

LINGUISTIC HIERARCHIES AND HIGHER EDUCATION ACCESS: A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC STUDY OF MULTILINGUALISM IN RURAL PAKISTAN

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Abstract:

Education policy of language has immense consequences on the avenues of higher learning particularly in the bilingual or multilingual societies whereby the stratification of language can result in the issue of inequity. The regional languages such as Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi and Balochi are marginalized in rural Pakistan whereby, Urdu and English are the major language of education and this diminishes the chances of students to prepare and avail higher education. The given qualitative ethnographic study, which relies on classroom observations, interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and community members, document analysis, was carried out in the rural schools of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Balochistan in order to know how linguistic hierarchies prevent the access to higher education. Findings have shown that privilege types against the Urdu and English language are used to create structural forms of discrimination that undermine the academic readiness and self-esteem of speakers of the regional language therefore restricting their access and performance to higher education. Nonetheless, the research also indicates pedagogical practices that use the regional languages to promote engagement and conceptual knowledge, and thus recommends that multilingual strategies could be applied to bridge the secondary and tertiary level. Placing these findings in the context of the international literature of higher education, the study proposes the establishment of culturally responsive language policies to value multilingualism as a resource, which will result in equal access to higher education. The study is relevant to the international discourse of linguistic diversity in higher education providing policy suggestions of the inclusion of institutional practices in multilingual environments.

Keywords: *Multilingualism, Higher Education Access, Linguistic Hierarchies, Regional Languages, Educational Equity, Rural Pakistan*

Introduction

Multilingualism in education is a major factor of access to and success in higher education, especially in conditions with linguistic diversity and social-economic inequality (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2021). Urdu is the national language of the country, English the language of high education and economic mobility, and local languages such as Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, and Balochi represent cultural and ethnic identities in Pakistan, a country with a complicated lingual situation (Rahman, 2020a). A good example of the country that offers the prospect of multilingualism to meet the challenge of educational inequalities is a honorific speaking English country in the Indian Subcontinent, Pakistan with its various lingual fabric. The lingual situation in the country is represented by Urdu, suggested as the national language; English, as the language of administration, academia, and economic power; and the wide variety of regional languages, such as Pashto, Sindh, Punjabi, Balochi, and so on; they have the pivotal cultural and ethnic significance (Abbasi, Channa, Kakepoto, Ali, and Mehmood, 2017).

Although the discussed dynamics can be observed in secondary education, their consequences on higher education are significant, as in many institutions, admission to the facility and successful academic performance may require speaking Urdu and English (Ashraf, 2023). In rural Pakistan, where educational resources are scarce, linguistic hierarchies worsen the inequalities, limiting students to be able to prepare to develop tertiary education and maintain social stratification.

The language factor also influences the linguistic problems significantly in the rural areas of Pakistan where the availability of educational materials and facilities is quite restricted and where the role of language in the formation of educational performances is a highly sensitive issue that is yet to be investigated (Naseem, Mahmood, Rauf, & Yen, 2025). Previous studies have been investigating the topics of language and educational inequality, but few studies from ethnographic studies in the area of multilingualism as a deterrent (as well as an enabling factor) in a rural region of Pakistan have been published (Khan, Sultana, Bughio, & Naz, 2014; Nisa, Sarfraz, Naveed, & Mahmood, 2023).

The preference given to both Urdu and English as the languages across the schooling system favors linguistic stratifications, which at most occasions put the weaker learners who have poor language expertise in schooling difficulties. Urdu being a national lingua franca, English is a signifier of socio-economic advantage which associates itself with the upward mobility and to getting in elite education institutions (Nisa et al., 2023). The difference between the proficheness of these official languages and that of the regional ones poses a special challenge to the rural student since the student might not be in a position to interact comprehensively with the education curricula (Tariq, Bilal, Sandhu, Iqbal, & Hayat, 2013).

