

English language teaching in religious seminaries in Pakistan: A broken bridge to the future

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Abstract

Pakistan has not been able to introduce uniform education system. The country is polarized over methods and goals of education. In the context of language teaching, private English medium schools promote English language while public sector schools rely on Urdu. At the rare extreme are more than 13000 registered madrassas (religious seminaries) where an independent scheme of studies is followed with Arabic at the top as language of religion. The lack of appropriate attention on the part of the government has led to the growth of an independent religious education system that does not teach English language. Thus, the graduates fail to compete in job market that is dominated by English. The current study is a qualitative investigation of English language teaching situation in selected madrassas purposively selected with data generated through 42 in-depth interviews from students and teachers. The study reveals that madrassas do not have trained teachers and allied facilities for teaching English. The current situation is deplorable and asks for timely State intervention to introduce meaningful reforms with a view to promote English language in madrassas to safeguard the future of about 2 million graduates in the English-dominated job market and to mainstream religious education.

Keywords: English; Seminaries; Pakistan; job market; linguistic divide

Introduction:

In Pakistan, English has been promoted and encouraged to overtake other regional languages in line with international spirit. It has therefore become a source of earning, a source of success in the labor market and also a major indicator of one's trajectory among the powerful elite. Likewise, the education system has also been geared up to teach the language and to facilitate learners. The country's policy is one of inclusion at local level too wherein it is noted that local languages are not banished as they represent the ethnic and social identities of their speakers. However, the last few decades have witnessed the growing importance of English language at the cost of ignoring the others and the private sector has also been very active in this regard. Analysis of the country's educational infrastructure reveals a huge private sector network of institutions which promote English language. In comparison, the state-run system is less vibrant and therefore may not be the first choice of most of the urban population. Successive regimes have been found attempting to make the public sector efficient and it is therefore found English has been made compulsory at primary level. But there are several challenges like training of teachers and lack of sufficient funding that have prevented the public to overtake the private sector¹. A holistic view of the measures undertaken so far were aptly summarized by Kaiser Bengali (1999)² when he stated that the whole exercise of framing education policies in the country were a sum-total of 'setting targets, bemoaning the failure to achieve the same, and setting new targets with unqualified optimism has been a continuing game policy makers have played *ad nauseam* and at great public expense over the last 50 years' (p. 28).

More specifically, there exists the religious seminaries which have been offering religious education. They are administered by religious clerics and looked after by private individuals who have been following their own curriculum and have a history of resisting government intervention. They have their own way of imparting education and facilitating their students. The government does not provide tangible support or funds to these institutions. Consequently, the seminaries have multiplied as a parallel system of education in the country. It is important to note that the curriculum offered in the seminaries is based on Dars-i-Nizami where Arabic and other local languages are taught with less or no space for English language learning. In the wake of 9/11, they were targeted by the world as promoting extremism and fueling religious fundamentalism. To address international concerns, the military ruler General Pervez Musharraf initiated a reform agenda in the education sector and took measures to introduce modern subjects including English and Computer Science in the seminaries. At the same time, he criticized the outdated approach of the seminaries³. Overall, the objective was to modernize the education system in the light of his doctrine of enlightened moderation and to curb ethnic and sectarian voices⁴.

Afterwards, the political elite and the government have been trying to devise a strategy to bring the seminaries at par with other institutions in the country. The National Education Policy (NEP)⁵ in 2009 was a continuation of Musharraf's policy but little has been achieved so far. However, the policy trends at national level may indicate a strong desire for decentralization and improvement of governance system by adopting new management practices⁶, the government administration spends most of the time in regulating the administration of the seminaries that has left the learning and teaching process unattended. As a result, madrassa students remain deprived of English as a social capital and a key to enter the job market. This paper attempts to investigate the attitude of teachers and students about the need for and importance of the language and how they view the existing state of affairs and their future prospects in the job market.

Literature Review

The linguistic landscape of Pakistan consists of many languages which point to linguistic diversity. However, there are major ethnic groups and most of the local politics are driven by their linguistic identities. The languages would conveniently include Balochi (Baluchistan); Sindhi (Sindh), Punjabi and Saraiki (Punjab) and Pakhtu (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). In addition, Urdu, the national language is also native to a considerable chunk of urban Karachi. Urdu is widely understood and thus used for communication in and among ethnic groups⁷. Amid these competing languages, the presence of Arabic cannot be overlooked as it is pivotal to the understanding of the religion of Islam and is therefore held in great esteem⁸.

