

The Challenges of Urdu-Medium Female Higher Education Students in Quetta, Balochistan: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This research explores the challenges Urdu-medium female students face in higher education due to the bilingual education system in Pakistan. The disparity in language can be inferred from the structural division of education systems in the country, which is divided into English medium, Urdu medium, and madrasa system. Urdu-medium students are very little acquainted with English till their graduation and face various language-related issues as they join universities where usually the medium of instruction is English. The purpose of this research was to investigate the academic and linguistic challenges that Urdu-medium students face at the higher education level in Quetta, Baluchistan. This study was qualitative and included 10 interviews. The data was analyzed by thematic analysis. The findings revealed that due to the bilingual education system, Urdu-medium students get burdened, lose confidence, and get poor grades at the university level. The study helped to highlight these issues and suggested that the government should deal with the evacuation of division between government and private schools by presenting a single medium of instruction in all types of schools at every level.

Keywords: *Medium of Instruction, Urdu-medium Students, Higher Education, Linguistic Discrimination, Social Stratum.*

Introduction

Pakistan came into being in 1947 after the partition of the Indian subcontinent from British rule. It holds an important linguistic position and is enriched with diverse regional languages with Urdu serving as a national language and English being a co-official language inherited from the

colonial masters (Channa, 2017). English was used for official purposes and at the schools run by the British government at the time of British colonial rule. English was an image of power on the grounds because the ability to speak English meant better-paying opportunities and earned individuals a reputation of being fair and intelligent (Shamim, 2008).

After the independence, this English Urdu divide persisted with the education system in Pakistan. Currently, almost all government-funded schools use Urdu as medium of instruction while private schools use English as a medium of instruction. Mostly lower-class and lower-middle-class families in Pakistan choose government schools for their children while middle-class and upper-class families plump for non-elite and elite English medium schools (Shamim & Rashid, 2019). The borderline between these two streams is that Urdu medium schools use Urdu as a medium of instruction and English is instructed as a second language course. On the other hand, private schools use English as a medium of instruction and Urdu as a subsequent language (Coleman, 2010). On the other hand, at the higher education level colleges and universities utilize English as a medium of instruction. Accordingly, when Urdu-medium students reach a higher level, they start having issues with English and other subjects taught in English. Students begin to face language-related issues in their transitional period when they move from college to university.

This research relates to the problem of language discrimination and educational inequalities in Pakistan. Very little previous research is devoted to analyzing the gender and language factors in higher education of Quetta city (Ashraf & Khaleel, 2024; Shamim & Rashid, 2019). Moreover, much of the literature aims only to compare the aggregated educational outcome without studying sub-groups of female students particularly those from Urdu-medium schools pointing to their academic achievements and identity development (e.g., Anjum et al., 2022; Baloch & Ahmed, 2019). This gap underlines the call for empirical research investigating these students' experiences as they transit through their schooling years in the context of social inequalities and language barriers that are not well theorized in literature.

Research Questions

1. What are the influences of low proficiency in English on the academic performance of Urdu-medium students at the university level?
2. What are the ways in which Urdu-medium students face linguistic discrimination in university?

3. How does schooling type provide the basis for the class division that occurs between government and private school students?

Literature Review

Among the policymakers of Pakistan, the inquest of dialects has consistently been complex and has remained contentious (Tamim, 2014). From the first educational conference in 1948, the essential parts of language strategy have stayed consistent (Aftab & Willoughby, 2021). National Education Policy 1973, under Article 251 aimed to determine this issue by unveiling that Urdu is the National language of Pakistan, and plans would be made for its execution for official and other purposes. It further focused on the use of the English language for true purposes until strategies were made for its replacement by Urdu. However, no endeavors were put for its execution as a result, the English language spread widely all through the country and ended up being a co-official language with Urdu after that the National Education Policy (NEP-2009) (GoP., 2009) supported the meaning of English language as a language of worldwide rivalry which slowly expands the value of English, particularly among the high society. In the meantime, Urdu had been set apart as a link to connect with individuals. English as a medium of instruction in grade four to forward in the public schools of Pakistan for content subjects like science and arithmetic and as a necessary subject in grade 1 ahead had been suggested by the NEP-2009 (Government of Pakistan., 2009).

