RELIANCE ON ENGLISH AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISPARITIES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

English has played a crucial role in transforming the linguistic and socio-economic framework of Pakistan, affecting multiple dimensions of society. This study offers an in-depth examination of the evolution of English language acquisition in Pakistan, beginning from the British colonial era and progressing to its current and anticipated roles. It investigates how English functions within the educational sector, its contribution to economic mobility, and its effect on cultural values. By analyzing historical progressions and present-day trends, the paper sheds light on the benefits and challenges linked to English language proficiency in the country. The study concludes by presenting future projections and recommending policies to bridge educational gaps and improve English language instruction. Overall, the evolution of English in Pakistan has greatly influenced national policies and development, particularly in the realms of education, economy, and culture.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The reliance on English as a medium of education, communication, and opportunity has become a defining feature of many postcolonial societies, including Pakistan, where it continues to shape social and economic hierarchies. While proficiency in English is often equated with modernity, success, and upward mobility, it also reinforces deep-rooted inequalities by privileging those with access to elite English-medium institutions and marginalizing those educated in local languages. This linguistic divide perpetuates class distinctions, widens the urban-rural gap, and limits equal participation in national development. Consequently, the dominance of English is not merely a linguistic preference but a socio-economic phenomenon that both enables mobility for some and entrenches exclusion for others.

In present-day Pakistan, English holds a significant position across various domains such as education, administration, legal affairs, and commerce. It is frequently perceived as a symbol of modern progress, globalization, and social mobility. Nevertheless, the widespread use of English introduces both advantages and complications, especially within a linguistically diverse society. This research aims to explore the dual impact—both beneficial and detrimental—of English serving as the dominant language in Pakistan, that is, language of state institutions and language of education.

No extraordinary perception is required to discern that there is a pressing need to examine how the reliance on English contributes to socio-economic disparities in Pakistan. Despite being regarded as a gateway to global knowledge, professional advancement, and international opportunities, English remains largely accessible to privileged groups who can afford quality English-medium education. This imbalance systematically disadvantages students from rural areas and low-income backgrounds, reinforcing cycles of inequality and limiting social mobility. By critically analyzing the intersection of language and class, this study aims to highlight how English functions not only as a tool for progress but also as a mechanism of exclusion, thereby shaping unequal access to education, employment, and power. Such an inquiry is essential for developing more inclusive language and education policies that address equity and social justice. The prevalence of English in Pakistan is rooted in its colonial past, where it served as the language of governance and instruction under British rule. After gaining independence, Pakistan continued to uphold English as a key language to align with modernity and the demands of an increasingly globalized environment. It became the primary language in higher education, the legal system, government institutions, and international discourse. Today, fluency in English is often linked with enhanced career prospects, academic advancement, and improved socio-economic status (Rahman, 1996). This study seeks to examine public attitudes and perspectives on the superior status of English compared to Urdu by utilizing a researcher-designed questionnaire.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review investigates the idea of linguistic imperialism, particularly emphasizing the prominent role of English in Pakistan. It explores how English — rooted in the colonial era — serves as an instrument of authority, social prestige, and economic advancement, often undermining native languages and cultural heritage. Within Pakistan's linguistically diverse landscape, English maintains its influence across the education system, government institutions, and social hierarchy, contributing to persistent inequalities and the suppression of regional languages. The review probes into the historical background, language policies, and socio-cultural issues arising from the elevated position of English in the country.

According to Akhter, Bhatti, and Zafar, (2024) Language in education has been a perplexing question for many nations of the world. Pakistan, along with other nations of the region, is no exception to it. The questions of instructional language and teaching of languages have not been settled throughout the history of the country. In this connection, advent of English and its globalization since the colonial times has further complicated the situation, especially in the formerly colonized countries.

This situation has consistently caused confusion and conflict across Pakistan's educational, social, and political domains. From time to time, demands have been made to clarify the rightful roles of English, the national language, and regional languages in education. Although several efforts have been undertaken to resolve this issue, the absence of clear vision among policymakers—combined with the country's complex linguistic landscape—has rendered these initiatives largely ineffective. A key reason behind this failure appears to be the disregard for the close connection between language use in education and the state's broader language policy. These two matters are deeply intertwined and cannot be considered separately. The authors aimed to explore the strength of this relationship, focusing on Pakistan in particular and the South Asian region more broadly.

Pakistan is a country rich in linguistic diversity. Its people commonly speak multiple languages. Not only does the nation comprise numerous distinct linguistic groups, but many of these groups themselves are also multilingual (Akhter, Bhatti, & Zafar, 2024).

IMPERIALISM: BASIC CONCEPT

The term *imperialism* is derived from the Latin word *imperium*, signifying control or dominance of one state over another in political, economic, or cultural terms. This concept, deeply rooted in the colonial history of European expansion into regions like Asia and Africa, laid the groundwork for what later evolved into *linguistic imperialism* — a notion shared by Robert Phillipson (1992) as well. He conceptualized linguistic imperialism as the continued dominance of one language over others, sustained by structural inequalities and power dynamics. Similar expressions like "language dominance" or "linguistic nationalism" are often used interchangeably in this context. The mechanisms driving this dominance include economic, political, and socio-cultural disparities (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1994). Such dominance often results in the gradual extinction or devaluation of indigenous languages, weakening their cultural and functional presence in society.

Phillipson (1992, 2009) underscores that language operates as a carrier of cultural, educational, political, and economic power. Those proficient in dominant languages such as English often gain disproportionate access to educational and professional opportunities, reinforcing societal inequalities. Simultaneously, local languages undergo structural shifts or are abandoned altogether as they are perceived as less prestigious. This transformation contributes to *linguicism*, a system wherein language functions as a tool for social exclusion, akin to racial or class-based discrimination (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

In Pakistan, English has evolved into a symbol of authority, elite status, and socio-economic mobility. This review investigates the implications of English dominance in Pakistan using the theoretical lens of linguistic imperialism. It highlights the colonial roots of English, the post-independence language policies, and the ongoing educational and socio-political consequences of English hegemony (Rahman, 1996; Coleman, 2010).

RELIANCE ON ENGLISH: A CRITIQUE

The dominance of English in Pakistan presents a complex interplay of linguistic, social, and educational challenges. Introduced during the British colonial era, English has maintained a prestigious status in the country, often associated with power, privilege, and upward socio-economic mobility. Despite being spoken fluently by only a small percentage of the population, English continues to dominate key sectors such as education, government, and business. This has led to significant disparities between urban and rural populations, as well as between English-medium and vernacular-medium learners. The prioritization of English often marginalizes indigenous languages and creates barriers to equitable access to education and employment. This research explores the multifaceted challenges posed by the dominance of English in Pakistan, analyzing its implications for linguistic identity, educational equity, and national cohesion.

In Pakistan English functions as a connecting medium between the local context and the global stage influencing numerous societal dimensions. Owing to its colonial heritage, the country adopted English as an official language, and over time, it has become essential in sectors such as education, commerce, and international affairs (Shahid, Asif et al., 2022). Historically tied to elite circles, English now plays a central role within Pakistan's educational, social, and economic structures. From being a mark of social privilege, it has transformed into a key enabler of

professional advancement and global participation (Wang, Zhang et al., 2023). This review explores the historical progression, prevailing practices, and broader implications of English language acquisition in Pakistan. By tracing its development, the study aims to highlight how English influences the daily realities of Pakistani citizens and to assess the potential challenges and prospects associated with its future use (Razzaq, 2023).

HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The roots of English language education in Pakistan are closely connected to its colonial past. During British rule in the Indian subcontinent, English was introduced as the primary language for governance, administration, and formal education (Mehmood et al., 2024). The colonial authorities established institutions that operated in English to train local elites who could assist in managing the empire. As a result, English became associated with social status, authority, and access to advanced education (Talat, Gulfam et al., 2023).

After gaining independence in 1947, Pakistan retained many colonial structures, including the use of English as an official language alongside Urdu. Its significance persisted in key domains such as administration, the legal system, and higher education. English remained the dominant medium in elite educational institutions, especially in urban centers, reinforcing social and linguistic divisions between English-educated individuals and the rest of the population (Irfan, Shahzadi et al., 2021).

Post-independence, discussions emerged regarding the linguistic identity of the nation. Some voices supported Urdu as the sole national language to strengthen unity, while others emphasized the strategic value of English in international affairs, science, and education. Consequently, English maintained its status within the education system, particularly at secondary and university levels, and continued to serve as a marker of privilege and opportunity (Shah, Muhammad et al.).

SOCIO-LINGUISTIC ARENA: CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS

Pakistan is home to a diverse linguistic landscape, where each province harbors one or more dominant languages alongside numerous minority ones. Despite this diversity, English retains a prestigious position due to its colonial legacy and association with elite institutions (Haque, 1983; Rahman, 2002). The privileged role of English continues through state policies that promote its instruction as a vehicle for modernization and equality — despite widening class divisions and cultural alienation (Rassool & Mansoor, 2009).