There is a nationwide consensus that English language is a gateway to access to education, research, business and technology and should therefore be given priority in education system. Tariq Rahman⁹ summarizes the popular views as:

English is still the key for a good future - a future with human dignity if not public deference; a future with material comfort if not prosperity; a future with that modicum of security, human rights and recognition, which all human beings desire. So, irrespective of what the state provides, parents are willing to part with scarce cash to buy their children such a future' (p. 24).

But this is not all. Ethno-religious class of the society has a history of upholding their languages and local identities and have viewed English as a foreign language¹⁰. There are provincial movements which attempt to define the nation on the basis of their local linguistic identities¹¹. The partition of Bengal is a case in point where language was a major if not primary cause of discontent among the protesting Bengalis¹². One reason of this linguistic divide has been the failure to devise an inclusive policy where each

language would have been accorded a fair share and representation. Instead, the policies since 1947 have been autocratic and elitist catering to the lifestyle and approach of the political elite. Besides, many policies had suffered failures due to political instability and military intervention in national politics¹³.

After the establishment of Pakistan, the ruling elite did not bring drastic changes in the education policy and continued their support for English education¹⁴. The country thus did not recover from the divide between English and the vernacular and two parallel realities with their advocates have been in existence¹⁵. It is observed that those who learnt English would become masters and officers while those educated in local languages would become supporting staff. In other words, the ruling elite have been able to use the language to their advantage. It was based on these discriminatory policies that the country has strong ethnic political groups especially in Sindh, Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa¹⁶.

The history of the country and its policies reveal that the country has only partially succeeded in devising an education system lacking a uniform structure which has paved way for the private sector to target selected socio-economic groups. The elitist system has every reason to be compared with international standards, the Urdu-based education is for the general masses which is more traditional and less progressive while madrassas or the religious seminaries are virtually ignored in policy documents. The seminaries are thus private enterprises where quality depends on the owners, and it mostly target the low socio-economic strata of the society who can't afford to pay for quality education. The basic flaw with the seminaries is not the overall religious outlook but their indifference to the needs of the labor market where the graduates would look for earning a respectable living and this is severely hampered by their inability to communicate in English language.

Methods and Procedure

The present study is qualitative, and the data was collected through in-depth interviews from students and teachers of madrassas. The interviews were conducted through interview guide¹⁷. A total of 42 interviews were conducted in six madrassas in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The average duration of each interview was 40 minutes. As a majority of the respondents had no or less exposure to English language, therefore the interviews were recorded in their native language- Pakhtu or Pashtu that was also the mother tongue of the researcher.

Madrassas were purposively selected after getting consent from their administrators. The sampling technique used for selecting the interviewee was also purposive. Purposive sampling was found appropriate to generate detailed data about English language teaching situation. The 42 interviewees were equally divided among the six madrassas with 7 each (2 teachers and 5 students). Initially, the study was confined to male students and teachers, but one female madrassa was also included after several efforts by the researcher through locally influential political and religious activists. The students were in various stages of the traditional 8-year Dars-e-Nizami course offered after at completion of eighth grade in any school or madrassa.

The collected data was transcribed and coded for the purpose of analysis. Pseudonyms were used for both the madrassas and the interviewees in fulfillment of the researcher's ethical responsibility. The coding process was an adaptation from Roney (2000)¹⁸ also used by Khan, Sultana and Naz (2016)¹⁹, Khan (2016)²⁰, Khan and Raees (2021)²¹.

Data Analysis and Discussion

I. English language teaching situation

Based on the scope of the research study, the analysis of data includes the current situation that exists inside madrassas in the context of English language. During the field study, it was known that English was compulsory for students in the first and second grade. The researcher therefore attempted to ascertain the nature of the teaching

and learning English, the time allotted to the learning of the language and the educational background of the teachers who taught it. The scope of the study did not include the textbooks, and this was one limitation of the study. Besides, some madrassas had evening classes or special arrangement for teaching English language, and they were therefore investigated to determine the quality and seriousness of purpose of the initiators.

As all the selected seminaries were in the same area, their linguistic priorities were similar too. Arabic was considered the language of scholarship and excellence while Persian and Urdu followed. For practical purposes, Pakhtu was the local language, and all informal communication would take place in it. At formal level, Urdu or Arabic would be used. In this scheme of affairs, the use of English language was almost non-existent.

The interview data revealed that the madrassas had an independent system of awarding certificates and degrees and unlike schools and colleges, their courses and examination papers were different. According to the scheme, they had to appear in 10 papers out of which 6 related to religious courses in Arabic while in general schooling, a student may either opt of arts or science. A teacher interviewee explained the nature of arrangements made for SSC students in madrassas as:

T – we enroll students once they complete their education till grade 8 in any school. After admission, they are registered here, and they take exam after two years with the examination board that govern our system. In the exam, 6 papers relate to courses in Arabic while 4 including English, Urdu and Mathematics are compulsory subjects. Apart from the Arabic papers, the rest are like the ones students' study at other state-run schools (3T16-M37-U8H)

Another teacher answered the same question in the following way:

T – It is mandatory to complete 8 years of education to get enrolled in Dars-i-Nizami program. The first two years are like Secondary School education in the country where students learn English also (2T09-F32-U8M)

As mentioned above, most of the courses relate to Arabic but teaching of English would require a trained teacher in the language. When asked about the availability of English language teachers, it was revealed that there was no separate teacher appointed for the purpose. Two important revelations were made. First, there was no qualified teacher but the same graduates who taught Arabic courses were expected to teach English too. Second, English was given very little space on the ground that the rest of the taught courses were time-consuming and required more time. In other words, English was not considered as crucial for the graduating students and their knowledge base in Arabic was supreme. Likewise, English classes would be managed through grammar translation method as pointed out by a teacher.

T – In all classes, we use Pakhtu for communication and teaching. We have made arrangements for teaching English and Mathematics in the evening (3T16-M37-U8H)

When it was asked if the religious books were translated in English, would that be helpful for making English an effective part of the curriculum, a teacher said.

T – Such books may not be a bad idea but who will teach them is a big question. We need books and also teachers. I mean if the resources are not provided, the whole exercise will be a waste (3T16-M37-U8H)

It was also revealed that the curriculum was too much for the students and mostly based on memorization by heart, they would need more time to learn their lessons. A student highlighted this point.

S – Our problems are multiple. We have to memorize our lessons. This takes a huge portion of our time in the day. Then the little time we are left with is not enough for English. Also, we do not have expert teachers (3S19-M22-U7B)

An argument in favor of giving less or no importance to English language is its status in the progress of students toward graduation. In real sense, a student may graduate from a seminary without passing English paper. It thus becomes a personal possession and extrinsic motivation may not be there to learn the language. A student was of the view that.

S – I believe that we do not really need it for our graduation in the seminary. If I know it, good enough. If I don't learn it, I can still complete my degree (3S19-M22-U7B)

Regarding the level of understanding of English by the teachers, there was a full variety of them. In rare cases, there were teachers who had individual liking for English and had made efforts to learn it. There were others who were honest in admitting lack of specialized skills. One teacher who did not claim proper understanding of the language revealed that he was also involved in teaching English tenses to students in the evening time.

T – My problem is that I don't really understand English. I know some basic things like words or sentences. I can also teach tenses but not more than that (3T16-M37-U8H)

Some teachers admitted looking at sources outside the seminary for learning the language. This also indicated the lack of facilities and trained teachers to help them learn the language. A teacher explained how he had been trying to benefit from his colleagues in a private school.

T – I must admit that I didn't learn English in madrasa. When graduated, I got a job at private school. There, I got a chance to find good teachers. They knew English and I tried to learn a little from them. I have made some improvement. I even try to speak English with them but it was too little too late (5T30-M29-R8M)

He also expressed his resolve to make special arrangements for his students in the seminary so that they get a fair chance to learn English.

T – We can have arrangements in madrasa but there are problems too. I intend to start it myself for the greater good of my students (5T30-M29-R8M)

During the field study, one important aspect was to investigate the timing and schedule for teaching English language. The objective was driven by frequent assertions of lack of time and the tough schedule Dars-i-Nizami required. Assuming that the course load would be heavy, how the madrasa authorities accommodated English language teaching classes. To this question, a teacher explained.

T – As a matter of routine, we continue till 5 in the evening. The morning time is reserved for teaching Arabic courses followed by a lunch break and soon after, students are given instruction in school curriculum including English. (6T37-M30-U8M)

II. Satisfaction with English language teaching

Based on the above section, it is said that the seminaries lack basic facilities and resources to teach English to their students. In most cases, the teaching does not meet minimum standards and fall short of creating motivation among students. Another aspect to this scenario was to investigate whether the students were satisfied with the arrangements or not. An investigation was made whether the students wanted to learn English, or they too were indifferent to it. During the interviews, several problems were

highlighted that need to be taken into consideration for a better tomorrow. For instance, a student said.