Mediums of Instruction in Pakistan: English vs. Urdu

According to Coleman (2010), Schools in Pakistan fall into four categories; 1) the private elite where the medium of instruction is English and where the strong upper class of the populace is being facilitated, 2) the private regular schools that also use English as a medium of instruction and are moderate for the lower working class, 3) the government schools that are accessible to all through the country and their medium of instruction is Urdu and 4) Dini Madaris that too utilized Urdu as a medium of instruction. Twofold posture towards the English language is because of the ruling elite of Pakistan. Although Urdu as a medium of instruction is supported in government-funded schools, English is being accepted for the development purposes (Shamim, 2008).

The public schools conversely practice less self-sufficiency, for chalking out any major and minor arrangements like deciding on educational plans, reading material, teaching methods and assessment which are mostly developed by the academic capital/ Educational Ministry. The unprivileged vernacular medium-state school learners, in the end, would need to rival their high-class companions in competitive

examination and labor market. By these practices their intellectual and basic abilities are not empowered (Umrani, 2015). In Pakistan, for teaching English, the public schools and colleges that use Urdu as a medium of instruction principally depend on the grammar-translation method (Rahman, 2002). Listening and verbal skills are little focused while the teaching and learning of grammatical principles are more concentrated in this procedure (Shamim, 2008).

Language Transition Challenges

At college, students from Urdu-medium and non-elite English medium and with lower socio-economic status, face trouble entering and effectively completing the university degree and getting access to finer financial status because of the twofold language policy (Javed, 2016). When Urdu-medium students join a university, they face language-related difficulties besides other transition challenges when adjusting to the requirements of a subsequent language or English language teaching, which can likewise be looked at (Evans & Morrison, 2011). Concerning reading, speech, writing, and hearing in English, learning can be adversely influenced by the language transition into university because of the student's low proficiency in the English language (medium of instruction).

In this case, different academic errands can be grieved in such ways as taking evaluations and composing assignments or understanding the lectures and comprehending the course prerequisites and substance (Rouf, 2012). The first-year students consider it challenging to adjust to the new linguistic culture and fulfill its needs. Thus, the lack of proficiency in the English language effects their learning and comprehension. Language imperative and hindered academic performance is led by incompetency in the medium of instruction, so academic accomplishment is straightforwardly affected by the present situation (Khan et al., 2012). Low proficiency in English impacts the academic performance and confidence of Urdu-medium students and they face difficulties getting a higher education (Mubin et al., 2014).

Research Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research approach through which the issue could be explored extensively based on students' experiences and opinions and objectives could also be achieved well. Currently, there are 229 Higher Education Commission-recognized universities in Pakistan. The study included only university students of Quetta. The research sample for this study included female students who were selected from three public universities of Quetta for data collection. The sample size included 10 participants, 7 with a government school background and 3 with a private

school background. 4 participants were from Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University Quetta. The next 4 were from the University of Baluchistan Quetta while 2 participants were from the Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering, and Management Sciences. Overall, a convenience sampling technique was used to choose 7 participants with an Urdu medium background and 3 with an English medium schooling background. The data was collected until it reached saturation.

Interview protocols were semi-structured with open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted by one-to-one interview technique. The interviews were recorded by a recording app with the assurance of complete confidentiality. The recorded interviews were then transcribed. The interviews were analyzed by thematic data analysis using ATLAS.ti software for coding and generating themes.

Table 1

Participants Data

Participants	University type	Schooling type	Department
Participant 1	UOB	Government School	Social Sciences
Participant 2	BUIITEMS	Private School	Arts
Participant 3	BUIITEMS	Private School	Science
Participant 4	UOB	Government School	Humanities
Participant 5	SBK	Government School	Science
Participant 6	SBK	Government School	Humanities
Participant 7	UOB	Government School	Social Sciences
Participant 8	SBK	Government School	Humanities
Participant 9	UOB	Private School	Social Sciences
Participant 10	SBK	Government School	Science

Findings

The findings revealed four major themes as school preference, challenges faced in getting higher education, social stratum and central rift between English/Urdu medium.

School/ Language Preference

The first theme was divided into two sub-themes. The first sub-theme discusses the preference made by the parents of the students for different types of schools and second sub-theme provides details and the choice of language as medium of instruction or schools.

Schooling preference: the data analysis showed that the schooling preference was affected by the financial condition, the family choice, and the quality of education. The participants reported that their family chose

Urdu-medium government schools because they couldn't financially afford English-medium schools as education their costs highly. For example, participant 1 reported, "All my siblings including me had studied from Urdu-medium schools because my parents couldn't afford alternate schooling financially". According to some of the participants their families selected government schools for them because private schools were modernized institutions that could harm girls. For example, participant 7 stated, "My family believes that most of the English-medium schools are co-education and have advanced environments that's why they chose government school for me". The participants also believe that Urdu-Medium schools offer quality education. For example, Participant 8 reported:

I studied in a government school because Urdu- Medium schools offer quality education. My cousins in my family before me also studied from the Urdu-Medium schools and were good at studies. That's why my father enrolled me there for a better future.

On the contrary, participants with private school backgrounds claimed that the reason behind completing their schooling from private schools was that they provide quality education and are far better than public schools. Participant 9 stated that:

Students in government schools tend to be at a disadvantage because the books in the curriculum are outdated and the entire teaching is almost in the language of Urdu, so parents had in mind that we go to a private school which would not prove to be a hindrance in our slumbering development in the future.

The Choice of Language as a Medium of Instruction: this sub-theme evince that which language should be preferred as a medium of instruction. The participants stressed that for the avoidance of conflicts associated with the Urdu and English, only the English language should be implemented as a medium of instruction all over the Pakistan at every educational level. Majority of the participants favored English as a medium of instruction because of its global worth and the status of international language. For example, participant 8 reported, "well I would prefer English especially If I want to avail some big opportunities in future". Likewise, participant 10 reported, "Government school students should be taught in English from beginning because at higher level only English is used. Urdu as a national language can be learned from our surrounding anyways". Similarly, participant 1 stated:

We must look at the demands of our society that wants us to develop English. Everything is in English even if you are writing an application or a letter you are not considered capable until you

can write it in English. even if I must study further, I must give priority to English for MPhil or PhD then it is necessary to give preference to English only because this is the society's demand, and we have need to accept it.

On the contrary, some of the participants believed that English should be taught as a subject, but Urdu should be the medium of instruction as education in national language can enhance the quality of education. For example, participant 6 stated:

As far as I have noticed, the developed countries teach their national language, and their education is at the top level. They focus on the quality and keep the language simple for students but here in Pakistan students are taught not only in Urdu and English but also in native languages which confuse the students so I think education should be in Urdu while English should be taught as a subject, and it should be taught well because it is a global language.

Participant 3 stated:

I would prefer Urdu. First, Urdu is our national language, and I do not want English... we start calling Urdu speakers ignorant and they are mostly considered "*jahil*" (ignorant) because they are not good in English. English should not be avoided at all. It should be taught and learned as a subject but not that much that it puts government school students in complexity.

Some of the participants favors the multilingual practices in education system of Pakistan. Participant 9 stated, "English, Urdu and Arabic should go hand in hand...Both English and Urdu have their own importance in Pakistan. So, to avoid conflicts all three languages should be given importance in Pakistan".