English has remained entrenched in key societal institutions such as education, law, and governance since the British colonial domination. Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" (1835) established English as the language of elite instruction, aiming to create a class that would mediate between colonial rulers and the local populace. This divide persisted after Pakistan's independence in 1947. While Urdu was declared the national language, English retained co-official status and continued to dominate higher education and administration (Rahman, 1996, 2004).

The widespread use of English in the education sector has significant consequences for social mobility, cultural identity, and language planning, making it a crucial area of focus for those concerned with the future of education and equality in the country.

It is significant ot probe into how the education system – English Language Teaching as a case in poiont – contributes to socio-economic disparities. In Pakistan, English-medium education is commonly regarded as a privilege reserved for the affluent, with private schools and universities

offering instruction in English mostly accessible to the upper classes. In contrast, government schools and religious institutions, which serve the majority of the population, generally use Urdu or regional languages as the medium of instruction.

This linguistic divide contributes to the reinforcement of social hierarchies, as proficiency in English is often a gateway to advanced education and high-paying jobs. Meanwhile, individuals lacking English skills are frequently excluded from these opportunities. By analyzing this gap, the study seeks to shed light on how the dominance of English in education perpetuates inequality and restricts upward mobility for disadvantaged groups. The research may inform efforts by educators and policymakers to design a more equitable education system. It supports the growing call for reforms in language policy to minimize disparities and ensure broader access to quality education and career advancement for all segments of society.

Another prospective contribution of this research is its focus on the effects of English-medium education on cultural and linguistic identities. In a linguistically diverse nation like Pakistan—where many regional languages coexist alongside Urdu—the rising dominance of English raises concerns about the marginalization of indigenous languages and traditions. Students in English-medium institutions may feel disconnected from their native cultures, as the language often reflects foreign values and norms that may not align with their own heritage.

The study on the socio-political impacts of English as the language of education in Pakistan holds immense significance in both academic and policy-making spheres. The dominance of English in the education system has profound implications for socio-economic mobility, cultural identity, and language policy, making it an issue of critical importance for the future of education and social equity in Pakistan.

One of the primary aspects of significance of this research is its focus on socio-economic inequality perpetuated by the education system. In Pakistan, English-medium education is often seen as a privilege of the elite, with private English-medium schools and universities catering to the wealthy segments of society. In contrast, public schools and madrassas, which cater to the majority of Pakistan's population, offer instruction primarily in Urdu or regional languages. This disparity in language of instruction reinforces class divides, as fluency in English opens doors to higher education and lucrative careers, while those who are not proficient in English are often left at a disadvantage. By investigating this linguistic divide, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how English-medium education perpetuates socio-economic inequalities and limits social mobility for the underprivileged.

This study's findings may offer insights for policymakers and educators striving to create a more inclusive education system. It will contribute to the growing body of research advocating for language reform in education to reduce inequalities and create opportunities for all socio-economic groups to access quality education and better career prospects.

Another aspect of this study is its exploration of the impact of English-medium education on cultural and linguistic identity. In a multilingual country like Pakistan, where numerous regional languages coexist with Urdu as the national language, the dominance of English raises concerns about the preservation of local languages and cultures. Students educated in English-medium institutions often experience a sense of cultural alienation, as English is not their native language and may carry values that are not aligned with their cultural heritage.

This research seeks to explore the impact of English linguistic imperialism on the socio-cultural positioning of indigenous languages such as Urdu and Punjabi. The study draws insights

from randomly selected university students and educators to examine their perspectives. This section outlines the methodological framework used, including the procedures, sampling strategies, and techniques employed to analyze and interpret the collected data.

The continued focus on English-medium instruction disproportionately benefits students from affluent and urban backgrounds who have greater access to quality English education, while disadvantaging those from rural and lower socio-economic settings. This linguistic divide intensifies social stratification and reinforces privilege and marginalization (Rahman, 2002; Coleman, 2010).

The prevalence of English in academic environments often leads students to distance themselves from their native languages and cultural roots, thereby influencing their sense of self and national affiliation. This can result in identity conflicts, where students may feel alienated from their indigenous heritage (Mahboob, 2009; Canagarajah, 1999).

Emphasis on English in education systems often creates barriers for students from disadvantaged communities, who may lack the resources or background to achieve proficiency in English. This not only affects their academic performance but also narrows their future employment opportunities (Phillipson, 2009; Mansoor, 2005).

The hegemonic status of English has significant implications for language policy debates, often sidelining Urdu and indigenous languages. This linguistic hierarchy perpetuates cultural and political tensions, raising questions about linguistic justice and the representation of regional identities in national discourse (Ricento, 2000; Rahman, 2006).

In modern-day Pakistan, English holds a prominent position across key sectors such as education, governance, law, and commerce, often representing progress and upward social mobility. Its continued dominance is a legacy of colonial rule, and it remains a language associated with power and privilege, particularly among the upper classes. However, this linguistic prominence brings several challenges. It contributes to widening socio-economic gaps, sidelines native languages such as Urdu, Punjabi, and Pashto, and poses a threat to the preservation of cultural identity. Although English offers avenues for international engagement and broader access to information, it also exacerbates inequality due to the limited availability of quality English education. This study seeks to examine how Pakistanis perceive the elevated role of English and to analyze its broader socio-political and cultural consequences, including aspects of linguistic imperialism, identity struggles, and disparities in the education system.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES AND LINGUISTIC HIERARCHIES

English proficiency in Pakistan functions as a form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991), disproportionately benefitting students in elite private schools such as Beaconhouse and Lahore Grammar School. These institutions, which mimic British educational standards, are accessible primarily to affluent families. In contrast, public schools and religious seminaries often use Urdu or regional languages and lack adequate resources, resulting in poor English instruction (Shamim, 2008). This disparity reinforces educational inequities and restricts upward mobility for the majority of the population (Coleman, 2010; Mustafa, 2011).

The educational gap is especially stark in rural regions, where English-medium instruction is often inaccessible. Consequently, students in these areas are excluded from the socio-economic advantages that English fluency confers, deepening class and regional divides (Rahman, 2004). English thus becomes not only a linguistic requirement but a socio-political gatekeeper.

LANGUAGE POLICY AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Pakistan's language policy has long struggled to balance national identity, equity, and globalization. English continues to dominate high-level governance, the judiciary, and academia, while Urdu and regional languages are relegated to informal or cultural domains (Rahman, 2002). The failure to uplift regional languages such as Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, and Balochi leads to cultural marginalization and alienation of ethnic minorities (Mustafa, 2011).

While some policymakers argue that English is essential for global integration, others warn that its unchecked dominance undermines national unity and reinforces socio-economic inequalities (Mahboob & Jain, 2016). The ongoing preference for English also diminishes the role of local languages in education and media, contributing to a gradual erosion of linguistic and cultural diversity.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND LINGUISTIC ALIENATION

English-medium education is often linked to Western cultural norms, distancing students from their indigenous linguistic and cultural identities (Rahman, 2002). In elite schools, students are subtly encouraged to adopt Western values, which can create internal conflicts regarding cultural authenticity and identity. However, English is also seen as a path to global success and modernity, especially among urban elites (Mahboob & Jain, 2016).

The widespread use of code-switching in urban areas illustrates the duality of language use, where individuals alternate between English, Urdu, and regional languages based on context. This practice reflects adaptability but also reinforces the perception that English is required for success in professional and academic settings (Rahman, 2006).

COPING WITH THE STATE OF AFFAIRS

Scholars and language policy experts have proposed reforms to mitigate the negative impacts of English hegemony in Pakistan. Rahman (2004) advocates for multilingual education policies that give equal importance to Urdu, English, and regional languages. Mahboob and Jain (2016) emphasize the need for improving the quality of instruction across both English and non-English-medium institutions to ensure equitable access to education and socio-economic mobility for all segments of society.

Language serves as a fundamental medium of communication and plays a crucial role in expressing identity and reflecting the speaker's social status. From the beginning of human existence, language has evolved alongside humanity, with people always using different linguistic systems. It emerges through the structuring of words into meaningful sentences during interactions aimed at sharing thoughts, beliefs, instructions, and more. Language also allows individuals to differentiate between linguistic and non-linguistic forms of communication (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009). Over time, English has developed into multiple forms across the globe, characterized by differences in pronunciation, dialects, vocabulary, and spelling. These distinctions often reflect the speaker's socio-cultural background.

The influence of various socio-cultural factors has shaped English into a global means of communication, making it a lingua franca in many nations. Because of its global status, English presents challenges and opportunities for English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals. As speakers across the world have adapted English to suit their local contexts, it has become widely recognized as a pluralistic language. This pluralism is reflected in its diverse linguistic structures, such as variations in pronunciation, grammar, discourse, vocabulary, and cultural norms (Marlina & Xu, 2018).

Today, acquiring English as a second or foreign language is increasingly important. Learners gain proficiency through both formal education and informal exposure. English's strength lies in its adaptability, having incorporated elements from various other languages. This flexibility has turned it into a hybrid language that accommodates a range of dialects and accents, making it accessible for use in multiple contexts (Walia, 2023). Consequently, there are now several forms of English, including but not limited to American, British, Indian, Australian, and Canadian English, each with its distinct linguistic features.

