

The Use of a Multilingual Approach in Supporting Students' Conceptual Clarity at the Primary Level: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Perspectives in District Mardan

* Mr. Irfan Ali Khan, MPhil Scholar

** Dr. Hafiz Muhammad Irshadullah, Associate Professor

*** Dr. Mohammad Sohail, Lecturer

Abstract



This article is a qualitative sample study to investigate the understanding and application of a multilingual approach in promoting conceptual clarity among students by primary school teachers in District Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The language environment of Pakistan places a large number of children who speak the Pashto language at a disadvantage in acquiring academic information in the Urdu and English languages that they do not have early fluency in. Informed by the sociocultural and Translanguaging theory, the paper analyzes semi-structured interview and thematic analyses of lived classroom experiences of teachers. The review contextualizes these experiences in the context of international and local literature on multilingual education, language of instruction, and conceptual development. The article summarizes that the multilingual activities of teachers, though mainly informal and self-motivated can be broadly construed as beneficial to the students conceptual mastery, which has implications to teacher training and language-in-education policy.

Keywords: Multilingual Approach, Conceptual Clarity, Primary Level

Introduction

The main channel by which human beings communicate, think and create meaning and in the context of formal education, the added role of human beings is that language is the carrier of academic content between teacher and student. The connection between language and learning is particularly intimate in the primary classroom where children are still learning the rudiments of basic literacy and logic: a concept that cannot be described in a language the student knows is practically a concept that has not been taught. In a multilingual society, this connection is even more complex because very often the language used in the school and the language used by children at home are different (Webb, 2004).

The daily classroom reality of South Asian classrooms is multilingualism, which is construed in the broad sense of someone being able to operate in more than one language, or of a community being able to operate in more than one language (Cenoz, 2013; Manzura, 2025). More than seventy regional languages are found in Pakistan alone, but Urdu is the medium of instruction in the majority of schools and English is studied as an obligatory subject. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, especially in the heavily Pashto-speaking District Mardan, children are normally sent to school speaking Pashto, and are then obliged to learn literacy and numeracy and subject knowledge in Urdu and English, languages that many of them have just started to study. This language divide is well known to limit the conceptual growth at the very years when the basis of knowledge is established (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 2003).

There are three strands of theory which inform how this gap can be bridged. The sociocultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978) considers language to be the most important instrument of thought thus learners reason more profoundly when they are allowed to think in a language that they completely understand. The concept of a Common Underlying Proficiency that was developed by Cummins (1979, 2000) suggests that the academic knowledge acquired in the first language can easily be transferred to the second language, as the conceptual framework that supports the idea is the same and not different in the two languages. This argument is furthered by a theory of translanguaging proposed by Garcia and Wei (2014), who characterize multilingual speakers as accessing an

* Department of Education, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan Email: mirwaskhel@gmail.com

** Department of Education, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan Email: drirshad@awkum.edu.pk

*** Department of Education, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan Email: msohail@awkum.edu.pk

integrated linguistic repertoire, instead of switching between compartmentalized language systems, which is especially relevant in the Mardan context, where Pashto, Urdu, and English are actively used alongside each other in the same lesson.

Although theoretically informed, much of what is known about multilingual teaching in District Mardan and similar parts of Pakistan is based on quantitative indicators of teacher attitude or in other settings, classroom experiments. Much less is known of the ways in which teachers, in their own words, explain the practical and improvised means by which they pass between languages, and what they think this passage achieves in the knowledge of their students. The current article fills this gap by documenting a qualitative study conducted with primary teachers, where the focus is to provide a more comprehensive, more detailed description of the multilingual practice as it is experienced at the primary school level.

Statement of the Problem

Students taught in primary grades in most multilingual education programs find it difficult to develop a clear conceptual and academic content when such content is presented solely using the second or third language. This challenge is acute in District Mardan, where children speaking Pashto at home are instructed in large part in Urdu and English, in which they only have functional command at the primary level. Individual teachers tend to use informal ways to respond to a lesson by switching to Pashto or Urdu, although this is not formally supported or recorded, and the policy of education in the region still presupposes a monolingual and monomodal approach to delivering educational services. Available studies on the subject have had a predilection toward assessing teacher attitudes by the use of structured questionnaires, which can determine that teachers believe in multilingual strategies but does not reflect how teachers interpret, reason, and implement the strategies in their respective classrooms. This paper fills that gap by looking at the meaning and perceived value of multilingual practice as indicated by teachers themselves with regards to their conceptual clarity in students.

Research Questions

1. How do primary school teachers in District Mardan describe their everyday use of a multilingual approach in classroom instruction?
2. In what ways do these teachers perceive their multilingual practices as shaping students' conceptual clarity at the primary level?

