

Attitudinal Trends: English Language in Madrassas of Pakistan

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Abstract

Historically, madrassas or religious seminaries have resisted reform efforts and have labeled them as part of western agenda of secularizing Islamic education. Currently, more than 13000 registered madrassas with a population of about 2 million students get education mainly in Arabic, Persian and local languages. English language teaching does not form a regular part of the traditional 8-year Dars-e-Nizami course. Based on the practical utility of English language and its importance in job market, the current qualitative study investigates attitudes of madrasa students and teachers towards English language. The findings are based on purposively selected 42 interviewees associated with madrassas in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study reveals that a majority of students and teachers view English language in positive esteem and term it necessary for life in general and professional prosperity in particular. It also finds that a tiny section of religious community associate negative feelings with the language that are mostly motivated by orthodox sermons and speeches. The study concludes that state intervention is needed to introduce reforms with the support of religious elite.

Keywords: *Madrassa; English; attitudes; Pakistan; education; job market*

1. Introduction

English language has become a symbol of professional prosperity for educated youth in Pakistan. Like other parts of the world, the government of Pakistan has a history of devising and implementing education policies that emphasize the importance of learning English. Most of the official business of the country is also performed in the language. Being the national language, Urdu has so far not been able to replace it for correspondence in civil and military bureaucracy. Unlike state schools, colleges and universities, madrassas over centuries have attempted to promote Arabic as the language of religion and Persian as symbol of past grandeur of Muslims in the India Sub-continent. Religious seminaries have resisted the ascendancy of English language and have been successful to a considerable degree in erecting a predominantly Arabic-based education. However, this approach has been harming the cause of the proponents of madrassas as their graduates do not succeed in finding better placement in the mainstream professional market of the country. In the context of globalization, the state needs to intervene to reform and modernize madrasa education for a greater good. The rarely employed madrasa graduates at present have a sense of alienation from the state and its machinery and there is likelihood that they support anti-state elements. In the context of Pakistan, this tendency has been observed in the form of support for religious extremists i.e. Taliban who have been in existence for the past two decades. In order to alienate religious community from extremist elements, there is a need to reform madrasa education with a view to equip the graduates to find respectable positions in job market and to allow them a fair chance to identify with the mainstream society.

The review of literature indicates the consistent but piecemeal approach of various regimes to reform madrasa education on the one hand and the resistance of religious community to welcome any reform measure on the other. It is believed that religious scholars look at English language with suspicion and declare its imposition as part of a wide western agenda to secularize religious education. However, it is also a fact that the state has not been able to attend to madrassas as it has done in the case of other schools and colleges. There is a communication gap and lack of trust between the government and the religious community that seems to be at the heart of failed attempts to reform madrassas.

This study is guided by bottom up approach and provides an insider view. It attempts to investigate the attitudes of madrasa students and teachers towards English language to reveal whether the community at present is willing to accept reforms or not. In either case, it is important to know their attitudes which can guide policy makers and international donors for reform measures. For the purpose of the study, the key questions asked from the interviewees were directed to investigate their attitudes towards English language including their responsiveness to the use of the language in madrassas and their lives, the amount of importance they accord to the language in academic and professional prosperity, their response to the dominance of English in society and the way they see it in comparison to other languages mainly Urdu and local languages. The replies were recorded and then thematically transcribed during the analysis of the generated data.

Currently, the various forms and manifestations of modern education and their usefulness in public life have restricted the scope of madrasa education. Its prestige has also gone down as people in general have stopped depending on religious scholars for guidance.

If looked at from inside, the madrasa administration ensures to provide food, clothes, books etc to students free of cost; and therefore easily attracts people from low socio-economic background who view it as their only hope of education (Ahmed, 2009). Their targets thus are mostly the lower classes and Afghan refugees whom the state has so far not successfully provided access to education (MOET, 2013; Farah & Rizvi, 2007; Tamuri, 2007). According to Tariq Rahman (2004), the apparently humanistic and caring approach of madrasa will continue to attract poor people and will gain impetus from the increase in poverty in the country.

2. Research Questions

The study is guided by the following key research questions.