Challenges Faced in Higher Education

The data analysis revealed that Urdu-medium students face various challenges in getting higher education. The main challenge was poor English Language background that hindered their reading, writing, comprehension as well as their confidence and communication skills.

Poor English Background: The data analysis revealed that students with Urdu medium school backgrounds faced linguistic challenges during and after joining university. Participants reported that the change in the medium of instruction at the university level brought them difficulties because now they had to study in English. Participant 5 stated that:

After admission, I had to face a lot of challenges. In the beginning, I did not understand the content clearly. I used to get

stuck in words that were being said...vocabulary was very advanced at this level, and I had difficulty understanding what was written. Even now I search out difficult words in a dictionary and then translate them. I can cover two to three topics in an hour even then I only used to cover one paragraph because my English was very weak.

Participants also reported having communication issues for example participant 1 said, "I could not answer my admission interview questions in English, and I lost my motivation that I may not be able to survive in university life". Participant 2 stated that:

At the time of admission, the NTS test was taken. A large part of it consisted of English language and grammar. After attempting the test, I realized that at university level, the importance is given to English only. After that, when the time came for my interview, the teacher asked questions in English, and I answered in Urdu because my English was not so good.

Participant 10 stated:

At the time of admission and even after that, the biggest challenge I had to face was to pronounce the English words correctly. Now it's not difficult to introduce myself in English or to say a simple sentence in English but what really happens is that I pronounce the words wrong, and the teacher correct it immediately, so I feel embarrassed in front of everyone.

Participants with English medium schooling backgrounds reported the opposite issues. They had no issues regarding language but the adjustment problem, time management, and the fear of choosing the wrong field of study. Like for example participant 4 reported, "managing my studies with given time was and still is the major challenge that I faced after joining university". Participant 3 Stated:

When I joined the university, I got to deal with people with different mentalities, behaviors, cultures, and backgrounds. I switched to Co-Education as well, so I tried to adjust to the environment, and it took me so long. So, the biggest challenge I faced was the adjustment problem.

Low Academic Performance: This sub-theme revealed that because the students who studied in Urdu medium were not equipped with adequate English skills, they were weighed down, lost faith, and scored poorly on their tests. According to participant 1, "At the university level, we are supposed to do every task and activity in English. Whether it's an assignment or a presentation ...we lack there. We get burdened that's why we can't give our best". The participant 5 reported, "even though I have

improved a lot, my sessional marks have always been affected by the unproficiency in English. Giving presentations in English is still the hardest task for me". Participant 6 stated:

We cannot speak English fluently; we lose confidence due to poor skills in English language and become hesitant. Private school students are better at this and because of that, they seem to us capable. So basically, the language barrier is the biggest factor that affects our performance and our marks.

Participant 7 stated:

We public school students have a lot of problems in speaking English, we do not have the habit of speaking English, and we never get the chance to practice. We have a lot of knowledge we just have problem in speaking and expressing it in English because of that we are left behind and our marks get affected.

Participants also reported that the students are underestimated and degraded based on their poor skills in English which makes them underconfident and turns them into demotivated students, and they stopped participating in class. Participant 10 claimed, "our grads are affected because we are degraded based on language we used, and we become demotivated. How can you study well when you lack motivation?". Basically, according to them poor skill in English is responsible for their poor performance.

Participants with English-Medium schooling background proclaimed that the course/content at university level is difficult and totally in English. For example, participant 3 claimed that "Urdu-Medium students have little to no experience and awareness about the technology and the basic skills like given presentation and writing assignments which is why the public-school students suffer, and their grades are affected". Participant 9 states:

The academic performance of Urdu-Medium students is relatively poor because there are not even basic facilities provided to them in terms of education. While private school students are introduced to tasks such as small assignments in English, presentations, and other activities, Urdu-medium students arrive unprepared at the university level. Due to their poor English, they lack confidence, and their academic performance is poor. I know such students are discouraged by their teachers from speaking in the classroom mainly due to their poor English language ability. Rather than using the higher-order thinking skills to learn and understand concepts, they memorize as they first fail to understand the words used in the content.