The research study is informed by the concept of the impact of linguistic diversity on institutional access and achievement as it is understood within the global discourse of inclusive education policies through the application of international literature on the higher education (Bamberger & Kim, 2023; Unterhalter & North, 2024)

The research addresses a research gap in the higher education research literature because it provides the localized perspective of the role of linguistic policies made in secondary schooling on higher education outcomes in a resource-deprived, multilingual setting. It builds upon the preceding literature of Higher Education that highlights the role play by language to the fairness and organization of education in institutions e.g., (Bamberger & Kim, 2023). The research paper will assist in offering of policy recommendations that can be adhered to by institutions of higher learning to pursue culturally responsive practices that value the linguistic diversity in order to enhance the access and equity of the rural students.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study investigates the role of linguistic hierarchies in shaping access to and success in higher education for rural Pakistani students, focusing on the marginalization of regional languages in secondary education. It examines how multilingualism can be leveraged to enhance academic preparedness and foster equitable transitions to tertiary education. The specific objectives are:

1. To analyse how linguistic hierarchies in rural secondary education influence access to and performance in higher education.
2. To explore the role of regional languages as barriers or resources in preparing students for higher education.
3. To assess the perceptions of students, teachers, and community members regarding the impact of language policies on higher education pathways.
4. To evaluate the potential of multilingual pedagogies in secondary education to promote equitable access to higher education in rural Pakistan.

The research questions are:

1. How do linguistic hierarchies, particularly the dominance of Urdu and English over regional languages, affect rural students' access to and success in higher education?
2. How can multilingualism in secondary education serve as a resource to enhance academic preparedness for higher education?
3. How do rural students, teachers, and community members perceive the role of language in shaping higher education opportunities, and how do these perceptions influence academic outcomes?
4. Can the integration of regional languages into secondary curricula enhance equitable access to higher education, and if so, how?

Rationale

The rationale for this study is grounded in the recognition that language is not only a tool for communication but also a key determinant of educational success (Troussas, Krouska, & Sgouropoulou, 2025). In rural Pakistan, where educational resources are limited, the language of instruction becomes an even more significant factor in shaping students' academic trajectories.

The study will have a positive policy implication to educators and policy makers as the gaps in the available literature will be filled. The relevance of the worth of these associations between lingual ranks and the availability of education will translate into the more widespread and efficient learning activities, which will take into account the reality that individuals in rural Pakistan were multilingual.

Literature Review

The intersection of education and language is a problematic area of higher education research, especially in multilingual settings where language inequalities determine access and equality (Unterhalter & North, 2024). In Pakistan, the pre-eminence of Urdu and English as mediums of education poses a considerable disadvantage on the students in rural areas, whose first languages are often regional (e.g. Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi), as it hinders their readiness and success in higher education (Ashraf, 2023).

Language and Higher Education Access

Linguistic stratifications in secondary school have significant effects on higher education access, especially in postcolonial settings where the colonial languages are spoken as the languages of study (Radcliffe, 2017). In Pakistan, higher education is only accessible to students with the knowledge of Urdu and English, but students in rural areas are not usually well proficient in these languages because of little exposure and resources (Rahman, 2020a). This results in a language mismatch restricting academic readiness and confidence which strengthens inequities (Cummins, 2000). The literature on Higher Education emphasizes the same tendencies all around the world, where access to secondary education is hampered by linguistic barriers to tertiary education, especially among marginalized populations (Bamberger & Kim, 2023). To provide an example, (Radcliffe, 2017) say that policies of language-in-education within Andean higher education discriminate indigenous speakers of language, which is similar to the situation in Pakistan in rural areas.

Language and Educational Inequality

The idea of educational inequality frequently collides with the problem of linguistic diversity, in the cases where there are certain students who must study a second language during their education when they do not necessarily have the knowledge in order to do so (Kim & Kim, 2025; Villegas, 1988). The second phenomenon, commonly talked of as language mismatch, has been much covered in both developed and developing nations (Cummins, 1997; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2006). To illustrate, A. H. Shah and Mushtaq (2024) highlights the discrimination

faced by students in the rural areas that mainly consist of people with Pashto, Sindhi, or Balochi language-speakers despite the fact that they are not good with Urdu and English. Such students are considered to be linguistically deficient and besides this fact, this may also influence their performance in the academic life as well as their self integrity and feeling of belonging in the school system (Akram, Yang, Ahmad, & Aslam, 2020).