1. How do madrasa students and teachers see English language in general?
2. What is their level of appreciation of English language in job market?
3. How do they view policy reforms initiatives introduced or needed in curriculum in the context of English language teaching?

3. Objectives of the Study

Following are the objectives of the study.

1. To investigate the attitudes of students and teachers towards English language
2. To find out attitudes towards English language in the context of job market
3. To assess response to State-initiated English language reforms in madrasa curriculum

4. Methods and Procedure

This qualitative research study is based on the findings of the data generated through in-depth interviews from 42 students and teachers stationed in 6 selected madrassas in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Both interviewees and madrassas were purposively selected for obtaining in-depth details. Initially, the study was designed to cover the whole province but due to financial and time constraints, it was delimited to three districts of Malakand Division including Swat, Dir Lower and Malakand. The three districts have been in the news for Taliban uprising led by Molvi Fazlullah in the first decade of the 21st century. More specifically, Dir lower is also the birth place of Molvi Sofi Muhammad who was the supreme leader of *Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi* (TNSM), a

movement for promulgation of Shariah law of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). These movements derived their support and power from madrassas.

Among the interviewees, the students enrolled in Dars-e-Nizami were included while all the teachers had graduated from the same scheme of education. Access to madrassas was facilitated by key informants, local elders and political activists affiliated with religious parties. The interviews were conducted in the local language- Pakhtu or Pashtu and were then transcribed and coded. The coding process is an adaptation from Roney (2000) which is appended at the end.

At the onset, the study was confined to male madrassas only due to cultural and religious restrictions but one female madrassas was also included after permission from the administrator through the local leadership of Jamat Islami (a political party in power in the local government).

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

With unflinching support for Arabic language and the authority it enjoyed owing to its being the fountain source of all religious knowledge, madrassa students and teachers also believed in a market-oriented approach to language. The interviewees were well aware of the use of English in daily life. They pointed to its seminal importance in operating modern technological tools like computer and performing tasks on internet. They also pointed to its extensive use in various professions like law and medicine that had made it necessary for them to know it. Many also endorsed the status of English as an international language. In a reply to a question regarding the need and importance of English, a teacher replied that it was necessary for access to knowledge and power. He also pointed to medical tests and court proceedings where English was used (5T30-M29-R8M).

Generally, it is believed that religious class is conservative and less likely to accept social change but I found it less applicable to the madrassa environment. Before going into the field, I had the same set of stereotypical perceptions about madrassa community and was more than careful in asking any question that would have offended the interviewees. I did not ask direct questions about English movies or entertainment programs. I found most of the participants very friendly and expressive in asserting their rare encounters with English language. Some liked sports mainly cricket and wrestling and had tasted English commentaries there. There were others who had been listening to religious speeches of Dr. Zakir Naik in English language. Most of the interviewees had no facility of TV, computer and Internet for three main reasons: first, most of them had low socio-economic background; second, majority of the families were less exposed to modern education and last but not the least some hailed from strong conservative religious section of the society that viewed these modern gadgets as satanic and sinful. In a reply to a question about instances of listening to English from a native speaker, a student replied that he had listened to cricket commentaries and had watched other programs on TV (5S33-M19-R4H). More interestingly, few students informed me that they had been using Facebook on their cell phones. A teacher was of the view that he was in search of a job in a public sector university where English was compulsory and that had made him conscious about the importance of English (5T30-M29-R8M).

With reference to English, a female teacher complained about the scarcity of resources at the madrassa. She pointed to the lack of funds and the non-cooperation of the government in promoting English language in madrassas. Here, it is important to note that in her individual capacity, she revealed that she had managed to provide opportunity to her children to learn English, computer and Internet (2T09-F32-U8M).

Sensing the educational and professional needs of students in general, another follow up question was asked from participants regarding their preferences for future generations. In this case, many

interviewees were accommodative of English language and wanted their children to learn it. Some teachers also pointed to their siblings who were enrolled in different schools and colleges that further clarified the picture. The attitudes of madrasa teachers need a special mention in this regard. The information gathered during the course of interviews revealed that those teachers whose children were of school age were more likely to attend English-based private schools. For instance, the sons of a teacher were enrolled in a Public School at Chakdara (2T09-F32-U8M). In another instance, the son of a teacher attended a Public School at Dargai before joining the madrasa. In his interview, he revealed that he attended the school but later on joined the madrasa as his father wanted him to run and manage the affairs in his absence. More importantly, his father fully supported him in learning English language and had hired an English tutor for him. He also revealed that his younger brother was also a student of a private school at that time (4S27-M20-R6H).

