[**Language report**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1604240/language-report)

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EARLIER this month, The Citizens Foundation (TCF) released a landmark report on the language of education, probably the first document of its kind in Pakistan. Based on in-depth studies and interviews, it reconfirms that children learn best in a language they understand. This is generally the mother tongue or the language of the environment in multilingual communities.

TCF is now testing this thesis in 21 classrooms in Tharparkar where it is setting up schools with the help of Thar Foundation. True, this is universally recognised. But TCF’s endeavour should be appreciated — it is the first private-sector organisation to move away from the prevailing practice in non-government institutions. They generally use English or an English-Urdu hybrid as the medium of instruction.

When it was launched TCF opted for the national language as the medium of instruction but came to realise that the vast majority of children do not understand Urdu in their early years. Hence the move towards the indigenous language of the area where the school is located. In that respect, it is a pioneer.

Our intelligentsia’s lack of knowledge about the role of language in education is shocking. Its approach is elitist. The correct choice of language is important not just because it ensures that a child understands concepts. It also promotes articulation that facilitates a child in expressing her own thoughts and not resorting to rote learning to parrot what she is told. There is also a link between language and culture and identity. This has been captured by the report’s title Finding Identity, Equity and Economic Strength. Yet it has been an uphill battle to change the mindset of the pseudo educationists who control education planning here.

TCF’s move towards indigenous languages is laudable.

The predominant position that English occupies has unleashed havoc on education. It is the primary cause of students’ poor learning outcomes and socioeconomic inequities. Barely four per cent of people are proficient in this foreign language (a legacy of colonialism) that gives them undue privilege. It is also believed that English opens the door to success in the job market. Nobody asks at what cost.

Coming from TCF, the verdict in favour of an indigenous tongue should be convincing. TCF’s growing number of high achievers enhances its system’s credibility. This report and the subsequent shift in its medium policy should hopefully set a new trend.

The organisation is not rushing into this experiment. The integral features of its programme are regular feedback, teachers’ training, incrementality and a language progression plan which shows how and when each language will be introduced. This is the ‘mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB MLE)’ way of teaching children in multilingual societies. Most important, it would allow planners to make adjustments midstream to ensure the scheme’s success.

Generally little is known in Pakistan about the teaching and learning of languages. I would like to elaborate on this as explained by psychologists. They attribute children’s ability to pick up language naturally with the “plasticity of their brains” or their “absorbent mind”.

Small children don’t ‘learn’ a language. They ‘acquire’ it naturally from the environment. There is no one-to-one instruction with a teacher in command. The mother/family and older playmates in the community facilitate the process. We would understand this better if we asked ourselves how people who have never been to school know one language or another.

The problem with our education system is that it is inherently too disciplinarian. It thrusts on small children an unintelligible language to put them in a straitjacket. This robs them immediately of the language they began acquiring and enjoying since infancy. Thus their self-education process driven by natural curiosity is killed. So is their language acquisition skill that has grown symbiotically with their cognition. Common sense demands this process be allowed to continue for a few more years till the new entrants settle down in the school environment.

With its underpinning of ignorance and draconian intolerance, our system robs our children of their individuality and freedom to think when they enter school. With this ends their joie de vivre and interest in learning and critical thinking. If the focus is on English, the children don’t learn that either. English is not the language of the environment anywhere in Pakistan for children to acquire naturally and there are not enough teachers qualified to teach English or in English.

A word for the Anglophiles in our midst. Never have we called for a ban on English. We have, however, requested priority for indigenous languages at the primary stage. English should come only when students are ready for it as determined by a carefully deliberated progression plan. It should also be taught using the correct methodology recommended for the teaching of a foreign language.

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*Published in Dawn, January 29th, 2021*