Ahmed, Pathan, and Khan (2017) state that poverty in Pakistan is closely associated with the English language proficiency because of access to quality education, prospects of employments, and social mobility. In this way, language emerges as one of the main axes of power that reinscribes social considerable levels of stratification (Rahman, 2020b).

Baker endorses this contention by saying that when adequately embraced multilingualism can be as a resource in cognitive development and academic achievement (Baker, 2011). Considering the background of rural Pakistan where regions of a country form part of local identities using regional language, acknowledgment of multilingualism as a resource in education can give a chance to enhance the educational participation and performance (Sheena Shah & Brenzinger, 2018).

Multilingualism as a Resource in Higher Education

Contrary to deficit perspectives, multilingualism can enhance higher education outcomes by leveraging students' linguistic repertoires (García & Lin, 2017; Serbinovskaya, 2025). According to Baker (2011), multilingual pedagogies enhance cognitive growth and academic interactions, which are essential in third-level education, to achieve success. In rural Pakistan where the students identify themselves based on regional languages, introducing these languages into the school curricula might bridge the gap between home and school which will create academic readiness in students (Sheena Shah & Brenzinger, 2018).

The Multilingual Advantage in Education

In a contrast to the deficit perspective of multilingualism, which conceptualizes non dominant languages in terms of corporal impediment of learning, newer studies endorse asset based form of approach. García and Lin (2017) present the argument that being a multilingualism is also a powerful tool in terms of acquiring superior learning outcomes, greater cultural competence, and improving cognitive flexibility. In this respect, multilingualism is also more than a possible impediment, but also the asset that can help to fill the gap between home and school language and foster more inclusive and equitable educational results.

In example, in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, it has been shown that where education is purposeful in the mother tongues of the learners, the results yield are very good especially in the lower grades (Bialystok, 2001; Heugh, 2009; Serbinovskaya, 2025).

The unqualified teachers who have expertise in using regional languages, lack of curricular contents in regional languages as well as having historical control of Urdu and English in schools are a big impediment (Rahman, 2010). Also, cultural element is also against the regional languages anchorage to education at the formal level where they are viewed as inferior languages among the populace of the social and economic advancement as anchored on Urdu and English languages (Mahboob, 2003; Rahman, 2009). Such issues demand a subtle response that, in addition to appreciating the significance of multilingualism, also takes care of the socio-policing aspects of language hierarchies.

Linguistic Capital and Institutional Stratification

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital underscores how language proficiency shapes access to educational and social resources. In Pakistan, English proficiency is a gatekeeper to elite higher education institutions, reinforcing social stratification (Raza et al., 2025). Rural students, primarily fluent in regional languages, are disadvantaged, limiting their ability to compete in national examinations and access tertiary education (Tamim, 2014). This mirrors

global patterns, as noted in Higher Education, where linguistic capital influences institutional hierarchies and student outcomes (Unterhalter & North, 2024).

Research Gaps

While existing literature addresses linguistic inequality, few studies focus on how secondary education language policies shape higher education access in rural, multilingual contexts like Pakistan. This study fills this gap by providing ethnographic insights into how linguistic hierarchies in rural secondary schools affect tertiary pathways, contributing to international higher education scholarship. By engaging with Higher Education studies (e.g., (Bamberger, 2022; Radcliffe, 2017)), it advances conceptual and empirical understanding of multilingualism's role in fostering equitable higher education systems.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to investigate how multilingualism shapes educational inequalities in rural Pakistan, offering contextually grounded insights into a largely underexplored sociolinguistic landscape. Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis were employed to capture the everyday realities of students, teachers, administrators, and community members.

Purposive sampling targeted rural schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Balochistan where regional languages such as Pashto, Sindhi, and Balochi are spoken at home, yet Urdu and English dominate instruction. The sample comprised 30 students (grades 6–10, balanced by gender), 10 teachers of language-intensive subjects, 5 administrators, and 5 parents or community leaders, ensuring diverse perspectives across linguistic and cultural contexts.