The extinction of a language leads to the simultaneous loss of its literary heritage and the intellectual frameworks—such as perspectives, philosophies, and worldviews held by its speakers. This phenomenon reflects the ideological dominance perpetuated in the contemporary era. As Phillipson (2009) emphasizes, linguistic imperialism is intertwined with broader systems of control, encompassing education, culture, media, communication, economic structures, politics, and even military agendas.

Language serves as a powerful conduit through which cultural and social forces shape individuals' experiences, values, and behaviors. In line with this, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory asserts that human development is fundamentally influenced by social and cultural interactions. According to McLeod (2022), Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning is a socially mediated process in which individuals—particularly children—develop cognitive and cultural skills through dialogue with more knowledgeable members of society. This perspective highlights how preferences for particular languages, or aversion to others, are formed within social and cultural contexts. Consequently, second language acquisition is deeply rooted in socio-cultural dynamics, with language functioning as a central mechanism in Vygotsky's views.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement Multilingual Education Policies Language policy should promote a balanced multilingual model that values Urdu, English, and regional languages equally, as proposed by Rahman (2004). This approach can reduce the marginalization of local languages while still acknowledging the practical value of English.

- Improve Instructional Quality Across All Mediums Strengthen the pedagogical quality in both English-medium and non-English-medium institutions to bridge the quality gap. As Mahboob and Jain (2016) argue, improving access to quality education across linguistic lines promotes equity and socio-economic mobility.

- Recognize and Integrate World Englishes Given the pluralistic and hybrid nature of English (Marlina & Xu, 2018; Walia, 2023), English language teaching (ELT) in Pakistan should incorporate multiple global English varieties rather than focusing solely on native norms (e.g., British or American English). This can validate local linguistic identities and reduce linguistic insecurity.

- Contextualize Language Learning Socio-Culturally Language education programs should be designed with socio-cultural relevance, taking into account learners' identities, backgrounds, and experiences. In line with Vygotsky's theory (McLeod, 2022; Vygotsky, 1978), second language acquisition must be seen as a socially mediated and culturally situated process.

- Preserve Linguistic Diversity Through Policy and Curriculum Introduce policies and curriculum reforms aimed at documenting and revitalizing endangered regional languages.

The extinction of a language, as noted, also means the loss of unique intellectual and cultural worldviews, which contributes to cultural homogenization.

- Raise Awareness About Linguistic Imperialism Educational stakeholders—including policymakers, educators, and curriculum developers—should be made aware of linguistic imperialism and its effects on identity, power, and access (Phillipson, 2009). This awareness can inform more inclusive and decolonized language policies.

- Promote Critical Language Awareness in Classrooms Encourage critical thinking about language in educational settings, helping learners understand how language relates to power, culture, and identity. This includes critically analyzing the dominance of English and fostering respect for linguistic diversity.

- Encourage Local Research on Language Use and Identity Support and fund local, context-specific linguistic research to inform policies that reflect the realities of language use and identity formation in Pakistani society.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of English language education in Pakistan reflects a complex interplay of historical legacies, socio-economic realities, and global influences. Introduced during colonial rule as a marker of power and elitism, English has since transformed into a crucial medium for education, professional advancement, and international connectivity. Its growing demand is evident in the expansion of English-medium schools and private language institutes, which are viewed as gateways to global academic and career opportunities.

However, this development has also deepened existing inequalities. A stark divide persists between urban and rural areas, and between private and public institutions, in terms of access to quality English education. Students from privileged backgrounds benefit from superior instruction, while those from under-resourced schools struggle to gain proficiency. This is indicative of widening socio-economic disparities.

The rise of digital platforms and online learning, particularly accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic, has created new opportunities for expanding access to English education. Yet, without adequate infrastructure and targeted support, these innovations risk reinforcing rather than reducing educational divides in marginalized communities.

Beyond education, the dominance of English raises pressing cultural concerns. As its role expands, there is a growing risk of sidelining Pakistan's rich linguistic heritage, including Urdu and regional languages. This situation highlights the urgent need for language policies that strike a balance promoting English for global engagement while safeguarding local languages as vital expressions of economic development, political freedom, identity and culture.

Ultimately, the future of English in Pakistan will depend on how effectively the country addresses these challenges. Ensuring equitable access, enhancing the quality of instruction, and protecting linguistic diversity will be essential for making English a tool of empowerment rather than exclusion. In this way, Pakistan can strengthen its position on the global stage while preserving its political and economic independence.

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