Linguistic Discrimination: This sub-theme indicates that Urdu medium school students do face linguistic discrimination at the university level. Participants reported that they had to deal with the weird behavior and gestures posed by their classmates and teachers based on low proficiency in English. For example, according to participant 1 “The teacher at very first day of university asked me if I’m from Urdu-Medium or English-Medium and when I replied with Urdu-Medium she just gave me a weird gesture like she is disappointed”. Participant 3 reported that, “I realized this thing when I joined university, no matter how knowledgeable and competent we Urdu-Medium students are we are considered nothing as compared to English-Medium students”. Participant 7 claimed:

Once it happened that the teacher asked a question in English and I answered in Urdu, and she gave such impressions as if I did not answer correctly, then when I gave the same answer in English her impressions changed, and she appreciated me. It was the same answer I gave in Urdu, but I got different responses based on the language I used.

Participant 10 indicated:

No matter how much we participate in the class, if we do not use English properly and speak Urdu and give answers in Urdu, then the teacher does not give us the value that English medium students get when they speak English, even if they do not give such a good answer. They get preference and receive appreciation.

Participants claimed that they were also bullied for not being proficient in English. Fun have been made of when they could not pronounce the difficult words or commit mistakes while trying to speak English.

Participant 2 also reported:

During the presentation, if you mispronounce a word even by mistake, everyone starts laughing. I have heard comments like “gaon wali” (villager) for myself, just because my English language skills are poor”. Also, Participant 6 reported that, “teachers at university level are so friendly but our classmates humiliate us for not being proficient in English.

Participants with English medium schooling background reported that they have witnessed the language discrimination Urdu-Medium students endured at the university level. Participant 3 stated:

I have noticed that if a student answers in Urdu, she is not considered competent, and people tend to be like; “oh look she doesn’t know English” as if it is a sin to not be proficient in English. If students are not able to write perfectly in English or if

they commit mistakes, then this also becomes an issue, and students are ridiculed for this.

Social Stratum

This theme manifests that the English and Urdu medium divide provides the root for social stratum. Participants believe that based on schooling background the person is treated accordingly. Schooling backgrounds create an extent to which students are considered high or low-class and are treated accordingly. For example, participant 9 stated claimed:

To be honest, in our society, we get more value. Our schools are known as “*bary schools*” (High standard Schools). An image has been created regarding government schools that those who studied at these schools are not capable and they have not learned much. On the contrary, private school students, no matter how they are, have been considered honorable and based on their school type their feelings are taken care of.

Participant 3 stated:

Schooling background is creating the division like there is a big difference in the reputation of these two streams. Both are different in terms of offering quality education, facilities, and opportunities. Students from these streams have the probability of having different future opportunities. Your capabilities are judged accordingly. If you go for a job, there is an image in their minds that Urdu medium students do not know anything then again only English gets preference.

According to the participants, the division between Urdu and English-Medium is so evident, that asking about your school medium is the first question being asked everywhere. For example, participant 6 reported, “Girls who come from government schools face a lot of embarrassment because of our schooling, we are considered low. As we cannot speak English, so we also start hesitating to speak Urdu”. Also, Participant 5 reported, “Our society treats students differently, keeping in mind the difference between Urdu and English medium that is where the class division begins. Students belonging from English medium schools are considered competent and better than Urdu medium students”. According to participants Urdu as a medium of instruction at the school level is the root of their worst predicament at the university level and afterward. Participant 1 states:

The biggest factor that distinguishes us is the language. It is because Urdu is our national language and even though English is not the national language, we have been told that we cannot

succeed without the proficiency in English. we judge more when it comes to speaking English, if there is not much tendency to speak English in Pakistan and it was not presented the way it is presented in our society then the rift or wall that exists between us would not exits.