Observations documented classroom language practices, participation patterns, and interactional dynamics. Interviews (45–60 minutes) explored perceived impacts of the language of instruction, strategies for navigating linguistic hierarchies, and views on policy. Textbook analysis, curriculum analysis, and policy document analysis indicated institutional orientations to the use of language and implications to equity.

Transcription and thematic analysis of data was done through iterative cycles of familiarisation, coding and theme development, which allowed identifying patterns, which cut across participants and locations. It was based on empirical and existing literature on multilingualism and educational inequality to draw interpretations.

The ethical protection procedures involved informed consent, pseudonymity as well as data protection and cultural sensitivity to gender norms and language preferences. Even though the findings are contextual, which cannot be statistically generalised, the findings introduce new and more detailed realities of the operation of linguistic hierarchies within the educational framework of the rural community and the reproduction or destabilisation of systemic injustices.

Data Analysis

The data analysis that is in the format of respondent observations, the focus group interview, and document review, follows a step by step process that aims at obtaining a valid and meaningful interpretation of the data in order to answer the research questions.

Theme 1: Linguistic Hierarchies in Educational Practices

Among the major details of this research is that Urdu and English have had predominant influence in the rural system of education, most times at the expense of local languages. This theme emerged strongly across multiple data sources, including classroom observations, interviews with teachers, and administrative documents.

Urdu and English were observed to be the primary languages of instruction in nearly all schools, regardless of the regional language spoken by the students.

Teachers confirmed that students with limited proficiency in Urdu or English struggled significantly, as these languages were central to understanding and engaging with the curriculum.

Table 1: Linguistic Hierarchies in the Classroom

Language Used	Frequency in Classroom (Observed)	Teachers' Perception	Students' Perception	Impact on Learning
Urdu	85%	Essential for communication and instruction	Viewed as an official language, but challenging for non-native speakers	Limited comprehension for regional language speakers
English	10%	Used for advanced subjects and exams	Seen as a language of prestige, but difficult for most students	A barrier to academic success for many students
Regional Languages (Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi)	5%	Rarely used, except in informal settings	Valued by students but seen as inferior in educational contexts	Not used as a medium of instruction, limiting engagement

The findings suggest that while regional languages are integral to students' identities and daily lives, they are largely absent from formal educational instruction. As illustrated in Table 1, the frequency of language use in different domains highlights the limited presence of regional languages in classrooms.