As stated above, the attitudes of madrasa community were in major way shaped by societal circumstances that also included the views and opinions of peers, friends, neighbors, and significant others.

Madrasa students are positively motivated to learn English language but it is also important to mention those voices who label it as an imposed language in the country. They view it in historical colonial perspective that resulted in the loss of prestige of local languages. To them, the process was facilitated by the westernized ruling elite. More specifically, they allude to the past grandeur of Persian as the official language in the sub-continent before the arrival of English rule (Rahman, 2004). Madrasa community interprets the replacement of Persian with English a move against the Muslims of British India (Coleman, 2010; Muhammad, et al. 2012). To them, the movement of Deoband was a counter strategy by the Muslim scholars to preserve Islamic culture and heritage. They upheld Arabic and condemned anything that related to the culture and language of the colonizers (Malik, 2008). This pattern of thinking still pervades madrasa community but there are many who are of the view that much has changed since then and it is the responsibility of the government and religious scholars to revisit the sans English policy and bring changes into it according to the need of the time. Some interviewees perceived historical animosity with the colonizers one reason of the exclusion of English language from madrasa curriculum. At the same time, they were less hesitant in admitting the current importance of English in the country and accepted their helplessness to reverse the situation. They attributed the ascendancy of English to the westernized elite among the ruling class who, according to them, supported and upheld English and were less bothered about other.

Another prominent feature of the responses of students and teachers in the context of English was their fear of cultural invasion. Some of them accepted the importance and thus the need of English language learning but they did not want to become English-like in the process. Some participants mixed the two while some were of the view that we should only learn English language and not their culture. It is important to mention that none of the interviewees had experienced face-to-face encounters with English people or culture and most of their fears were derived from religious sermons and traditional anti-western rhetoric that formed part of political Islam in Pakistan.

It is believed that language plays role in the propagation, reinforcement and preservation of culture (Khan, Sultana, Bughio, & Naz, 2013). To inquire attitudes on the effectiveness of this role, interconnected questions were designed to find the relation between language and the value system of society. The replies of the participants were not uniform. They differed in their interpretation of the relationship and many were of the view that it should not be overemphasized. One interviewee, for

example, said that one should learn as many languages as one could and that it was unjust to declare culture and language inseparable. He referred to Muslims in the western world who spoke English and also cared for their religious beliefs and identities (1T02-M27-R8M).

Some of the interviewees thought differently, however. They were of the view that language was part to the process of perpetuation of culture. Dominant cultures and values were spread through languages and all learners needed to keep that in mind while learning any language. A teacher deplored the sway of English over a majority of the educational institutions in Pakistan and termed it a major cause of the trend towards westernization in the country (3T16-M37-U8H).

After establishing the positive relation between language learning and cultural invasion, I asked: “Don’t you think that if it has anything to do with language learning then can we say that those who learn Arabic must also be good Muslims? What do you say?” In response, the reply was not a well-grounded argument and was based on the stereotypical presentation of English-based education. Such replies can be categorized as the prominent part and parcel of religious speeches and sermons that are attended by madrasa community regularly. Mostly, such occasions are lecture-based and the listeners are expected not to question the views of their superiors about foreign cultures and people.

Like all other languages, English is also associated with nations and people who have their own way of life and culture. The speakers and the culture are always there in background when we refer to different languages (Crystal, 2003). English language is generally associated with the west but many Pakistanis associate English mainly with the United Kingdom and the United States of America. This is particularly the case after 9/11. Owing to the religious sentiments for and against the War on Terror and the history of madrassas in the country, it was a point of interest for me to investigate and record the responses of the participants regarding English nation and culture.

