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The younger, the better: Idealized versus situated cognitions of educators about age and instruction of English as a second/foreign language in Pakistan

Syed Abdul Manan^{a, b, *}, Khadija-Tul-Kubra^c

^a Department of English, Faculty of Arts & Basic Sciences, Baluchistan University of IT Engineering & Management Sciences, Quetta, Pakistan

^b Faculty of Languages & Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

^c Department of English, Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, Quetta, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Most stakeholders including educators in Pakistan commonly theorize that English should be taught from day one in schools because the younger children are, the greater the possibility for mastery of the language. In the backdrop of prevailing beliefs and the resultant phenomenal proliferation of English-medium schools, this paper surveys educators' cognitions about this rather theoretical, yet perennially conflicting debate within language-in-education context. Drawing on multiple tools, this study surveyed 11 low-fee English-medium schools in part of Pakistan. Results suggest that teachers and school administrators take maximalist position emphasizing exclusive use of English from day one whereas they view use of the L1/native languages as waste of time. They propose that 'the younger the child, the absorbent the mind'. However, most existing research suggests that age is not the sole predictor of second/foreign language development, but multiple factors such as quality and quantity of input, intensity of exposure, and socio-affective orientations serve more critical role than only age or maturation. Data shows that early-English policy is problematic because students usually receive only decontextualized and bookish input while they receive nearly no naturalistic exposure to English. The study concludes that educators demonstrate narrow theoretical understanding of rather complex and multifactorial issue.

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1. Introduction

What age is the most favorable, and at what age should children begin learning a second or foreign language? This study contextualizes educators' (teachers & school administrators) cognition about age and the medium of instruction policy in Pakistan. Educators' cognition refers to the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers think, know and believe" (Borg, 2006, p. 1). Contextualizing the same issue within the diverse multilingual landscape of Pakistan, this is still an unresolved and hotly debated educational subject whether to start children's schooling with English (the official language), or

* Corresponding author. Department of English, Faculty of Arts & Basic Sciences, Baluchistan University of IT Engineering & Management Sciences, Quetta, Pakistan.

E-mail addresses: rm_manan@yahoo.com (S.A. Manan), khadija.seher07@gmail.com (Khadija-Tul-Kubra).

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with Urdu (the national language), or with native languages (for speakers of indigenous languages other than Urdu). Examining this can be critical not only from a language-in-education policy perspective, but it can equally be crucial in theoretical terms as the “effects of age on second language acquisition constitute one of the most frequently researched and debated topics in the field of Second Language Acquisition” (Muñoz, 2008, p. 578). Two prominent theoretical orientations emerge in this regard:

...one which aims to elucidate the existence and characteristics of maturational constraints on the human capacity for learning second languages, and another which purports to identify age-related differences in foreign language learning, often with the aim of informing educational policy decisions (Muñoz, 2008, p. 578).

Research evidence in a wide range of contexts on the same issue shows that age is not the only determiner or the sole predictor of language proficiency of the second/foreign language; instead there are multiple factors which can explain the extent and rate of learning a second or a foreign language in addition to a maturation factor (Birdsong, 2006; Cenoz, 2003; DeKeyser, 2013; Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Muñoz, 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Muñoz and Singleton, 2011). Crucially, this is a recurrent debate not only among theorists and applied linguists, but it also crops up persistently among other stakeholders particularly parents, policymakers, educators, etc. This issue is particularly challenging in countries such as Pakistan where stakeholders wish to introduce English, a foreign language, as early as possible in schools. This paper aims to analyze the theoretical and empirical foundations of a perennial, but conflicting debate within the language-in-education context in Pakistan where most stakeholders including policymakers, educationists, parents, teachers and students advocate the teaching of English as a medium of education from day one (Coleman and Capstick, 2012; Mahboob, 2002; Manan et al., 2014; Manan et al., 2015b; Mansoor, 1993; Rahman, 2002).

In Pakistan, English serves as a first language for a few highly Anglicized people, as a second language for a larger affluent and highly educated group, and as a third/foreign language for all educated others (Rahman, 2001, p. 242). The early introduction of English is referred to as the ‘straight-for-English’ educational policy, which is practiced not only in Pakistan, but also around the world particularly in the postcolonial countries (Heugh, 2002; Manan, 2015; Manan et al., 2016; Obondo, 2007). The most persistent argument which the advocates put forward in support of the ‘straight-for-English’ policy in schools is the belief that the earlier the child is exposed to English, the greater the potential for learning the language. Aligned with this position is also a theoretical assumption that the child who comes into contact with English at a younger age is likely to achieve a higher level of proficiency in the language than he/she would do at the later ages when English is introduced in transition. Kinsella and Singleton (2014) aptly observe that this is a widely debated subject not only within academia on second or foreign language learning, but it is also a pervasive theme in the non-academic world. The supporters of the ‘straight-for-English’ policy intensely accentuate and vigorously rationalize it on grounds that enhanced English proficiency and competence promises socioeconomic rewards and relatively brighter career prospects for children.

Keeping in view the instrumental power of the English language in Pakistan and worldwide in terms of socioeconomic and sociocultural transactions, most stakeholders including parents, children, teachers, and school authorities recommend earlier introduction of English in schools. As a result of imagined benefits and massive pragmatic value, which most stakeholders associate with the English language, the demand for English-medium schooling has markedly increased, leading to an exponential proliferation of private schools in Pakistan particularly English-medium schools over the last one and half decades. Figures suggest that school enrollment in the private sector accounts for 34% of the total enrollment in 2007–08. According to Pakistan Education Statistics (GOP, 2009), one in every three enrolled children attends private institutions in which English is the medium of instruction. A majority of the private schools, colleges, and other institutions of higher learning are English-medium. One of the major reasons for such dramatic expansion is the public ambition behind English-medium education. English is a powerful language as it is used in the domains of power in Pakistan (Mustafa, 2011; Rahman, 2004a; Rassool and Mansoor, 2007; Shamim, 2008, 2012). English thus serves as ‘the passport to privilege’ (Rahman, 2005). The popularity of English-medium education can also be seen in global terms in that the globalization of English has transformed the language-in-education landscapes not only in Pakistan, but it has also become widespread in many other parts of the world. Hornberger and Vaish (2009) observe that,

One of the consequences of globalization processes is the spread of English as a medium of instruction in national school systems. Disadvantaged communities are increasingly demanding access to English so that their children can join a workforce that mandates knowledge of this language (p. 1).

Much like the aspirations of stakeholders to have an English-medium policy from day one, scholars whose research focusses on age and second language learning, also analyze the prevailing beliefs such as that children can learn languages easily, and that it is ideal to plunge them into the new language. They make assertions such as: “younger is better” and “kids soak up languages like sponges” (Lightbown, 2008, p. 5). English is a foreign language to most children except a tiny Westernized elite (Rahman, 2007); however, most private and some public schools offer it as a medium from the nursery levels. Considering the presumptions of stakeholders, the advocacy of a straight-for-English policy, and the popularity of the English-medium schools, this study surveys English-medium schools in part of Pakistan to analyze the perspective of educators (teachers and school administrators). Theoretically, we will analyze cognitions of educators through the lenses of existing research from across wide range of contexts on issues of age in relation to the instruction of English as a foreign language in schools. In particular, the focus of the study is to situate the theoretical soundness and practical validity of the ‘the

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