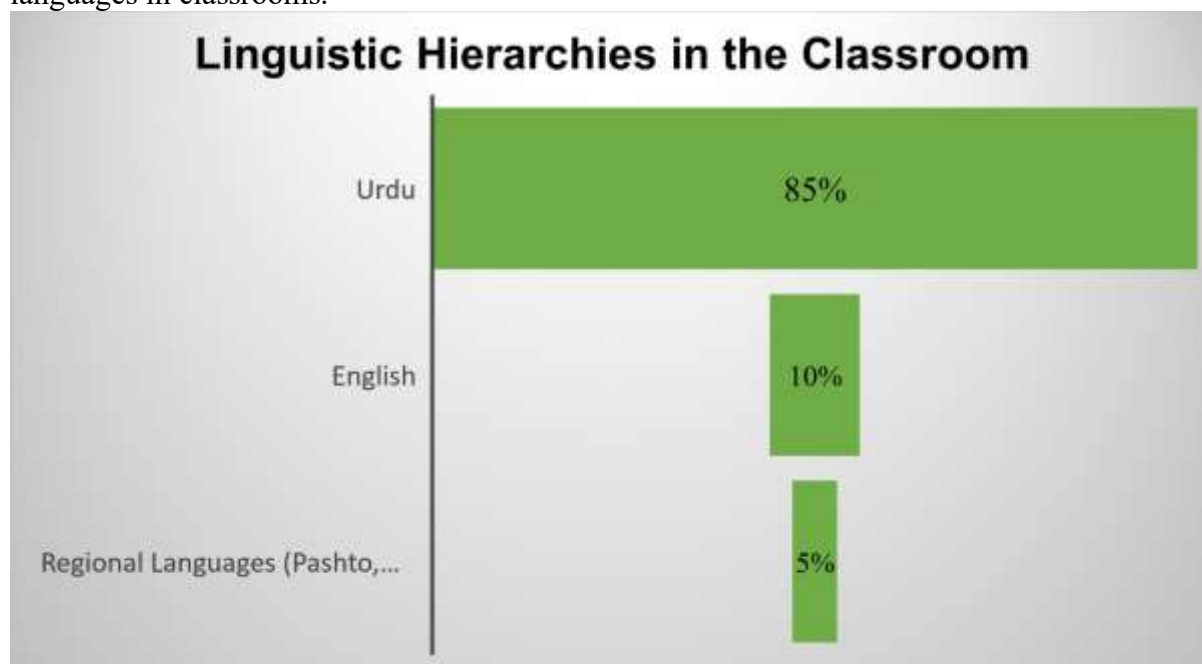


Figure 1: Linguistic Hierarchies in the Classroom

Figure 1 clearly illustrating that the dominance of Urdu and English not only reflects a linguistic hierarchy but also exacerbates educational inequalities, as students with limited proficiency in these languages are unable to fully access the curriculum.

Theme 2: Teachers' Strategies and Challenges in Multilingual Classrooms

Teachers in rural areas reported using a mix of Urdu and English in the classroom to navigate the linguistic challenges of multilingual students. However, there were significant variations in how teachers approached the language barriers faced by students.



Figure 2: Teachers' Strategies in Multilingual Classrooms

Although there were some teachers who tried to include some aspects of tags in their explanation, there were those who strictly taught Urdu or English because they considered them as key to academic achievement as shown in figure 2.

Table 2: Teachers' Language Strategies in Multilingual Classrooms

Teacher Language Strategy	Frequency	Impact on Student Engagement	Teacher's Confidence
Code-Switching (Urdu to Regional Language)	35%	Increased participation and understanding in cases	Low confidence, unsure about the effectiveness of this approach
Full Instruction in Urdu/English	50%	Limited participation from students not fluent in these languages	High confidence, based on perceived importance of Urdu/English for academic success
Use of Regional Languages for Explanations	15%	Enhanced clarity and comfort for regional language speakers	Low confidence, as teachers feared compromising academic rigor

The use of code-switching by teachers was also somewhat successful in building engagement, but it was not a systematic practice, as it lacked institutional support and consistent training.

As presented in Table 2, classroom language choices reveal that Urdu and English dominated teacher–student interactions, often at the expense of regional language inclusion. This strategy ultimately failed to bridge the educational gap among multilingual students who struggled to follow lessons in languages they did not fully understand.

Theme 3: Students’ Perceptions of Language and Education

Linguistic hierarchy was experienced daily by students and this influenced their perceptions on language in the classroom. Whenever the question of not being able to take part in classroom discussions or learn the material properly was brought up, the representatives of the regional languages were largely expressing their anger about being unwilling to do so. Through the interviews, it was revealed that students considered the regional languages useful but commonly regarded them as less academic as compared to Urdu and English.

Table 3: Students' Perceptions of Language in Education

Language	Student Perception	Level of Comfort	Perceived Academic Value	Impact on Motivation
Urdu	Viewed as necessary for educational success, but difficult to master	Medium	High	Frustration in comprehension
English	Seen as a key to social mobility and professional success, but challenging	Low	Very High	Motivation to learn despite challenges
Regional Languages (Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi)	Valued as part of cultural identity, but seen as unimportant for education	High	Low	Limited motivation to learn in school settings

Students were ambivalent about the language of instruction. Although they acknowledged that Urdu and English are necessary for academic success, most of them reported difficulty connecting with the material due to the language barrier.

As shown in **Table 3**, student perceptions highlight a clear divide between the instrumental value of Urdu and English and the cultural significance of regional languages, which were not regarded as valuable for formal learning.

