**Love of English**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A F A | 8/2/2019

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| ONE reason why our education system is going to the dogs is that our policymal(ers earnestly believe that to be meaningful, education must be serious and dull. They think that a student enjoying herself in class is not learning anything. That would explain why our classrooms are generally not intellectually lively and why our students learn so little.  Having said this, I will ask the question I had asked in my earlier column, `Books are fun`: can a child enjoy any activity in a language she cannot understand? The answer is so obvious that it amounts to insulting the readers` intelligence and I am sorry for raising this question again.  Yet our schools insist on teaching small children in a language they do not understand and enjoy. In Karachi, with the exception of public-sector schools and some NGO-run educational institutions such as TCF, the medium of instruction is either English or a hybrid of Urdu-English because the teachers know no better. The worst part is that all the reading and writing is done in English because the textbooks used are in English.  As a part of my personal research I have tested children studying in Urdu-medium schools and used the same question paper translated into English to test students in the so-called English-medium institutions.  Not surprisingly, the first group did better.  In fact, many children in the Englishmedium schools chose to write in Urdu when offered a choice.  I realise full well that other factors, such as the quality of pedagogy, textbooks, environment, and mode of testing also determine learning outcomes. Keeping this in mind, I had tried to select schools of similar levels with children coming from the same socioeconomic background for this test.  Last week, I chose another approach: the same child was tested in two languages. A school I visited had teachers who appeared to have had some training. But remember, one cannot learn a language in short courses at least not enough to gain sufficient proficiency to teach children various subjects using the newly acquired language as the medium.  As we were being conducted round the school I heard children reciting a nursery rhyme which I had also recited more than 70 years ago. It brought back long-forgotten memories and the image of the Englishwoman who taught me English flashed in my mind`s eye. `Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town/ upstairs and downstairs in his nightgown`, recited the students in a singsong voice. On an impulse I stopped and requested my host that Iwished to enter the class and talk to the children. She graciously agreed. A chair was brought for me and the lesson was resumed.  The children were pretty good. What struck me most was their pronunciation. They did not say, `Daa town`, as most students in similar schools say.  When I talked to the children (who were about eight years) they explained to me the meaning of the nursery rhyme perfectly in Urdu. The teacher had done a good job. But when I tried to expand my conversation to issues beyond the book, they fell silent.  Then I switched over to Urdu and the discussion became more meaningful. One of the students who knew Imran Khan was the prime minister and a former cricketer said he would like a big playground to play cricket and a spacious house for his parents. Another child who volunteered to speal( in English fell silent when I asked him to narrate the story of Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp which he claimed he knew. But as soon as I said Urdu wasallowed, the dam burst and out came a torrent of narration.  I recalled my own childhood when I had read Wee Willie Winkie in class. Many years passed before I had grasped fully themeaning of this rhyme because I could never relate to it. I had never known anyone with the name of Willie. And all this when I had the advantage of a highly trained teacher and a family who knew English and helped me with my schoolwork.  The problem is that we are still obsessed with obsolete notions about schooling. We believe that a child`s education begins when she enters school. On the contrary, a child`s cognitive development and language acquisition starts soon after birth.  Instead of taking it further, our schools reverse it in the belief that education is the transfer of knowledge from the teacher (who supposedly knows everything) to the student who knows nothing. This is an incorrect approach. The fact is that good education is a process in which students construct knowledge themselves with the teacher providing subtle guidance. In this process, language counts.It isfun and the student learns effortlessly.  NB. When I use the word Urdu I mean the child`s first language that may be any indigenouslanguageinPakistan.  www.zubeidamustafa.com |