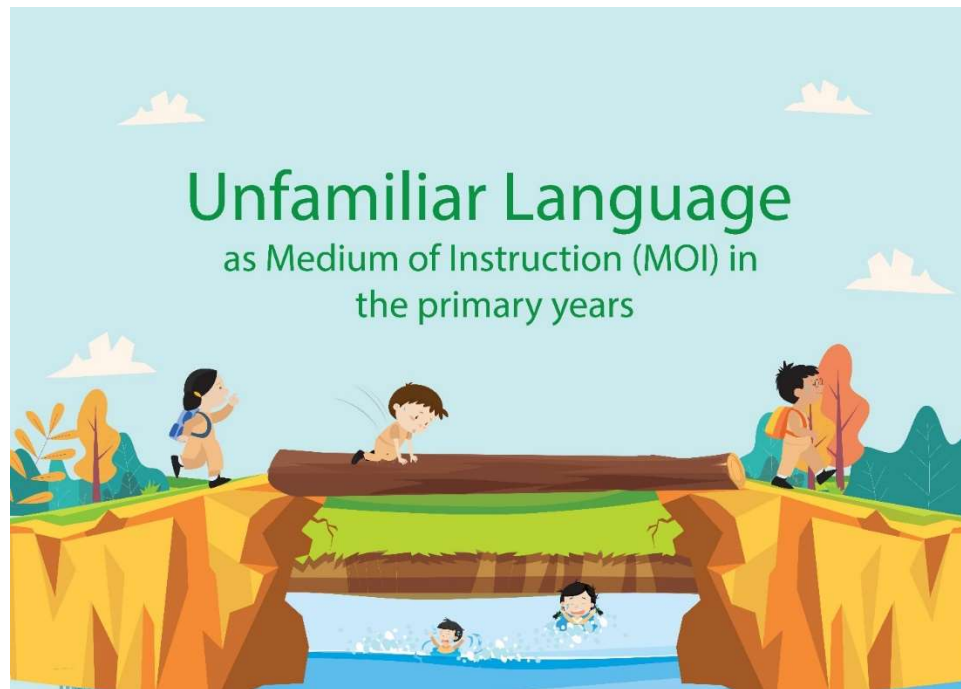


FIGURE 1. Many children are unable to learn and thrive when they are made to learn in an unfamiliar language. They are pushed out of the schooling system. *Source: Khawar Ali Rizvi, Zain ul Abedin, The Citizens Foundation, Pakistan.*

We must first acknowledge that if we — the schools, the state, our policies and practices — are the ones who have failed Pakistani children. We have created an environment in which the child is disadvantaged from the very first day, aggravating the conditions that lead to the child exiting the schooling system.

When children are expected early on in their education—sometimes as early as the first day of school—to learn, think, and produce in a language they do not hear or speak at home, they are faced with a burden that is discouraging at best, and unmanageable at worst. Adopting an unfamiliar language as the primary medium of instruction in early

education is too demanding for a young child to cope with (Ssentanda, 2014; Malone & Malone, 2017). This disadvantage disproportionately impacts children who already face other barriers to education, such as poverty, hunger, and poor learning conditions (Pinnock, 2009).

Most Familiar Language: Building a bridge

Research has stated that in order to ensure conceptual clarity and understanding, as well as to create a strong foundation for our children to learn as many languages as they aspire to, we must begin education in the language which is most familiar to the students: the mother tongue (MT) is the language in which children initially learn to think, communicate, and understand (UNESCO, 2003; Cummins, 1993, 2000). The term "mother tongue" itself highlights its nurturing role as the language that guides us as we are first introduced to the world. It provides us access to the world inside of us (our thoughts, feelings, ideas) as well as the world outside (our conversations, questions, experiences). Given this important role played by the MT in the early development of children, experts have unilaterally shown support for education in the early years to be in the mother tongue.

But is English not important? The answer to this question is that it is. Given that English is the global lingua franca, it is often a key for our children to unlock many doors of access and opportunity. Speaking English widens the linguistic repertoire of the child and thus allows access to spaces that would not have been possible without knowing the language. We cannot ignore, then, the fact that English can be a skill and tool in the life of a child.

However, it is also important to remember that English is only one of many skills with which we can equip our children in order for them to fully participate in and experience what the world has to offer. Understanding the role of English as a key, a tool, and a skill which can help children reach the eventual goal of learning, exploring, and growing helps us place the importance of the language in its due place. English is not our aspired destination — it is one of the tools which can contribute towards our aspired destination.

Whether your vision for your child is simply of them speaking English fluently, or them living a life of learning and exploration, the school language policy that is recommended to support both these aspired destinations is near-identical: adopt the most familiar language as the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling.

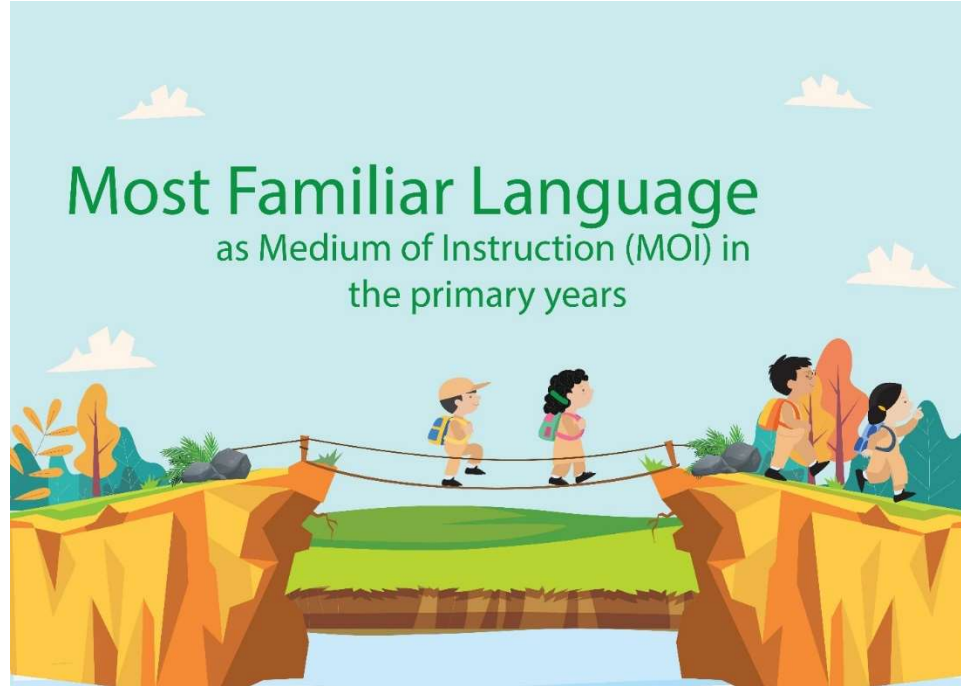


FIGURE 2. The most familiar language serves as a bridge and supports student learning. *Source: Khamar Ali Rizvi, Zain ul Abedin, The Citizens Foundation, Pakistan.*

Adopting the most familiar language for students as the medium of instruction in their early years of schooling creates a foundation for them to then successfully learn further language skills. When children have clarity and space to question the world around them in their early years, they equip *themselves* with the love of learning. Initial literacy in the most familiar language facilitates, rather than hinders, the acquisition of literacy in additional languages (Benson, 2005; Bialystok, 2001). Furthermore, only when children have reached a threshold of competence in their initial language can they successfully learn a second language without losing competence in both languages (Ball, 2010). The most familiar language builds a bridge between the known and the unknown — between home and school, familiar knowledge and unfamiliar knowledge — thus supporting students in their ability and willingness to learn.

Challenging the Myth

Some might think this sounds counter-intuitive: If we want our children to learn English as soon as possible, then why are we delaying the introduction of English in their lives?

A prevalent myth is that the earlier we introduce a language, the quicker and better our children learn it. Research points to the contrary. Educators worldwide have advocated that literacy in the second language

should not be introduced until a child has competence in speaking, reading, and writing the first language because this hinders, rather than supports, learning of additional languages (Garcia et. al., 2007).

A review of 19 studies on L3 acquisition across various multilingual countries found a positive relationship between age and third language acquisition in school: students performed better on tests of third language proficiency when they were introduced to the language at a later age. These results were explained by the older students' greater cognitive ability and their proficiency in their L1 (Dyssegaard, 2015).

Additionally, there is an absence of research to support that introducing an unfamiliar language in the early years of a non-native speaker's life will result in faster acquisition of that language. Instead, researchers have warned that when we teach only the English language in societies where it is not the most familiar language both for the student and for the teacher, we are slowing down a child's cognitive and academic growth. Thus, whether we aspire for our children to love to learn, or to just learn English, we must let them learn in their most familiar language throughout their earlier years.