In relation to this aspect of investigation, I had to prepare ground as direct questions about English nation and culture would not have yielded more expressive replies. Local people feared undercover agents and spies who could pose a threat to their lives and they therefore did not express their personal views about foreign nations particularly the USA. As member of the local community, I had the advantage of knowing that trend and thus understood their fears. It was believed that many agents were scattered far and wide in the area who worked for Pakistani government or Taliban or foreign nations engaged in the War on Terror. I was also aware of the conservative outlook of madrasa community and their love for Arabic, I, therefore, started with a question about ugly and beautiful languages and then contextualized it to English language. The recorded responses were encouraging and majority did not pronounce dislike for any language. Majority of the respondents supported their views from the holy traditions (Hadith). This gave me an easy opportunity to twist and turn the question to mix the issue of language with nation and culture.

During the session, it was revealed that many participants did not justify hatred for any language. They made it clear that language should not be the object of hatred. All languages were good and respectable. We must condemn only the bad deeds of people not their languages.

One participant was critically sympathetic towards the western people and alluded to some extremist elements in the west that were bent upon disrespect of Islam and holy books. He did not refer to any particular incident at that time but later on revealed that he had in mind the blasphemous anti-Islam film on YouTube (<http://rt.com/news/pakistan-shuts-youtube-film-353/>) (see also Esposito, 2011) and the US pastor who threatened to burn copies of the holy Quran on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in

2013 (<http://www.dawn.com/news/1042364>). To note, these incidents led to violent protests all over the country. The anti-Islam film <http://www.dawn.com/news/1023036>) also led to the suspension of YouTube by the government of Pakistan ((5S33-M19-R4H).

With the introduction of modern means of communication including print and electronic media, internet, and satellite TV, it is said that public opinion is experiencing transformation and traditional ideas and views are reshaped (Zaidi, 2013). A decade ago, it was very common among the Pakhtuns to talk negatively about western culture and civilization. The anti-western narrative reverberates in a tiny religious circle however. A clear line needs to be drawn between western societies and their foreign policies. In Pakistani context, it is mainly the policies that provide space for the expression of such sentiments. Conservative religious class is known for outright rejection of western values. This is not always the case, however. It was noted during the course of interviews many participants acknowledged western virtues that they found lacking in their own society. In an interview, a student explained that opposition to English is a minority opinion and is vanishing with each passing day (4S27-M20-R6H).

While asking questions about English people, I was well aware that majority of the participants might not have travelled abroad and had therefore no practical experience with them. I did confirm it throughout my interviews however. I had to frame the questions based on what they had heard about English societies and nations. I also had to explain the purpose of my question for getting appropriate replies. In a majority of the interviews, the initial reaction of interviewees was that they had no lived experience in the western society. I had to convince them that they could share what they had heard through different sources like TV, Internet, newspapers, magazines, scholarly books and lectures.

With reference to English people, some participants were more careful in their replies and tried not to be specific about their answers. They justified their replies on religious ground that they were not allowed to form opinion without proper knowledge. Their attitudes were fairly rational however. They were of the view that no society was good or bad in itself. Good and bad people were always there and it would be unjust to categorize a society on the deeds of some individuals (4T23-M33-R8S).

Sensing the reluctance of the interviewees in expressing their views about native speakers of English, I had to give examples and my own views about different tribes and villages that were known to them. This strategy was helpful and facilitated the conversation in a meaningful manner. With traditional religious narrative in the background, I was expecting less or no positivity in their attitudes towards English nations. I had read and heard about their anti-western stance (Qazi, 2013) and I had also witnessed their demonstrations against the US pastor and YouTube movie. It came to the fore that many participants took interest in knowing about the world through media. They went to the extent of comparing English societies with their country and attempted to draw a picture of the two. The interviewees also had in notice the positive virtues of English people and one respondent went to the extent of calling many of their acts in consonance with the teachings of Islam.

T - They do not deceive others, mind their own business, observe cleanliness etc. which are also part of our Islamic teachings. But it is wrong to generalize that they follow Islam. And I must say Islam does not forbid us to establish relations with others, so there is no harm in associating with them. (5T30-M29-R8M)

Another interviewee was a step ahead in his views about the native English societies. He also presented a comparative picture in which he highlighted the weaknesses of Pakistani society but this was not all.

