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**Language and instruction**

I have to disagree with the opinion on language and the medium of instruction expressed by M Zeb Khan (‘Talking Language’, The News, January 28, 2020). The writer has identified the key issue but then let his attention deviate from the main point.

The writer begins with a very important issue that needs attention and bears reiterating: “Like many other unresolved perennial issues in Pakistan, the question of which language to use as medium of instruction during the formative years of school-going kids remains unpacked and hence unaddressed.”

However, instead of remaining focused on the child and assessing the impact of the use of different languages as mediums of instruction on his or her learning, the article ventures into the entirely unrelated adult domains of culture, politics, and political uses of language.

The world of Pakistan is divided into camps – “those believing in the unchanging character of a nation’s identity (fixed culture) advocate Urdu as lingua franca” and those who “abhor English as an alien language of the then British Empire which they used as a strategic weapon to deprive Muslims of their cultural heritage.”

Quite apart from the fact that this is a myth – the vast majority wants to acquire English ever since the British were here – what, if anything, does this cultural controversy have to do with the cognitive development of a child who is just starting school?

The article places itself in the camp that is “language-neutral” – “For them, knowledge rather than any particular language, should be the overriding individual and collective concern.” But this neutrality is not extended to ask the crucial question whether the transfer of knowledge to young children is also language-neutral.

And then immediately comes the point of local languages being deficient in knowledge materials, losing sight of the fact that what is under consideration are the first few years of school for which advanced scientific knowledge is not relevant. How difficult is it to create material in local languages for early education if it is established that teaching in local languages is better for cognitive development? Or would one insist on teaching in a foreign language because advanced knowledge only exists in that language? Is there no tradeoff involved in making this choice?

The writer then goes into even more peripheral territory by referring to Foucault and Orwell. According to Foucault “language is not value neutral and is central to any discourse system which controls how we think and what we know.” And Orwell “believed in the thought-controlling power of language and elucidated with different instances the linguistic tricks (rhetoric, narratives, slogans) that governments employ to conceal and reveal ‘reality’ as and when political conditions demand.”

Both these observations are correct but they are true of any language – one can lie, obfuscate, control, and distort reality in any language – no language is superior to another in this regard. So, the question remains: What do these observations have to do with the efficacy of early childhood education?

The article then raises the issue of creativity, making the valid point that “children learning in a bilingual environment are qualitatively better in high-order thinking and innovation” but then jumps to the unrelated connection that “We may like it or not but English provides the key to modern sciences (scientific knowledge in particular).”

This argument loses sight of the fact that for most children in Pakistan, English is not part of their bilingual environment and also that advanced scientific knowledge is not the most critical part of early childhood education.

How far the argument has drifted from the question posed at the outset should be evident from the article’s conclusion: “Culture is necessary for one to feel owned and loved where one lives but scapegoating a particular language (English in our case) for moral degeneration and identity crisis is a disservice to the cause of both knowledge and culture.”

This makes it turn into a confrontation between culture and knowledge and into a defence of English which to the writer is being scapegoated for moral degeneration and identity crises. Meanwhile, the focus on early childhood education has gone out the window.

If one were to come back to early childhood education, medium of instruction, and language, the basic proposition is exceedingly simple. The function of a medium is to transmit – the medium of transmission of sound is air, of electricity is copper wire, and of knowledge is words which are derived from language. Without a medium, no transmission can take place, neither of sound or electricity or knowledge.

When a child enters school, he or she has acquired, without formal learning, a lot of words in a language or languages that become the ideal medium for transmission of additional knowledge. If one of those languages is English, then English is an acceptable medium of instruction. If not, it is a suboptimal medium of instruction.

One cannot transmit much while the medium itself is absent or being created and it is damaging to the child to use a medium under construction. Education theory suggests that a child has to be exposed to five years of a language before it can serve as an effective medium of instruction. What this means, in theory, is that if children in Pakistan start learning English in the first grade, they can switch, if pushed, to English as a medium of instruction in grade six and will be ready to absorb all the scientific knowledge that allegedly exists only in that language.

But much more importantly, they would by then have a sound cognitive foundation equipped to deal with the abstractions that are needed to make sense of advanced knowledge. Otherwise, they would be memorizing all that knowledge as they are doing now.

Languages are not in conflict with each other. But the sequence in which languages are acquired, learnt, and used is crucial to the learning of children. We need to keep our eyes on the ball if we are interested not in the politics of language but in the well-being of children.

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