Theme 4: The Potential for Multilingualism as an Educational Resource

The fact that the educational environment in rural Pakistan consists mostly of relying on Urdu and English as the main languages does not exclude the fact that the study has found an awareness building on the possible advantages of multilingualism as shown in Figure 3. There was also the interest of some teachers and community members in becoming more liberal in using regional languages to resolve the language barrier.

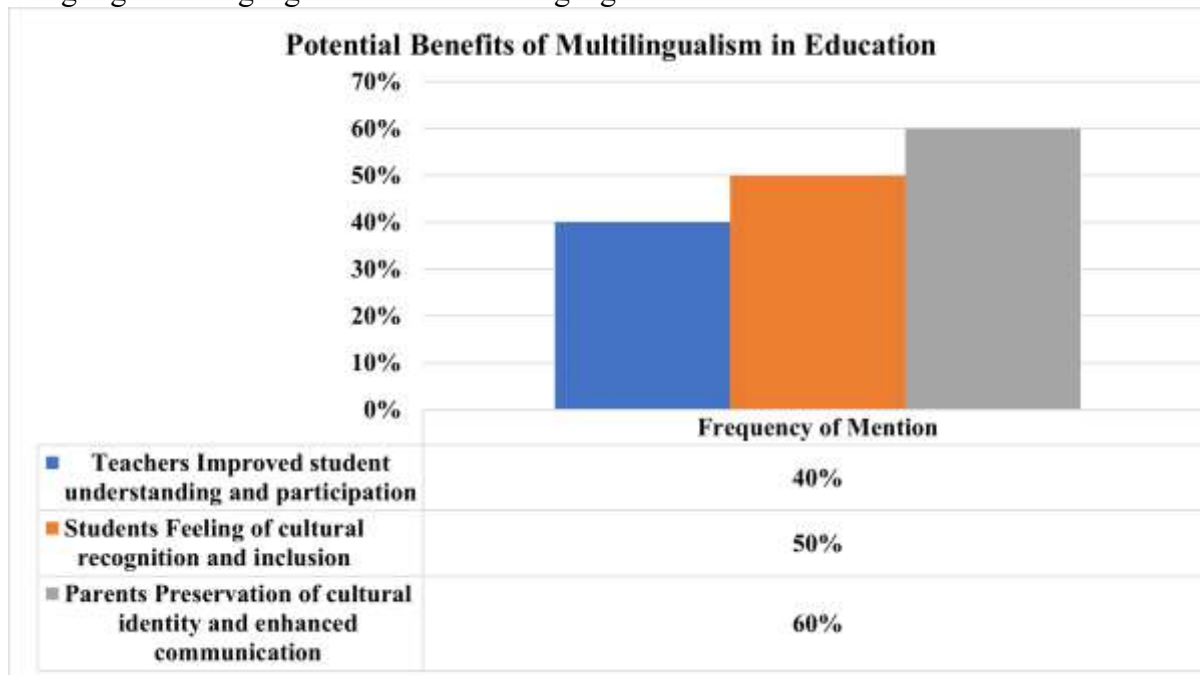


Figure 3: The Potential for Multilingualism as an Educational Resource

The parents stressed on the importance of the need to preserve regional languages as a means to preserve cultural identity and enrich the communication that existed in the classroom between the students and the teachers.

Table 4: Potential Benefits of Multilingualism in Education

Stakeholder	Suggested Benefits of Regional Languages in Education	Frequency of Mention	Impact on Education
Teachers	Improved student understanding and participation	40%	Enhanced engagement and reduced academic struggle
Students	Feeling of cultural recognition and inclusion	50%	Increased motivation and self-esteem
Parents	Preservation of cultural identity and enhanced communication	60%	Strengthened community-school relationship

There is significant potential for utilizing multilingualism as a resource through the incorporation of regional languages into the curriculum. As illustrated in Table 4, feedback from key stakeholders including teachers, students, and parents indicates strong support for initiatives that integrate regional languages into teaching.