Navigating Linguistically Diverse Classrooms

It sounds tricky to accommodate everyone's mother tongue in an urban and linguistically heterogeneous classroom. However, in practice, starting early education in the most familiar language is both a possible and sustainable model—much more sustainable than starting with an almost universally unfamiliar language: English. This is because for many children, the mother tongue is often the most familiar language during their early years because their zone of interaction is limited to the household and the languages spoken within it. However, as children grow and expand their zone of interaction, they are introduced to languages outside the household and soon become familiar to more than one language.

Take the example of Mehak, who resides in an urban centre in Pakistan. She speaks Sindhi at home with her family and friends but speaks Urdu when communicating with shopkeepers and other community members. Mehak's mother tongue is Sindhi, but both Sindhi and Urdu are familiar languages to her. If Mehak is enrolled in an Urdu-medium school, she should be able to easily learn, express, and communicate in Urdu even though it is not her mother tongue. The likelihood of Mehak's transition to receiving Urdu at an academic proficiency is high because of Mehak's daily exposure to Urdu and the linguistic proximity between Sindhi and Urdu.

However, if Mehak were to be taught in an unfamiliar language as a medium of instruction—one which is not spoken, heard, read, or written in her daily life (say French, Portuguese, English)—she would greatly struggle in comprehension, conceptual clarity, and expression. This second situation is the reality for the majority of children in Pakistan. Be it

in the province of Balochistan, in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Sindh, or in Gilgit Baltistan, many Mehaks are required from their very first day at school to learn unfamiliar content in an unfamiliar language. The personal stress and loss of identity they experience cannot truly and wholly be measured by failing grades or drop-out rates. Teachers in these contexts are equally burdened because they, too, are demanded to teach in a language that is unfamiliar to them when they are not equipped with sufficient capacity building.

In classrooms where there is not much linguistic diversity and students share a common MT, it would be then advised to adopt the MT as the medium of instruction. However, in linguistically diverse classrooms where students come from a number of different language backgrounds, adopting a common familiar language as the medium of instruction can be sufficient to support learning and academic achievement. This language, in many cases, is a regional or a national language shared by many other children in the same school, especially when the school is in urban quarters or in linguistically heterogeneous areas (Alidou et. al., 2006; Pinnock, 2009; Benson, 2016). In this scenario, a caveat in smooth transition from one language to another may remain, and schools and policy makers are encouraged to embed oral and written stories in as many native languages represented in the student cohort as possible.

Embracing Multilingualism

This multilingual model fosters rather than hinders learning. It helps them develop a strong foundation in their own language and bridges the disconnect between home and school. No longer are "school" and "home" two different worlds; they are connected through language, and children can share their experiences, thoughts, and creations with fluidity between the two. Adopting the most familiar language model also supports learning of all kinds of skills — whether that be the development of fluency in English, Mandarin, Russian, or any other language, or whether that be expressing themselves through poetry, sculpture, or gardening.

Moreover, such a policy appeals to the largest number of students and does not put an unmanageable burden on the educational institutions either. By adopting a language which is familiar to the majority of students, we not only avoid the harms of learning in an unfamiliar language, but we also accommodate and support the learning journey of a majority of the students. Institutions do not need to tailor their language policy per child or per linguistic group; instead, they can adopt a policy which caters to the needs of a multilingual population and embrace multilingualism.

Do not discourage children in their expression via the languages familiar to them. Focus on encouraging them to explore, to learn, and to grow. Encourage them to write poetry in Punjabi with their grandmother. Let them watch cartoons in Sindhi. Let them express themselves in Urdu.

And for those worried about their child learning in English — that will happen, too, eventually.

As a country, we have seen the repercussions of such attempts in our literacy rate, our attitudes towards learning, our stunted personal growth. We must not only worry about the out-of-school children; rather, we must also worry about the children in school, who try and struggle every day and yet make minimal progress in their education or personal development.

Let children learn English — or any other language that they require or desire — but only after they have developed a strong foundation in their familiar language. Introducing an unfamiliar language as the medium of instruction in early years will not make students learn the unfamiliar language faster — it will only hinder them from learning and understanding both the language and the content. It will get in their way of exploring the world and expressing themselves. If our desired destination is a child who is able, willing, and excited to learn, one who is equipped with the skills and tools required to do the best they can and live up to their potential, then do not hurry the introduction of unfamiliar languages. Take it slow. Introduce languages gradually — and let them learn in what is familiar. Fix the journey, so that we can reach the aspired destination successfully.

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