

Parents' choices of language as the medium of instruction in schools

By Zubeida Mustafa

Independent journalist - Pakistan

It is now recognized worldwide that the language used as the medium of instruction in primary schools has a profound impact on the child's learning process. Everything else being equal, children do better academically when they are taught in a language they already know, that is, their home language. Their comprehension is better, their cognition develops faster and they can communicate more effectively as they have the skills to express themselves. They are certainly more confident.

With all the advantages that education in a child's mother tongue offers, it is surprising that not much attention has been paid to the issue. No language policy for education has been formulated in Pakistan. Neither has any research in the form of a survey on the ground been done.

Hence by adding some language-related questions in the survey form, the authors of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2012 have done a very commendable job. It will not only draw attention to this crucial question, it will also shed some light on how appropriate are our education strategies in the language context. The report also helps us assess the preferences of the parents which is important because it is primarily through them that a child derives the motivation to study a language. ASER asked three questions that focus on language. They are:

“What is the official medium of instruction in children's school?”

“What is the language spoken at home by family members?”

“What is the preferred medium of instruction at school?”

The answers to these questions, although the questions could have been more comprehensively phrased, reveal a wealth of information that could help the policymakers formulate more sensible policies on education. The main findings of the survey in the eight regions surveyed are

- Pakistan is a multilingual state. Not only does every province have its own language, there are a number of languages spoken in each unit and there is a lot of overlapping.
- The parents' preferences of the language they want to be used in their children's school are not uniform and vary from province to province. There must be hidden variations in every province too.
- There is a broad disconnect between the language spoken at home and the one used as the medium of instruction officially.

There are three main issues to be analysed and explored. First what do the parents prefer and what language they speak at home with the child. Secondly is there a disconnect between the home language and school language. Thirdly, if there is a disconnect how does it impact on education.

ASER 2012 gives the following results for medium preferences, the language spoken at home, and the medium of instruction:

Region	Preferred medium	Home language	Medium of instruction	
			Government schools	Private schools
Balochistan	Urdu (69%)	Balochi (44%) and Pushto 34%	Urdu (100%)	Urdu (49%) and English (51%)
Azad Jammu & Kashmir	Urdu (70%)	Hindko (34%) and Pahari (21%), Urdu (15%)	Urdu (97%) and English (3%)	Urdu (32%) and English (68%)
FATA	Home language (60%)	Pushto (99%)	Urdu (80%), English (2%) and Pashto (17%)	Urdu (12%), English (86%) and Pashto (2%)
Gilgit Baltistan	Urdu (54%)	Shina (47%) and Urdu (1%)	Urdu (68%) and English (32%)	Urdu (16%) and English (84%)
Islamabad Capital Territory	English (49%), Urdu (46%)	Urdu (47%) and Punjabi (28%)	Urdu (97%) and English (3%)	Urdu (32%) and English (68%)
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Home language (45%), Urdu(39%)	Pushto(77%) and Hindko (11%)	Urdu (66%), English (3%) and Pushto (30%)*	Urdu (23%), English (70%) and Pushto (7%)*
Punjab	Urdu (56%) and English (31%)	Punjabi (65%) and Seraiki (21%)	Urdu (50%) and English (50%)	Urdu (35%) and English (65%)
Sindh	Home language (90%)	Sindhi (86%) and Urdu (1%)	Urdu (2%), English (1%) and Sindhi (97%)	Urdu (59%), English (35%) and Sindhi (6%)

*With variety of languages spoken in the province, the medium of instruction is being changed. According to the Mother Tongue Education Bill adopted by the KP Assembly in 2011 all major languages of the province – Pushto, Hindko, Seraiki, Torwali, Khovar, etc – will be the medium of instruction where the speakers of a language are in a majority. This is a recent move and is not reflected in the schools on the ground.

What emerges clearly is that there is a disconnect between the three dimensions of language probed by the survey. Depending on how strong the feelings of the speakers are vis-à-vis their language, people at times do not display a pride in their language that distances them from their own mother tongue. The preferences of the parents for the medium in school may not necessarily be for the language they speak at home. That could be as a result of their inability to understand the question or the implications of their answer.

On the contrary, there are people with nationalistic sentiments that are reinforced, as in Sindh, by a strong linguistic tradition, a rich language and a wealth of literature.

English is another complicating factor. English is used as a medium of instruction mainly in private schools all over the country (68 percent) because they equate English with quality though this is a myth. Chasing the “English dream” is the government (especially in Punjab) that has switched over to the English medium in a big way. This is a new phenomenon of government schools -- where the poor study -- also turning to English medium (14 percent). This is mainly in Punjab. Since English is regarded to be the “language of power” as described by the leading linguist of Pakistan, Dr Tariq Rahman, this feature reflects the class divide as well. The rich go to private schools and learn in English. The poor go to public sector schools and learn in a local language.

It should be pointed out, though, that when a school describes its medium as English, it needs to be investigated further. My experience has shown that many institutions that describe themselves as English medium are actually using a concoction of various languages to teach their students. Since the textbooks are in English they call themselves English medium but the child cannot speak or express himself in correct English. This is most damaging to the child who simply resorts to the rote method to memorise the text and reproduce it in his exercise book.

What came as a pleasant surprise was that with the exception of ICT, nowhere else does a plurality exist for English as the preferred medium of instruction. In Islamabad 49 percent parents indicated English as their preferred language of education. In some provinces the support for English was extremely low at 3 percent in Balochistan and 7 percent in Sindh. This explodes the myth that is propagated that parents want their children to be taught in English. Many parents may want their children to learn English as another language but that is different from using English as a medium.

The preference for the home language as the medium is also very pronounced, though ASER did not specify the language when it noted the preference for the home language. In fact a correlation between the medium preference and the home language should have been probed. In some regions it was conspicuously missing.

It is interesting that in Sindh 90 percent voted for “home language”, 60 percent in FATA were for “home language” and 45 percent in KP want their home language to be the medium of instruction of their children in school. This is understandable. Pushto and Sindhi are developed languages with a rich stock of literature that cultivates a sense of pride in the speakers.

A word about Urdu. There is a strong preference indicated for Urdu in some provinces. They are Balochistan (69 percent), AJK (70 percent), Gilgit Baltistan (54 percent) and Punjab (56 percent). These are the provinces where the indigenous languages have been overshadowed by Urdu. Yet that does not justify abandoning the mother tongue.

ASER should try to relate the child's learning skills with the language that is the medium of instruction. It would be interesting to assess her/his performance against the language s/he learns in. Are her/his scores higher when s/he is taught in his mother tongue?