Central Rift between English/Urdu Medium

Theme showed that the main considerations liable for the split between Urdu and English medium students is language barrier. Participants reported that private school students gain attention and higher marks because of English proficiency, like a Participant 1 stated that:

The biggest factor that distinguishes us is the language. It is because Urdu is our national language and even though English is not the national language, we have been told that we cannot succeed without the proficiency in English. we judge more when it comes to speaking English, if there is not much tendency to speak English in Pakistan and it was not presented the way it is presented in our society then the rift or wall that exists between us would not exits. It shows that the English medium students will in general be more certain and are good in English while most of the Urdu medium students are underconfident and they are less competent in English language skills.

According to participants, incompetency in English lowers the confidence level of government school students. On the other hand, private school students have proficiency, so they are freer and more confident, and confidence always leads to progress, especially in academic achievement, which is an essential element. For example, participant 1 shared that “English-medium students are better than us because they can speak in English and have the confidence to express themselves”. Quite the opposite, the participants also reported that the confidence of students is impacted because government schools have a toxic environment. The physical and emotional abuse of students is common in these schools which in turn causes these students to lose confidence and become hesitant and fearful. For example, participant 5 stated:

There is such an environment in government schools, physical abuse is so common there and the teachers behave in such a manner that students cannot ask any question out of fear and if mistakes are made or wrong questions are asked then they have to face very rude behavior and the fear of being beaten is another factor, because of this the confidence in government school

students is lost. There is a big difference between the government and private school teachers.

According to some of the participants with an English medium schooling background, the language barrier gives rise to the conceptual unclarity and that is where the real division begins. Likewise, participant 4 argued:

We are more knowledgeable and intellectual, that is the reason that we consider ourselves superior and we also have more confidence. On the other hand, most of the Urdu medium school students do not have a strong grip on content and they do not usually pose intellectual questions during lecture because their schooling background is not good, and they are not educated well. Most of them are hesitant and do not share their point of views.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has raised the issues of Urdu-Medium students at higher education level. Findings of this study seem to confirm that the language shift from Urdu to English does influence the academic performance of Urdu medium students at university level. Urdu-medium school students face linguistic discrimination in university due to the lower proficiency in English language. Incompetency in English language give birth to communication problems as Urdu-Medium students tend to be more hesitant to pose questions in English and interact with other classmates and teachers. Similarly, Andrade (2009) stated that in various ways the English language proficiency affect the students experience in university and the problems of interaction and communication with others is one of them.

The rude behavior and the offensive gestures are what they receive by their classmates and their teachers. Their capabilities are judged based on their English language skills, this finding has similarity with the finding of Sarooj (2020) that revealed that students are treated accordingly the way they talk, behave or dress and because of the same significant reasons students are ridiculed and bullied. The expense of schooling is another factor liable for social class division. While the abilities of the students are not given a lot of significance and capability in English is pondered as a key to progress that is a big threat to the equality and education system of Pakistan. Shamim and Rashid (2019) believe the same that the education system that distinguishes, remunerates, and authorize the financial, linguistic, and capital of the prevailing class benefits the more well-off students through the Urdu English medium divide.

The findings will contribute in the sense that the bilingual education is promoting the class division among students, and it is a great

pathway for the discrimination and segregation. This problem needed to be tackled because it is affecting the standard of higher education in Pakistan by creating such grouped issues. The results will open the way for further research and improvement of the education system by working on the social problems related to the medium of instruction in Pakistan.

This study also suggested that the state should handle some of the problems rooted in the divisions of government and private school evacuations by implementing a single medium of instruction in all categories of schools at all levels. The course content is different from one medium to another should be uniform and consistent with the educational purpose. The course material that differs in govt and private schools should be the same and appropriate. The content should be selected based on the socio-economic requirements of our society. In the beginning, the curriculum developers should develop all the content in basic English for public schools not only that, but the lectures should also be delivered in English so that the govt school students become more familiar with English.

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