# ENGLISH MEDIUM POLICY IN PAKISTAN: TEACHER AGENCY AND CLASSROOM REALITIES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

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**Abstract**
*Language policy in education plays a crucial role in shaping national identity, providing access to knowledge, and ensuring fair learning outcomes. This article reviews both the theoretical and empirical literature on language policy and planning (LPP), with a particular focus on English Medium Instruction (EMI) and teacher agency in multilingual educational settings. Drawing from studies in Pakistan and other multilingual countries, it examines historical developments, challenges in implementing top-down language policies, and the effects of language choices on student learning. Although English holds a privileged status within Pakistan's education system, the use of mother tongues remains limited, especially in public primary schools located in rural or monolingual areas. The literature reveals a gap between official language policies and classroom realities, highlighting the important role teachers play in interpreting and adapting policy. This review also points out gaps in current research, especially regarding how primary-level teachers in under-resourced settings handle EMI-related challenges, and calls for more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to language planning.*

## INTRODUCTION

Language is more than a tool of communication; it is deeply intertwined with culture, identity, cognition, and power. Hall (1968) defines language as "the institution in which individuals interact and speak with each other through regularly used spoken aural random signs and codes" (p. 158). In educational settings, the language of instruction plays a vital role in shaping student learning, classroom participation, and teacher effectiveness. Cummins and Swain (1986) argue that integrating a learner's first language (L1) into the learning process enhances "self-worth, self-identification, and the empowerment and inculcation of one's cultural identity." Supporting this, Spada (2006, p. 26) states that "learning in one's L1 enhances children's self-esteem and cognitive development." These perspectives emphasize the significance of language in both cognitive and emotional development.

Pakistan is a multilingual polity. The country is home to 68 indigenous languages (Ethnologue, 2024). Urdu is the national language, and English is the official language. According to the Census (2023), Punjabi remains the most widely spoken mother tongue in Pakistan at 37%, followed by Pushto at 18%, Sindhi at 14%, Saraiki at 12%, Urdu at 9%, while Balochi speakers make up 3%. Despite this linguistic diversity, English is a mandatory subject in schools and universities, making the effective delivery of English-medium instruction (EMI) particularly difficult in under-resourced and linguistically complex settings. Furthermore, the gap between centrally designed language policies and classroom realities further

complicates the situation. Most language-in-education policies in Pakistan are drafted at federal level and often ignore local linguistic contexts. Manan, Tajik, Hajar, and Amin (2023) argue that this top-down approach creates serious implementation issues in multilingual contexts. This gap between policy and practice underscores the inadequacy of adopting a uniform language strategy across diverse contexts.

The global spread of English adds another layer to the complexity. Stromquist et al. (2000, p. 7) explain that "the whole world has entered the era of English-speaking globalization, in which most observers see a trend towards the homogenization of moral codes and rules, while others view prospects to preserve local identity." These competing dynamics make language education planning even more sensitive. Hamidi (2023, p. 54) emphasizes that "language education policies must cover and integrate cultural codes from the civilizations from which the languages originated in addition to being taught... while developing language teaching regulations, one must take into account the cultural ideology of the student, the instructor, and the society in which the target language is learned." This review paper is a part of my MPhil thesis. In light of these complexities, it aims to highlight the importance of studying government English medium policy, particularly in public primary schools, through the lens of teacher agency and classroom realities. To this end, the following literature review is presented.

## 2. Thematic Literature Review

### 2.1. Language as a Cornerstone of Learning and Interaction

Language is the foundation of human interaction. It not only facilitates communication but also reflects our thoughts, dreams, and social identity. Hoffmann (2014, p. 41) asserts that "language serves both symbolic and instrumental purposes—it is a medium of expression and a means of exerting control across social domains." Similarly, Smith (2017, p. 115) argues that "language in education is not merely a vehicle for knowledge transfer, but a determinant of how learners conceptualize academic content." In multilingual societies, the choice of language in education affects learner engagement, understanding, and academic performance. When students are taught in a language they are unfamiliar with, their

participation and confidence tend to decrease. This is especially true in rural areas like Balochistan, where children often start school speaking a different home language from the school's medium of instruction. When classroom teaching does not align with students' linguistic backgrounds, learning becomes a mechanical task rather than a meaningful experience. Unfortunately, the dominance of English and Urdu in Pakistan's education system often sidelines regional languages. This marginalization not only affects student learning but also contributes to feelings of inferiority and alienation. Language becomes a gatekeeper rather than a bridge to knowledge. Addressing this requires not only policy reforms but also a re-evaluation of how language is positioned in the classroom, recognizing it as a "cornerstone of interaction, understanding, and identity formation."