S – There are so many problems. There are no facilities. Earlier, I was studying in a seminary based in Peshawar. It was so huge and well equipped. It was a large building with computer labs and had more than 20 teachers. But here, we don't have these luxuries. (5S33-M19-R4H)

The researcher did not stop here and asked him to explain it a bit further to which he replied.

S – I mean the problem of money and funding. We have limited space. The teachers may do their best but where is the government? Good teachers would ask for good salaries and in the absence of funds who will pay them? (5S33-M19-R4H)

In another interview, a student explained the situation from his perspective which seemed quite factual and realistic in the context of the seminaries. He said.

S – You need to understand that our teachers here are all religious scholars and graduates of the same system of seminaries. They spend their time occupied with their books and sermons. How can they get time to make plans for other things? We need people like you who would help us in looking over and above our world. There is a need of inserting visionary people in madrassas and then you will see how things change. (6S38-M20-U3B)

III. Additional Measures for English language learning

During the interview process, one seminary had made part-time arrangements for teaching English to students. This aspect looked progressive and therefore needed further investigation. The seminary had hired the services of trained teacher who would teach English in the evening time. The researcher noted wall chalking advertising the same program in the vicinity of the seminary. This initiative was sponsored by the owner of the seminary. There was also another instance in which the students had themselves approached a teacher in the locality and would pay him for teaching English to them. A brief examination was made and during the interviews, the following information was gathered.

As mentioned above, the owner of the seminary had hired the services of an English teacher and expressed his resolve to equip his students with modern knowledge. He informed that it was an open for all course where those willing to learn the language could go. It was further said that the teacher had his own busy schedule that prevented them from arranging it in the morning time. Later on, several students and teachers were asked about the arrangements. One student who was taking the class revealed that the son of the owner was key to the whole process. An extract from his interview which is self-explanatory.

4S26-M21-R4S: We have been taking the class for the last three months.

Researcher: Do you mean to say that before that there was no such class?

4S26-M21-R4S: You are right.

Researcher: So how did it happen? The owner (Muhtamim) or the teacher initiated it?

4S26-M21-R4S: Honestly, the main reason was the interest of the son of Muhtamim who is also a student here. He liked English and would go to the teacher. Later on, I and some other students also expressed our desire and would accompany him. The process

continued and many other students joined and then this class was formalized. We fixed a time with the teacher and since then the class is on.

In short, the case was unique in its nature as it was the only madrassa during the field study where a private tutor taught English language course. The teacher came regularly and all interested students attended the class. The presence and interest of the son of the Muhtamim in this case can neither be exaggerated nor overlooked. In his interview, he had referred to his interest in the language. He had also referred to an English medium school in the private sector which he had attended earlier.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study was undertaken to investigate the nature and scope of teaching English language to students in seminaries with the objective to enable them to compete in the job market. During the study, several aspects were investigated including the time allotted and the quality of teaching with reference to the training and professionalism in English teachers. Besides, it was also investigated whether the students were satisfied with the teaching process, or they wanted improvement. It was revealed that madrassas lacked in providing comparative opportunity of English learning and the students therefore were found dissatisfied. They also asked the authorities mainly the government to facilitate English based reforms. There were no trained teachers available and teaching was done by Dars-e-Nizami graduates. The students also did not find the environment congenial for English language learning. Madrassa administration neither encouraged nor discouraged any attempt by students or teachers for learning the language. After collecting and analyzing the field data, it is said that fortunate are those madrassas where the faculty members include someone having a fair knowledge of English. They can then influence the situation and motivate students to spare time for learning English language.

More importantly, a majority of the interviewees criticized the biased attitude of the government focusing only schools and colleges and ignoring madrassas. They defended madrassas by arguing that they were already overburdened and could therefore not financially sponsor activities like English and other modern subjects. They found the role of government critical in provision of the facilities and empowering madrassa authorities to initiate English based reforms in the curriculum. There were however other interviewees particularly teachers who were found conservative in their approach and viewed English as additional and secondary to the overall academic and professional goals of madrassa graduates. A majority among madrassa students showed positive attitudes towards English language that was also authenticated by the additional measures they had taken to learn the language.

Overall, the lack of attention of government coupled with scarcity of funds for promoting English language teaching deprive madrassa graduates from learning English which is the most valued in job market. The linguistic capital they accrue during their education thus leave them at disadvantage to compete for lucrative jobs and professional positions. This also develops sense of alienation among the graduates and tends to nourish the linguistic divide among the educated in the country. There may be other important reasons too but inability of the majority to find proper place in the job market is at the heart of their alienation from mainstream society, tilt towards extremist tendencies and following of anti-state religious fundamentalists.



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