

Urdu to Unify the National Education System

The Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training, Shafqat Mahmood, has encouraged that all provinces of Pakistan should promote the same national curriculum. He has called for Urdu to be the unified language across the national education system, deeming it in the main language of instruction for the first five years. As students' progress to secondary school, the choice between teaching Urdu or English as the primary language will be left up for debate among experts. This recent proposal raises the question of a full language reform, inclusive of students' native tongues.

The education system in Pakistan is fragmented and divided in many parts. There is a difference in courses and classes along with the language. Various different systems prolong in Pakistan such as Urdu medium, English medium, Olevels, A levels, Fsc, Matric and many other divisions exist. In order to bring everyone on one page, the government need to take affirmative actions against it. The proposal in reforming the country's educational reform is found in reaction to the underuse of English as a language of instruction or learning despite its prominence as the language of school textbooks. According to a recent survey, 94 percent of English-medium private school teachers in Punjab do not speak English. It was found out that only 4 to 12 percent of third grade pupils are fluent readers and comprehend 80 percent of what they are reading in English.

Pakistan is one of the very few countries where children in schools are not taught their mother tongue through early years of development even though research extensively talks about its importance. Only the province of Sindh offers some instructions in its regional language of Sindhi, versus India, where all except for one state offers instructions in the regional language. Some efforts are now being made through initiatives like the Pakistan reading project and Sindh reading program which is finally focusing on developing the capacity of teachers to teach reading Urdu and Sindhi using phonetics. Other materials are also under development to teach the students to read in Pashto, Balochi and Brahvi.

The proposed shift towards using a child's native tongue as the main language of instruction and learning for primary school-goers is intended for the aim of helping these children to develop cognitively, socially and academically. A second, linguistically proximate language and English would be introduced at a later stage in primary school as individual subjects and not dominate as the medium of teaching and learning. Further disciplines in the latter

languages can be introduced at a higher level once the students have a strong enough command over their use. Multi-lingualism at higher education levels would improve the quality and variety of scholarship, which is stunted by keeping English as the main medium of students to express their ideas in academia. The Urdu language reform will likely incur similar consequences. However, the matter of a language reform in the education sector is not a linear solution. Pakistan has always had voices calling to teach curriculums in Urdu and locally indigenous languages, but the issue calls for more complexity than it seems as Pakistan is a multilingual society where at least 69 languages are spoken. Of these around 30 are spoken just in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province.

The education ministry will have to undergo a long-term project to achieve the teaching of an Urdu dominant curriculum, possibly one that is also inclusive of multi-lingualism. Perhaps, financially this can be achieved as contrary to popular belief, the education state department is no longer a poorly funded institution. The budget for the country's education has been growing at a rate of 17.5 percent since 2010 and should be sustained by the PTI government. However, the challenge lies in the approval of school administrators, the teaching staff and the households of school-going children. Where the introduction of teaching Urdu and local languages can open doors for children and their families to seek education without the added difficulty of first undergoing the learning of English, and enhance scholarship of neglected languages, the process will be slowed down by the lack of instructors who can provide years of academic teaching under this new reform.

While the spirit of the federal ministry is in a place to revive a nationalist identity and enhance the progress of Urdu scholarship, it also looks like an attempt to create equity in the education that Pakistanis will receive. However, if it is to fuel economic growth and create future generations of better professionals and academics, it is not the most suitable option. Better skill acquisition created by the right economic policy and improving the returns to education will act as better motivators to improve the nation's schooling performance.