### 2.2. Language Policy and Planning: Concepts and Evolution

Language policy is both explicit and implicit, comprising formal legislation, administrative regulations, institutional practices, social beliefs, and community norms (Johnson, 2013). Kaplan and Baldauf (1997, p. 3) define language planning as "a systematic, future-oriented decision-making process initiated by governments or other authorities to influence language use and development in society." Schiffman (1996, p. 5) extends this concept to include "linguistic culture," which encompasses the unspoken assumptions, attitudes, myths, and ideologies about language that affect how policies are interpreted and practiced.

In many postcolonial societies, language policy and planning (LPP) developed as a nation-building strategy. Newly independent states often adopted or maintained colonial languages for elite access and governance, while also attempting to elevate national or regional languages as symbols of unity (Cooper, 1989). In Pakistan, this dual role of language policy is evident in the promotion of Urdu as a national identity marker and English as a tool for modernity and global integration.

By the 1980s, sociolinguistic scholars began to question the effectiveness of top-down language policy approaches. Tollefson (1991, p. 14) argued that such models "ignored the lived experiences of language users and reinforced social inequalities." Since then,

critical language policy research has emphasized the need for inclusive, context-aware frameworks that consider the perspectives and agency of local actors, including educators, students, and communities. Recent studies have shifted from viewing teachers as passive transmitters of policy to recognizing them as key stakeholders who interpret, adapt, and sometimes resist language policies. Menken and García (2010, p. 1) suggest that "schools are active sites of policy negotiation, where educators exercise professional judgment to meet learners' needs." This shift aligns with the broader understanding that successful language policy must reflect both macro-level goals and micro-level classroom realities, especially in linguistically diverse countries like Pakistan.

## 2.3. Pakistan's Language Policy: History, Contradictions, and Implementation Gaps

Pakistan's language policy has historically oscillated between promoting Urdu as a unifying language and retaining English for access to global knowledge and administrative functions. As Zeeshan (2025a) observes, "Language policy in Pakistan reflects a complex interplay of political, cultural, and educational considerations." Article 251 of the Constitution (1973) calls for Urdu's promotion as the national language, yet English continues to dominate in education, governance, and the job market. As Zeeshan (2025a, p. 7) states, "English continues to dominate higher education and official domains, marginalizing indigenous languages despite constitutional provisions." As Mustafa (2011, p. 99) notes, "English remains a symbol of privilege and authority, while Urdu is associated with nationalism and unity." This duality has created enduring tensions in shaping educational language policies.

Since independence, successive governments have attempted to balance national integration with global competitiveness through language decisions. Urdu, despite being the mother tongue of only a small percentage of the population, was positioned as a lingua franca to unify ethnolinguistically diverse groups. English, however, remained entrenched as the language of the elite, essential for higher education, civil services, and access to upward mobility. This has resulted in a deeply entrenched linguistic hierarchy, with English occupying the highest rung, followed by Urdu, and then regional and indigenous languages.

Over time, various national education policies—including the National Education Policy (NEP) 2009—have introduced English as the medium of instruction (MOI) from Grade 4 onwards, particularly for science and mathematics. The rationale behind this policy was to enhance students' access to scientific knowledge and align national education standards with global trends. However, this shift has often been implemented without proper planning, teacher training, or curriculum support. Teachers in public schools, especially in rural and under-resourced areas, frequently lack the English language proficiency and pedagogical skills necessary to teach complex subjects effectively in English.

The inconsistency in policy directives and their weak implementation have created confusion among educators and administrators. While federal policy encourages EMI, provincial autonomy under the 18th Constitutional Amendment allows regional governments to make independent decisions about language in education. This has led to a fragmented policy landscape, where language policies vary significantly across provinces and even within districts.