He saw many ills in his society that could be cured by following the west. He mourned the absence of truth, honesty and rule of law in Pakistan that were, according to him, the hallmarks of developed nations in the west. He expressed his dislike for capitalism and communism however (1S05-M33-R8H).

In another interview, a student referred to peace and development in the west. He complained about his own society where minor issues led to conspiracies and revolts. To him, the English people were broadminded, committed, hardworking and peaceful. He also bracketed the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan terming it a power game in which everything was fair. He interpreted those excursions hegemonic that could not be presented to negate a whole nation (4S27-M20-R6H).

Madrassa students and teachers give more importance to Arabic for religious reasons. They value it as symbolic of their religious identity and give a unique place to it. They do not want to compare it with any other language for ideological reasons. I decided not to challenge the views of the interviewees and designed a general question to find what language they found best-suited for them for national and international communication. The objective was to reinforce and to cross check their earlier views and to measure their attitudes to English language in an unfelt and indirect manner. Here too, I found the love of Arabic but it was not that vehement and unique as it was in the context of religion. Many interviewees gave more space and scope to English for faring better in social life. Some replies also included references to renowned religious scholars at national and international levels who used English for propagation of their ideas and teachings. It is important to mention that such references were also among the outcomes of the participants' exposure to modern means of communication including internet and satellite TV.

6. Conclusion

The study was undertaken to investigate the attitudes of madrassa students and teachers towards English language. Guided by bottom up approach, the major objectives were to investigate need for English language teaching, its importance in job market and to draw a sketch of the possible reaction of the religious community to English language reforms in religious curriculum taught at madrassas. It was also aimed at informing policy makers and intellectuals and to allow them to have an inside view of educational situation in religious seminaries. The findings of the study reveal that a visible majority of the religious community support meaningful reforms and view English in high esteem for practical reasons. A minority however is still under the spell of conservative sermons and speeches that view English imperialistically and label it an imposed language. Analyses of the views of the interviewees about English nation and culture have also been positively influenced by media and globalization. In a sense, we have a mindset that thinks in the 21st century but lacks the means to get out of the clutches of history that is inked by traditional orthodox religious class.

Based on the advantages English afford and the practical steps taken by madrassa students vindicate the need for positive intervention by the state and international community. As many of the religious community members do not trust the government and they also fear secularization, it is necessary that English language teaching reforms should not be implemented from above. The teaching material should be made relevant to religious teachings of Islam to nourish ideological association with the language.

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Appendix
Interviewee Identification Key
(10 Character Code)

Character key	Description	Details
1 st Character	Madrassas (Pseudonyms)	1 Minhaj Ul Quran Ouch 2 Jami'ah-tul Banaat Chakdara 3 Jami'ah Ulum ul Quran Sakhakot 4 Darul Ulum Qadria Dargai 5 Jami'ah Ashrafia Tindodag 6 Darul Ulum Arabia Manglawar
2 nd Character	Participants	T=Teacher S=Student
3 rd & 4 th Characters	Participant's Number	Ranges from 01 to 42 (Total participants)
5 th Character	Gender	M= Male F= Female
6 th and 7 th Characters	Age	e.g. 15, 22, 35
8 th Character	Location of the Madrassas	U= Urban R=Rural
9 th Character	Grade / Daraja of Dars-e-Nizami (All teachers will be marked 8 as all of them had qualified it).	First= 1 Second= 2 Third= 3 Fourth= 4 Fifth= 5 Sixth= 6 Seventh= 7 Eighth= 8
10 th Character	General education	L= Below secondary S= Secondary H= Higher Secondary B= Bachelor M= Master

Source: Roney, (2000, p. 311). Adapted by the Researcher

- e.g.
1. 4T25-M44-R8M = Darul Ulum Qadria Dargai, Teacher, 25th Interviewee - Male, 44 - Rural, 8th Grade / Daraja, Master
 2. 2S12-F18-U3S = Jami'ah-tul Banaat Chakdara, Student, 12th Interviewee - Female, 18 - Urban, 3rd Grade / Daraja, Secondary