[**Privilege & learning**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1604630/privilege-learning)

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MANY things are taken for granted and accepted as the norm. Only when examined through a particular lens — class, gender, race, ethnicity, religion — do we discern how arbitrary some of them may be. White privilege — the advantages that accrue just by virtue of colour — is one example. The privilege that goes with being male is another.

Unexamined privileges exist in Pakistani education. At one time the Cambridge ‘O’ level curriculum included a paper called ‘Easy Urdu’ as the only alternative on offer. I can only conclude that most children in the ‘O’ level stream didn’t know enough Urdu to pass at the regular level and a fix had been contrived to let them get by with the level that was actually intended for those studying it as a foreign language.

I am told schools offer both Urdu A and Urdu B these days but the level of Urdu A is so dumbed down that there is really no need for the latter. No one has dissected the Urdu A syllabus to determine the level of Urdu we expect our privileged students to know. By way of reference, one can look at Hafiz Mahmud Sherani’s Sarmaya-i-Urdu, the prescribed text for the Punjab University matriculation examination till 1960 or at [Urdu ki na’i kitab](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urduhindilinks/urdukinaikitab/urdukinaikitab.html) that the late S.R. Faruqi had prepared in 1986 for Class 9 in India. Their tables of content would leave the typical ‘O’ level student and parents nonplussed.

‘Easy Urdu’ was thus an unacknowledged privilege extended to those who could not pass an examination in the national language at a decent level. This recourse was contrary to standard practice which is to challenge students at higher levels of difficulty. Thus the same ‘O’ level curriculum offered a paper in additional math above the level of regular math. The American high school system offers advanced placement courses in most subjects at the first-year college level and these qualify for college credits.

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The objective in education is to maintain benchmark standards and push students to higher levels of achievement. The lowering of standards is a unique innovation adopted by those who can use their leverage to do so without challenge.

The class-based discrimination becomes apparent when one notes that this concession was not applied uniformly. There are many bright students from the matriculation stream who fail to complete their certification for failure to pass the compulsory paper in English. There is no ‘Easy English’ to help them though there is greater justification, English being a foreign language for them. Ditto for all entrance tests for college admissions and for entry into the civil services where many outstanding students stumble repeatedly over the compulsory English paper without being offered the lifeboat of ‘Easy English’.

While at school ‘O’ level students are not required to compete in Urdu at the same level as matriculation students, both are required to compete at the same level in English at college. There is no good explanation for this discrimination except the exercise of privilege.

Is it being argued implicitly that command of the national language is irrelevant but that of English is essential because it is correlated with competence or intelligence? Anyone claiming that is exposing his or her own intelligence to challenge. International tests measuring the performance of high school students across countries decisively invalidate any such conclusion.

The 2020 ranking released by Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study shows, as in previous years, that East Asian countries outperform all other countries in mathematics and most others in science. (Pakistan was ranked second from bottom in 2019.) All these countries use their own languages as the medium of instruction without unduly privileging English. One can safely conclude that education in the home language does no harm; in fact there is strong evidence that it yields significant cognitive advantage.

It is reasonable to posit that intelligence is randomly distributed in all countries and is nurtured by good education that prioritises thinking over memorisation which is a function of familiarity with the language used in early education. Countries that initiate education in local languages and teach foreign ones later consistently do better than those that start with a foreign one and marginalise their own. This implies that the sequence in which we teach languages as also the criteria we employ to select individuals for positions of responsibility are exactly the reverse of what they should be.

The existence of ‘Easy Urdu’ is an exercise of privilege to smooth the way for those born to advantage. The absence of ‘Easy English’ is an exercise of power to eliminate competition from those who might be more intelligent, competent, and motivated. The outcome of this exercise of privilege over an extended period of time is there for all to see if they wish to see it.

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