This disjointed approach has practical implications in classrooms. Teachers often resort to code-switching between English, Urdu, and local languages to ensure comprehension, especially when students lack foundational literacy in English. Such multilingual practices, though pedagogically beneficial, are not formally recognized in policy documents. As Mustafa (2011, p. 104) and Manan et al. (2017, p. 224) argue, these contradictions between stated policy and actual classroom practices "create a wide gap between language policy and classroom practice," leading to inconsistent learning outcomes and heightened educational inequalities.

In sum, Pakistan's language policy reflects a complex interplay of historical, political, and social forces. The literature consistently points to a disconnect between top-down language policy and the lived realities of classrooms. To move forward, there is a pressing need for inclusive, coherent, and context-sensitive policies that recognize linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier, and that empower educators to implement meaningful language practices in their classrooms.

## 2.4. The Rise of English Medium Instruction (EMI) and Its Consequences

The global rise of English Medium Instruction (EMI) has become a defining trend in education policy, especially in countries where English is not the first language. Macaro et al. (2018a) define EMI as "the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English." Governments around the world have embraced EMI as a strategy to enhance students' access to global academic content, improve employability, and elevate national competitiveness in an increasingly interconnected world. However, the rapid adoption of EMI has brought with it significant pedagogical and equity-related challenges. In many non-English-speaking countries, the implementation of EMI has outpaced the development of necessary linguistic and institutional infrastructure. Teachers often lack the required English proficiency or training in EMI pedagogy, and students struggle to grasp subject matter in a language they have not fully mastered.

In Pakistan, these challenges are particularly acute. EMI has been introduced as part of broader education reforms aimed at modernization and global integration, but it has also deepened existing inequalities within the education system. Students in elite private schools—who often have prior exposure to English through family background and preschool education—benefit from well-trained teachers, abundant resources, and immersive language environments. In contrast, students in public schools, particularly in rural and underserved areas, face a very different reality. As Channa (2014) and Zeeshan (2013) report, children in government schools with limited English proficiency struggle significantly with comprehension, classroom participation, and academic achievement. These students are often taught by underprepared teachers who lack the fluency to effectively deliver complex subject content in English. The result is a growing achievement gap between public and private school students, reinforcing the link between language proficiency and socioeconomic privilege.

Brock-Utne (2016) cautions that EMI, when imposed in linguistically diverse and resource-poor settings, can "undermine student learning, lead to rote memorization, and alienate learners from the content being taught." In such contexts, students are not only expected to master new academic concepts, but to do so in a language they do not understand well—a double burden that severely hinders meaningful learning.

Moreover, EMI has sociolinguistic consequences that go beyond the classroom. The prioritization of English as a medium of instruction often marginalizes local languages, contributing to the erosion of linguistic and cultural identities. Students may develop feelings of inferiority or detachment from their heritage languages, particularly when these are excluded from formal education. In Pakistan, this is evident in the limited presence of regional languages in the curriculum beyond the early grades, despite their importance for cognitive development and cultural connection.

Teachers, too, are placed in a difficult position under EMI regimes. Many navigate these challenges by employing translanguaging strategies—using English for key terms, Urdu for explanation, and local languages for clarification. While these practices are effective in supporting student understanding, they are not officially endorsed by policy, leaving teachers without institutional support or recognition for their adaptive strategies.

In conclusion, the expansion of EMI in Pakistan and other multilingual contexts reflects a tension between global aspirations and local realities. While EMI may offer long-term benefits in terms of internationalization and economic competitiveness, its success depends heavily on context-sensitive implementation. Without adequate training, resources, and recognition of linguistic diversity, EMI risks becoming a barrier rather than a bridge to quality education.

## 2.5. Mother Tongue-Based Instruction and Learning Outcomes

A growing body of research supports the vital role of mother tongue (L1) instruction in fostering cognitive development, emotional security, and academic achievement. Cummins (2009) argues that "children learn a second language better when they have first achieved a strong foundation in their mother tongue." This perspective is reinforced by sociolinguistic and pedagogical studies showing that early literacy and

conceptual understanding are most effectively developed in the language a child speaks at home.