Research Design

The research design of this study is an interpretive, qualitative research design which is suitable in answering questions of sense, perception and experienced classroom life. In one positivist, survey based design that considers teacher opinion as a measurable variable, an interpretive design, in contrast, considers the account of teachers as the major data, on the basis that practices as situated and improvised as multilingual teaching are best understood in terms of the words of the people who practice them (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2002).

The qualitative case study design was employed with the public primary (male) schools District Mardan as the limited case. The sample was made up of primary school teachers who were sampled on the basis of purposive sampling, on the basis that they had at least two years of classroom experience and were giving regular lessons in an environment where Pashto, Urdu and English were all present. This sampling rationale is inclined towards depth and relevance of insight rather than statistical representativeness.

The data were collected by the use of semi-structured interviews with some notes on short, non-evaluative classroom observations to support what the teachers said. The interview guide was designed with three broad categories, i.e. general attitude of teachers towards multilingual teaching, their tangible classroom practices and how they feel that these practices are connected to conceptual knowledge of students, but it also enabled teachers to expound, digress and bring up issues that were not foreseen by the researcher.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview transcripts: the first set of codes was formulated inductively using the data, and they were then put into larger themes which were subsequently verified against original transcripts. The triangulation of interview and observation data and peer debriefing with the supervisory team as well as member checking were used to support trustworthiness, where a small set of participants were presented with a summary of the emerging themes, and asked to read through them and correct errors.

Review of Related Literature

Multilingualism in Educational Contexts

Demographically, multilingualism is more the rule than the exception: the majority of the world population operates in more than one language in their daily life (Baker, 2011), and South Asian classrooms are no exception. Cenoz (2013) defines multilingualism as a competent use of more than a language, whereas Manzura (2025) broadens the concept to refer to the social co-presence of multiple languages in a single institution or community, like a school. Maher (2017) warns that multilingualism is not to be treated as a cumulative number of languages that a person speaks, but is a dynamic repertoire that speakers selectively use depending on the situation, audience, and purpose. This repertoire of dynamism can be observed in Pakistani classrooms when a child speaking Pashto is taught in Urdu at the same time English is introduced as a school subject; the three languages do not exist in three separate and closed boxes of the child language life but rather interact with one another. Baker (2011) states that the best way schools can serve learners is not by silencing this repertoire to teach them only one official language but by appreciating and expanding on what a multilingual child already knows as a totality.

Language of Instruction and Conceptual Clarity

A key issue in multilingual education research has been the interaction between language of instruction and the conceptual knowledge. The Common Underlying Proficiency model of Cummins (1979, 2000) is the view that academic and cognitive skills do not depend exclusively on a single language but are based on an underlying proficiency, such that conceptual knowledge acquired in one language can (in theory) be transferred to a second language without necessarily being relearned. This model suggests that, denying learners the right to their native language in the classroom does not safeguard the target language; it merely deprives the learner of a tool that can be used to think with. The continua-of-biliteracy framework by Hornberger (2003) also considers the relationship between languages of a learner a continuum and not a strict boundary that implies that development in one language may complement and not compete with development in another. In a situation where teaching is only conducted in a foreign language, students are subjected to the dual task of understanding the language, on the one hand, and the idea that it expresses, on the other hand, a challenge that can confuse or even render even a good student to seem to be confused (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Their studies of the language-minority students over the long-term also established that long-term access to the first language in the early school was linked to better long-term school performance compared with programs that transitioned learners to the second language too rapidly (Thomas and Collier, 2002).

Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Resource

According to Garcia and Wei (2014), translanguaging is a process where multilingual speakers flexibly utilise their entire linguistic repertoire, instead of discretely alternating between identified, defined languages, to convey and create meaning. When applied to the classroom, translanguaging does not imply that a teacher is moving out of the appropriate mode of teaching in monolingualism but rather that it is a valid pedagogical tool that enables one to approach a concept in more than just one language. May (2014) places this argument in the context of a larger turn to multilingualism in language education research, where the question is how it can be assumed that learners develop optimally when presented with one target language only. Content and Language Integrated Learning as defined by Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010) presents a similar model where subject material, as well as language development, is sought out as a partnership and not in sequence, a practice that, similar to Translanguaging, considers language diversity in the classroom as an asset, and not a liability, to be coordinated. In the case of District Mardan, where the presence of three languages in most of the classrooms with or without the recognition of the policy has already become a fact, the theory of Translanguaging would provide the language to call it instead of apologize about what many teachers already seem to be practicing.

Teachers' Practices and Institutional Support

In some cases, teachers may privately be able to understand the importance of switching between languages, but institutional pressure can make them not switch publicly. The structure of examination, the school rules, and the long-standing belief that only Urdu or English is in a proper classroom can cause teachers to look at their own multilingual strategies as something that can be silently applied and not something that can be spoken of and called. This conflict of teacher belief and institutional

expectation is not unique to the literature on multilingual education: Hornberger (2003) and UNESCO (2003) both report that policy to support language-in-education in most countries remains far behind classroom practice, and that multilingual solutions are improvised by teachers, without official training, materials or reward. In those schools where multilingual explanation is explicitly promoted by head teachers as well as education officers and curriculum planners as legitimate pedagogy, teachers indicate that they use it in a more consistent and purposeful manner than as a workaround (UNESCO, 2003).

Empirical Evidence and the Pakistani Context

The evidence on multilingual instruction has been growing in various national settings. A study by Mohanty (2010) of indigenous multilingual education programs in India revealed that students who were taught with systematic application of their first language showed better results in literacy, wider academic performance and confidence than their counterparts in monolingual education programs, with similar results noted elsewhere in Africa and Latin America (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). In Pakistan in particular, the empirical studies of multilingual practice at primary level are relatively scarce, although, Pakistan is a highly linguistically diverse country. The existing evidence is more likely to support the general international trend: with Pashto-speaking children allowed to use their native language in addition to Urdu and English, the understanding and classroom performance seem to be enhanced, which also fits into the description of the cognitive load that Cummins (2000) attributes to learning in a foreign language. Ali (2022) adds that the four fundamental language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, are formed in the safest manner when they are not imposed on students and introduced to unfamiliar academic material at the same time and in isolation of the linguistic resources they already have at their disposal.

Research Gap

Collectively, the literature provides a fairly robust theoretical and empirical argument in support of multilingual instruction, but there are two gaps that are directly applicable to District Mardan. To start with, much of the Pakistani studies on this subject, as well as previous survey research on the same district, has quantified teacher attitudes as opposed to what they say in their own language about the way that multilingual strategies are actually formulated and defended in practice. Second, although the impact of multilingual education on overall academic success and language acquisition has been actively studied, only relatively little of it has considered the conceptual clarity, i.e., the ability of students to explain, relate, and use what they have learned in particular and not merely to memorize it. A qualitative inquiry into the lived accounts of teachers is in a good position to fill both of these gaps simultaneously, and provide a depth of insight that is not in substitution to, but is complementary to the existing quantitative evidence in the same setting.

Conclusion

This article has described a qualitative study of an issue, which in District Mardan, has largely been studied using quantitative indices of teacher attitudes: how, and what perceived impact, do primary school teachers alternate between Pashto, Urdu and English in the context of daily instruction? The argument in favor of taking teacher own accounts seriously (Read) opposes theoretical literature, the sociocultural theory places language as the medium of thought in its own, the Common Underlying Proficiency model proposes that languages of a learner do not compete, but form an integrated resource, and the theory of translanguaging explains multilingual practice as an integrated resource instead of a chaotic escape of the proper teaching. A qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis is most appropriate to the aim of describing how these ideas are practiced, improvised and occasionally limited in practice in real classrooms.

Whether, as the literature and the proposed inquiry both imply, the multilingual practices of teachers can facilitate, not impair conceptual clarity in students, then policy around language-in-education would serve well to formally allow, as opposed to tolerate, such practices, and programs aimed at teacher education would consider the strategy of translanguaging as an explicit part of teacher education, instead of it developing informally as it is currently the case. A mixed-methods design would be a way to provide the most comprehensive possible view of the impact of multilingual teaching on conceptual understanding at the primary level, a perspective that only the combination of this qualitative outlook and available quantitative evidence can offer.

References

- Ali, H. H. (2022). The importance of the four English language skills: Reading, writing, speaking, and listening in teaching Iraqi learners. *Humanities & Natural Sciences Journal*, 3(2), 154–165.
- Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (5th ed.). Multilingual Matters.
- Bloomfield, J., & Fisher, M. J. (2019). Quantitative research design. *Journal of the Australasian Rehabilitation Nurses Association*, 22(2), 27–30.
- Cenoz, J. (2013). Defining multilingualism. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 33, 3–18.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2002). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.
- Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and language integrated learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, 49(2), 222–251.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Multilingual Matters.
- García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hornberger, N. H. (2003). *Continua of biliteracy: An ecological framework for educational policy, research, and practice in multilingual settings*. Multilingual Matters.
- Maher, J. C. (2017). *Multilingualism: A very short introduction* (Vol. 525). Oxford University Press.
- Manzura, B. (2025). Benefits of multilingualism in education. In *International Conference on Modern Education and Innovative Approaches to Teaching Foreign Languages* (pp. 9–11).
- May, S. (2014). *The multilingual turn: Implications for SLA, TESOL, and bilingual education*. Routledge.
- Mohanty, A. K. (2010). Languages, inequality and marginalization: Implications of the double divide in Indian multilingualism. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2010(205), 131–154.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education—or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement*. Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Education in a multilingual world*. UNESCO Publishing.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Webb, V. (2004). African languages as media of instruction in South Africa: Stating the case. *Language Problems & Language Planning*, 28(2), 147–173.