This analysis demonstrates that the multilingual facets of individuals in rural Pakistan is a curse and also a blessing.

These findings suggest that a change in the current policies regarding language use in the schools to adapt and accept the multilingual nature of countryside in Pakistan can be significant in reducing the disparities in education and enhancing a sign of equity improvement.

Findings and Discussion

This paper finds that in rural secondary schools of Pakistan as far as language hierarchies are concerned, the prevalence of Urdu, as well as English, in the instructional systems, severely limits the preparation and access of students to higher learning. The results are ethnographic in terms of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Balochistan, and they assist in recognizing the role of these hierarchies in maintaining educational inequities and give an idea about how the idea of multilingual pedagogies could be utilized to enhance tertiary opportunities, which contributes to the already existing international higher education (Unterhalter and Oketch, 2023; Webb and Radcliffe, 2023).

Linguistic Hierarchies and Higher Education Access

The prevalence of Urdu and English as the secondary languages in schools puts structural obstacles in the path of rural students, whose first languages are regional (e.g., Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi).

The classroom observations showed that Urdu was the language of instruction (85% of communication), and English followed on more complex topics (10%), and regional languages were hardly used (5%). Students with limited proficiency in Urdu or English struggled to engage with the curriculum, impacting their academic preparedness for higher education.

This aligns with the findings that linguistic barriers in secondary education limit access to tertiary institutions, particularly for marginalized groups (Bamberger et al., 2022). Teachers noted that students' inability to master Urdu and English hindered performance in national examinations, a critical gateway to higher education.

As observed in classrooms, the Urdu language was the major language that was used in instruction with few inclusions of the regional languages. Even though it was less common, higher-level subjects, like science, and mathematics that are prerequisite to academic progress were taught through English.

Multilingualism as a Resource for Tertiary Preparation

The study concluded that Urdu and English language were dominant, however, in the pedagogical settings, consolidation indicated that, regional languages could be applied to enhance student engagement and comprehension, and consequently, there was a prospect of having more preparedness to higher education. Teachers who mentioned more students engagement (35 percent of the strategies observed) told complicated ideas by code-switching or local languages.

The argument that was advanced by Baker (2011) regarding the fact that multilingual pedagogies have the effect of enhancing cognitive development is supported by the fact that students became more confident and motivated when the language they were using was regional.

The result is in line with the previous literature observations that have created sensitivities regarding the harmful impact of language mismatch in education performance (Shah, 2015; Bughio and Khan, 2016).

The findings suggest that the prevalence of Urdu and English is not only a hindrance to the educational performance, but the basis of the social segregation along the linguistic proficiency lines. This language barrier limits the education of such students with rural backgrounds who may not have had exposure to such languages outside the classrooms.

The above discovery points to the twofold nature of multilingualism in country schooling. On the one hand, multilingualism can be taken as an asset that unites home and school languages

so that the students can get a clearer idea of the material content and be involved in the studying process. On the contrary, reluctance to adopt the regional languages in the systematic way it is administered in classroom is a manifestation of the firmly held notions that the regional languages are inferior to Urdu and English.

The results can be attributed to sentiments expressed by Baker (2006) who assumes that multilingualism employed in a right manner can enhance learning experiences in addition to cognitive development.

Stakeholder Perceptions and Policy Implications

It was realized by teachers, students and parents that the need to have access to higher education and use Urdu and English created tension with the cultural importance of the local languages. Educators considered Urdu and English as the keys to national examinations and tertiary achievements but recognized the difficulties of the speakers of the regional languages. Regional languages were significant because they were considered to be cultural identity but Urdu and English were taken as gateways to academic and professional mobility among the students. These perceptions show that inclusive language policies should be adopted in institutions of higher learning to help promote linguistic diversity and enhance equity.

The study suggested that equity in education could be enhanced by using the local language in the school curriculum. The teachers as well as parents suggested that regional languages should be learnt as per the style of building a culture of understanding and involvement of the students. The students claimed that they were active and eager to study because hard terms were explained by the use of regional languages to introduce clarity. Teachers who used the regional languages at some point experienced that the participation and understanding was more successful in students. The incorporation of regional languages was seen to help in the easier learning and make it relevant to the day to day life of the students.