UNESCO (2007) strongly advocates for "Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education" (MTB-MLE), asserting that instruction in learners' first language not only improves academic performance but also strengthens cultural identity and social cohesion. MTB-MLE models encourage a gradual and systematic transition from mother tongue to additional languages, allowing learners to build upon familiar linguistic structures while acquiring new ones. Mother tongue is a resource, particularly when used as a language of education (Zeeshan, 2025b). According to Walter and Benson (2012), "when instruction is given in a familiar language, learners are more likely to engage with content, retain information, and develop critical thinking skills."

Despite these global endorsements, Pakistan's language-in-education policies continue to marginalize mother tongues. Bazai, Manan, and Pillai (2022) observe that native languages are introduced only until Grade 2 in some provinces, often without proper curricular support, teaching materials, or trained instructors. After this limited exposure, students are expected to abruptly switch to Urdu or English, languages that may be unfamiliar at home, creating a significant barrier to comprehension and academic success. As Zeeshan (2025b) notes, "the vast majority of the children in Pakistan do not receive education in their mother tongue." (p. 3)

This challenge is particularly acute in rural regions such as Balochistan, where the linguistic distance between home languages and school languages is vast. Rehman (2014) explains that this linguistic gap results in diminished motivation, higher dropout rates, and weak foundational literacy skills. Bizenjo and Awan (2019) further report that students struggle to make sense of classroom instruction when they cannot connect it to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Compounding the problem is the widespread parental perception that English-medium education guarantees upward mobility. Channa, Memon, and Bughio (2016) found that many parents, even those from low-income communities, opt for English-medium schools in the hope of providing their children with better employment opportunities. However, this preference often ignores the linguistic and pedagogical realities of early learners, many of whom are unequipped to succeed in environments where neither Urdu nor English is spoken at home. The consequences of this disconnect are serious. Children who start their education in a language they are not familiar with often depend on memorization rather than understanding, which limits their ability to think critically or communicate confidently. They are also more likely to develop a negative self-image and find school to be alienating.

In contrast, evidence indicates that mother tongue instruction not only supports literacy development but also serves as a bridge for acquiring second and third languages more effectively. When learners understand academic concepts in their first language, they transfer that knowledge more easily into additional languages. In light of this, policymakers and educators are encouraged to move beyond superficial acknowledgment of indigenous languages and instead integrate them meaningfully into early childhood education. This involves investing in teacher training, curriculum development, and resource creation for mother tongue instruction. Only by taking these steps can education become genuinely inclusive and equitable, reflecting the multilingual reality of Pakistan's diverse society.

## 2.6. Teacher Agency in Language Policy Implementation

Teacher agency refers to educators' capacity to make informed decisions, adapt policies, and implement practices that best support their students' learning within specific classroom contexts (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). In environments where language policies are often formulated through top-down processes, detached from the socio-linguistic realities of classrooms, teacher agency becomes not only relevant but essential. This agency enables educators to bridge the gap between rigid policy prescriptions and the fluid, multilingual realities they encounter daily.

Research underscores that teachers are not merely passive implementers of language policies but are in fact active agents who interpret, modify, and sometimes resist official mandates. Manan, Channa, and Haider (2025) reveal that even in elite private schools where EMI policies are strictly enforced, teachers often engage in covert multilingual

practices—such as code-switching and translating key concepts—to enhance student understanding. These practices, though unofficial, reflect teachers' commitment to learner comprehension over strict policy compliance.

In less-resourced, rural environments, teacher agency becomes even more pronounced. Khan (2016) documented cases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where public school teachers used English for subject content, Urdu for general instruction, and Pashto for clarification and emotional support, irrespective of official language policy. These hybrid linguistic practices demonstrate a localized response to student needs and illustrate how educators creatively navigate systemic limitations.

