**Whose language is it anyway?**

Hamid Naveed And Zubair Torwali

Friday, Jun 16, 2023

Recently, a person from the village that one of the writers of this piece comes from approached him about applying to the Prime Minister’s Youth Skill Development Program (PMYSDP).

This programme is intended to equip young people with market-driven conventional and high-tech skills required for career progression with an aim to bring the capacity of the youth at par with international standards. Participants can choose from a variety of courses, including short-term courses that can be completed in a few weeks, and longer-term courses that can last up to six months. The programme – launched by the government of Pakistan – provides technical and vocational training to young people, aiming to equip them with the skills and knowledge necessary for success in the job market and to promote entrepreneurship.

The person in question had to approach someone other than himself because the online application process was in English only, and those who needed to apply had only completed 8th or 10th grade and were not proficient in English. The application procedure was also extremely complicated. As a result, not many candidates applied, and because of the complexity of the application, the date was extended.

It is unfortunate that government services in Pakistan are available in only two languages, English and Urdu, the former being the official language and the later as the only national language. In a densely multilingual country like Pakistan where more than 75 languages are spoken, availability of government services in only two languages is seriously problematic, further marginalizing those who are at the receiving end of this discrimination. All the information about the Prime Minister Youth Programme including the application process is in either English or Urdu. And not only the application process but all the subsequent communication is also conducted in English. .

Imagine a country where services are available only in English or Urdu and which has the second highest out-of-school children in the world. Minister for Federal Education and Professional Training Rana Tanveer Hussain recently said that Pakistan has 23 million out-of-school children, something the country has not been able to fix in years. This fact that such a large number of children do not go to school is a violation of Article 25-A of the constitution of Pakistan, which states that “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law”, Moreover, Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights gives the right to education to everyone: education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages.

A number of declarations and conventions by Unesco also guarantee every child the right to an education of her choice, in her language and as per her culture but in Pakistan we do not see any such move on a national level; and the country’s policymakers including the designers of the much-trumpeted Single National Curriculum – now the National Curriculum of Pakistan – have always been obsessed with a two language policy which is alien to the majority of Pakistani children and parents.

Children at our schools are not taught in their mother tongue which is a violation of their linguistic human rights as defined by Finnish linguist Tove Skutnab-Kangas. In addition to several other reasons, not being taught in one’s mother tongue often leads to children dropping out of school. The child’s mother tongue is marginalized both in school as well in society at large. Despite 10-12 years of English learning, our school system has not produced the level of English language proficiency that is desired; this again is because of the larger landscape and linguistic diversity of Pakistan, where young people face challenges in applying in English for jobs or other services by the governments.

The obsession with one language or two at the expense of excluding the mother languages of the majority of children has its roots in a colonial mindset where the native languages are not deemed of any worth in education and literacy. This mindset in individuals as well as in institutions has given birth to discrimination on the basis of language – usually referred to as ‘linguicism’ by scholars.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that children have the right to learn in a language they understand. This is because learning in a familiar language helps children learn more effectively and develop their self-esteem. Education in an alien language promotes the culture of rote learning and using ‘unfair means’ in examinations and assessments which we so often witness in our schools, colleges and universities. This is also one of the reasons why critical thinking has been virtually killed in pedagogy.

Beyond schooling we also witness this form of linguicism in other institutions. Government services are made available in a language that is not understood by the majority of applicants. This process benefits those only who happen to get their education at the few elite English medium schools.

Access to government services is a fundamental right for all citizens, regardless of their language or cultural background. However, for many non-native speakers of English, this right is being denied due to a language barrier. In countries where English is the official language, it is often assumed that everyone is proficient in the language, and services are provided only in English. This puts non-native speakers, particularly those who have limited proficiency in English, at a disadvantage.

Many government services, such as applying for a passport, obtaining a driving license, or accessing healthcare services, are often available in English only. However, many non-English speakers do not have the language skills required to navigate government websites or online applications, resulting in them being unable to access essential services. It is essential to eliminate linguistic discrimination and promote inclusivity in government services. By providing services in multiple languages, governments can create a more inclusive society that respects and values linguistic diversity.

To address this issue, governments can take several steps to make their services more accessible. One solution is to provide services in multiple languages, particularly the most commonly spoken languages among the population. Another solution is to provide language assistance through a dedicated helpline or help center where individuals can seek assistance in their preferred language.

Many Pakistani and foreign scholars admit – on the basis of cognitive science and linguistics – that primary education up to grade five should be provided to children in a language they speak at home, which could be the mother language, first language or native language. Eliminating linguistic discrimination and promoting inclusivity in government services is also crucial to creating a more inclusive society that respects and values linguistic diversity. The government has a duty to ensure that every child has the right to receive education in their mother language and that language should not be a barrier to accessing essential services for all citizens.

Additionally, language-in-education policies need to be changed in favour of diversity including the diversity of the media of instruction. This will in turn change the overall language attitudes in individuals and in institutions.

Zubair Torwali heads an independent

organization dealing with education and

development in Swat. He can be reached at: ztorwali@gmail.com

Hamid Naveed is a lecturer in English at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad.