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**The language debate**

As the Single National Curriculum continues to be prepared to go into effect at schools by the end of summer this year, there is much debate over the situation of language teaching and the use of English at a slightly wider level in some subjects at the primary level.

We are told by our federal education ministry that from now on, to improve the English skills of children, English should be taught as a language and not as a subject. In theory, this is of course, an extremely sensible step given that only when a language is taught as the second language by skilled teachers, can there be any hope of children acquiring the skills required to master it. At present, surveys carried out by NGOs and other groups have found that in our public schools, and in many private schools, children in class five are unable to read a sentence in either Urdu or English unless they have learnt it by rote. In maths too, the skills are extremely low and do not match the standards of other countries.

We argue firmly that language is a severe barrier to education. This of course is fundamentally true. We have completely eliminated the mother language from our education system in Punjab, with children who speak primarily Punjabi at home or at least hear it most of the time around them, suddenly forced to tackle English and Urdu at their schools. In other provinces, the mother language is given some importance; Sindhi for example, is taught from grade one on as the first language the child hears at his or her school. The same is true of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. But we then struggle with how to introduce Urdu and English, both languages which have become necessary in a country given that Urdu is the only language which links people across the four provinces and many regions, and English is the language most in demand among parents and also children themselves, who are desperate to learn it as it has become a symbol of upward growth and privilege or superiority to languages such as Urdu or the mother tongue.

The problem is easy to understand. The question is how to tackle it. One method would be to look at the process in other countries, especially those which are similar to us. India for example, does not attempt to recognize one official mother tongue, but accepts 22 languages as official languages. It is valid for schools to teach these diverse mother languages, which range from Tamil to Bangla, to a host of other languages in their schools, and then introduce English, from class five onwards when children have mastered the basic sense of each object, in a language they understand well and do not struggle with. However, given that many parents are hostile to education in the mother language, more and more private schools are switching to English as the main language in which to impart education. As is the case with schools in Pakistan, this has brought its own problems with teachers rarely able to teach the language skilfully and enable children to master it.

The idea of teaching English as a language rather than a subject may be sound. But to do so, teachers have to be trained, and taught the methodology for this. This can be a complex process and it takes time to train teachers and find the master trainers skilled enough in English to impart these skills to others who will take it to children in various grades. In the Netherlands, a country which has been acclaimed around the world for the number of languages its people speak, the method used is fairly simple, but based on a high degree of skill, amongst teachers. Dutch, the mother language of most children, is the language first taught at schools. A little later English, a language all Dutch children learn, is introduced. Most Dutch children then also go on to learn French and German, one step at a time as they move to the grades to the end of secondary education. There is now also a greater option to pick Spanish, Portuguese, Flemish or other languages in place of French or German.

The fact that Dutch children are largely familiar with these languages through television and through tourism in a very small country makes things somewhat simpler. To some degree they are familiar with the language. But many educationists also say that language teachers in the Netherlands are among the very best in the world and language is taught skillfully to children at the various grade levels.

In Singapore too, a country which has been attributed by educationists as having one of the best education systems in the world with extremely high scores recorded in the Cambridge International Exam, and other international examinations, children are taught English at schools, but also along with this, their mother tongue whether this is Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil. The mix is not easy to achieve, but it has been managed in other countries. Today for many in Holland, English is a national language mixed in with Dutch, while in Singapore, more and more households speak primarily English at home.

What is also significant for both these nations is that in the process of teaching English, the mother language is not disparaged, or put down in any way. Children in Holland do not believe that Dutch is in any way inferior to English, or for that matter, French or German. The same is true in Singapore, with children who speak Mandarin at home, and at school are eager to learn English, but do not believe Mandarin is an inferior language.

Our troubles with language began early, with the language riots in the 1950s showing how acute the problem was. But surprisingly, in the Bangladesh of today, at university level, pupils study Urdu as a possible language they can take up if they choose, and explain that they do so to give them skills in a language with a vast set of literature and a vast ability to give them fluency in another language that they can use across the region.

The attitude to language also has an impact on the manner in which it is taught. But first of all, we must train teachers to be able to teach English adequately and with skill, as a second language for our children, explaining to them how the grammar works and how phrases and clauses fit together to make up a comprehensible sentence. We are still struggling to do so even at the Masters level.

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