Similarly, Channa and Panezai (2019) found that in public schools across Balochistan, teachers faced acute challenges such as inadequate English language proficiency, absence of pedagogical training, and lack of textbooks aligned with EMI directives. Despite these barriers, teachers still sought to facilitate learning by translating content into the local language or supplementing English instruction with explanatory sessions in Urdu or Pashto. These adaptive strategies show a deep awareness of students' linguistic realities and a professional commitment to educational equity.

Moreover, teacher agency extends beyond language use. It includes decisions about pacing, curriculum adaptation, assessment methods, and how to manage the linguistic and cultural identities present in the classroom. In multilingual contexts, such as those found in Pakistan, these decisions significantly influence students' learning outcomes and sense of belonging. Teachers' ability to exercise such discretion underscores the importance of treating them as partners in policy design, rather than as mere executors of directives.

However, the literature also highlights that teacher agency is often constrained by systemic pressures. Policies that prioritize EMI without providing sufficient training, resources, or institutional support can disempower teachers and create feelings of inadequacy or non-compliance. Therefore, fostering teacher agency requires more than rhetorical support—it demands structural changes that involve teachers in policymaking, provide ongoing professional development, and acknowledge the

legitimacy of context-sensitive instructional practices. "For effective implementation of the policy, powers should be devolved to the local levels so that the school administration and teachers could make decisions according to the given context and situations" (Zeeshan, 2025d, p.1373)

Recognizing and strengthening teacher agency is crucial for the successful implementation of language policies, particularly in linguistically diverse and under-resourced educational settings. When educators are empowered to draw upon their professional knowledge and linguistic repertoire, they are more likely to implement inclusive practices that bridge policy and practice, ultimately enhancing student learning and engagement. As Zeeshan (2025c) also calls for a broader methodological and theoretical engagement with LPP, encouraging researchers to adopt perspectives that account for both explicit regulations and the deeper, less visible forces shaping language policies." (p.139)

## 2.7. Gaps in Research: Overlooking Primary-Level Public Schools in Response to Top-Down Policy Initiatives

Despite a substantial body of research on EMI and language policy, most of the focus remains on urban, private, or higher education settings (Macaro et al., 2018a; Dearden, 2014; Shah & Hussain, 2020). This focus often neglects the particular challenges faced by public primary schools in rural areas, where resources are scarce, and students may not have enough foundational exposure to the language of instruction. While some studies do explore rural educational settings (e.g., Khan, 2016; Channa, 2014), they tend to insightful perspectives provide general overviews; there is still a dearth of studies reporting the nuanced realities of daily classroom experiences. These include the linguistic negotiations teachers make, the strategies they use to overcome EMI-related challenges, and the informal ways in which policy is adapted at the grassroots level. Furthermore, there is limited discussion in the literature about how primary school teachers and principals in under-resourced areas interpret and implement language policy. The voices of these educators—their insights, adaptations, and professional judgments—remain largely absent from mainstream discourse.

This literature review highlights the need for further exploration of teacher perspectives and practices in such settings, with a focus on how educators interpret and mediate EMI policy in linguistically diverse classrooms. Addressing this gap is essential for informing more equitable, context-sensitive language policies that consider the realities of both learners and teachers in multilingual education systems.

## 3. Conclusion

This review article set out to explore how language policy, English Medium Instruction (EMI), and teacher agency interact within the multilingual and resource-constrained educational landscape of Pakistan. The review reveals a critical gap in the existing literature: limited attention to classroom realities in public primary schools, particularly in rural or monolingual regions. Most language policy discussions remain top-down, neglecting how policies are actually interpreted, adapted, or resisted by teachers in real classroom settings.

A key finding of this review is the central importance of mother tongue-based instruction in supporting students' comprehension, engagement, and academic development—especially in early grades. Yet, current policies often marginalize regional languages, leading to cognitive and cultural disconnects for learners. Equally significant is the role of teacher agency. Educators act as mediators of policy, employing multilingual strategies to bridge the gap between imposed English-medium directives and students' linguistic needs.

By highlighting classroom practices and teacher perspectives—often absent in national discourse—this review underscores the value of bottom-up approaches to language policy planning. For future policy to be equitable, effective, and inclusive, it must be grounded in classroom realities, recognize linguistic diversity as a resource, and involve teachers as active partners in shaping language-in-education policy.

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