Implications for Higher Education

The results indicate that language stratification within secondary school systems upholds inequality within education, which restricts access to higher education among students in rural areas. Schools should incorporate regional languages in their secondary curriculum to improve the academic preparedness which will create equal access to higher education. This is in line with international demands of culturally responsive pedagogies in higher education institutions (Bamberger, 2022).

This aligns with the findings of Heugh (2009) and Bialystok (2001) who have provided the benefits of learning in the first language by the students in a multicultural setting. The research also contributes to the argument about an asset based approach of multilingualism where regional languages are not regarded as a hindrance but rather as a valuable tool that can be used to support learning and bring inclusivity. Nonetheless, such an approach will have to be implemented in systemic changes, such as development of teaching materials in regional languages, training of teachers and institutional support.

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on the importance of linguistic hierarchies in the determination of access and achievement in higher education by Pakistani rural students. The prevalence of Urdu and English in secondary education leaves the speakers of the regional language behind in terms of academic preparedness and reduces their access to tertiary institutions. According to ethnographic evidence of schools in rural areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, and Balochistan, although Urdu and English are important to access and succeed in higher education, they place structural disadvantages on students who speak the regional language (e.g., Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi). Nevertheless, the paper also recognizes the multilingual

pedagogies as a tool to promote engagement and understanding as a way of creating an avenue to enhance higher education preparedness.

The study provides insights into the effects of linguistic diversity on institutional access and equity by placing these findings in the body of literature on higher education in international scholarship (Bamberger, 2022; Radcliffe, 2017). Linguistic gaps can be solved by the introduction of regional languages in secondary school curricula which allows fair access of students to higher education. Besides, tertiary institutions should use inclusive language policies including multilingual support programs and flexible admission demands to fit the linguistic factors of the rural students. These are in line with the international demands of culturally responsive pedagogies to improve access to higher education equity (Unterhalter & North, 2024).

The hegemony of these languages contributes positively to social stratification because students in the background of regional languages have to go through different barriers in gaining access into the curriculum and ends up having a poor educational experience. This substantiates the results of past studies in that language mismatch is a fatal issue in the education underachievement in multilingual students (Cummins, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

These results should be discussed in the context of a spraying literature that promotes asset-based approach to multilingualism where regional languages are no longer regarded as a barrier but as a source of economic wealth on education (Baker, 2006; Garcia, & Wei, 2014).

It also showed that regional language inclusion in the curricular could lead to equality in education by making the education more accessible and more pertinent to the students linguistic and cultural spheres. Such an inclusion would imply major institutional transformations which are the development of teaching materials in the regional languages, training of teachers on multilingual education and a transformation of the predominant cultural attitudes which value Urdu and English over regional languages.

Finally, the present study is a demonstration that language has an instrumental role in determining the educational performance of rural Pakistan. The results indicate that linguistic inequality within the education system could be dramatically reduced by determining a wide range of education barriers that might negatively impact various students. The introduction of the regional languages and recognition of the importance of multilingualism will help the educational system to be more accommodative and compliant to the needs of all the students despite their lingual backgrounds.

The research will add to the existing literature on higher education in the world by providing more localised information on the connections between the language, education, and equity in the multilingual resource-strained world. It offers policy recommendations for secondary and tertiary institutions to valorize linguistic diversity, reducing barriers to higher education access and fostering inclusive academic environments.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study highlights the need for further research to explore how linguistic policies in secondary education shape higher education access and equity in multilingual contexts like rural Pakistan. Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term impact of multilingual pedagogies on students' transitions to and success in higher education, focusing on academic performance and socio-economic outcomes. Comparative research across diverse multilingual contexts, such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, could provide broader insights into effective language policies for higher education equity. Additionally, studies should investigate the efficacy of multilingual support programs in higher education institutions, such as language bridging courses or culturally responsive curricula, to enhance inclusivity for rural students.

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