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Unequal Tongues: Language Policy, Linguistic Hierarchies, and Educational Disparities in the Primary Education of Pakistan



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Abstract

This study explores the impact of language policies on the primary education in Pakistan, especially in Southern Punjab, a region characterized by linguistic diversity. The research examines the role of dominant language policies in fostering linguisticism, linguistic hierarchies, disparities and their impact on the academic performance and inclusivity of students, especially those whose primary language is Saraiki, a regional language. This research adopts a mixed-method study. The findings indicate that language policies in the region primarily support Urdu and English, thereby marginalizing local languages such as Saraiki. The marginalization leads to language barriers, which in turn result in decreased engagement and academic performance among Saraiki-speaking students. Educators encounter challenges in instructing students in languages that are not familiar to them, resulting in complications within the teaching and learning processes. Linguicism is evident, as students who speak Urdu or English are perceived as more competent, whereas Saraiki speakers experience discrimination and exclusion from educational opportunities. The research emphasizes the necessity of inclusive language policies that support bilingual or multilingual education, facilitating the integration of regional languages into the curriculum. The study advocates for the integration of local languages in educational practices, the provision of professional development for educators to manage linguistic diversity, and the promotion of community involvement to impact policy formulation. This study enhances the understanding of language policy and linguisticism within primary education in Southern Punjab, highlighting the significance of linguistic equity in promoting an inclusive and effective educational environment. Future research should investigate the effects of language policies in secondary education and other linguistically diverse areas to enhance the development of inclusive language policies.

Keywords: *Language policy, linguisticism, primary education, equity, multilingualism.*

Abstract: This study explores the impact of language policies on the primary education in Pakistan, especially in Southern Punjab, a region characterized by linguistic diversity. The research examines the role of dominant language policies in fostering linguisticism, linguistic hierarchies, disparities and their impact on the academic performance and inclusivity of students, especially those whose primary language is Saraiki, a regional language. This research adopts a mixed-method study. The findings indicate that language policies in the region primarily support Urdu and English, thereby marginalizing local languages such as Saraiki. The marginalization leads to language barriers, which in turn result in decreased engagement and academic performance among Saraiki-speaking students. Educators encounter challenges in instructing students in languages that are not familiar to them, resulting in complications within the teaching and learning processes. Linguicism is evident, as students who speak Urdu or English are perceived as more competent, whereas Saraiki speakers experience discrimination and exclusion from educational opportunities. The research emphasizes the necessity of inclusive language policies that support bilingual or multilingual education, facilitating the integration of regional languages into the curriculum. The study advocates for the integration of local languages in educational practices, the

provision of professional development for educators to manage linguistic diversity, and the promotion of community involvement to impact policy formulation. This study enhances the understanding of language policy and linguicism within primary education in Southern Punjab, highlighting the significance of linguistic equity in promoting an inclusive and effective educational environment. Future research should investigate the effects of language policies in secondary education and other linguistically diverse areas to enhance the development of inclusive language policies.

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Introduction

Dera Ghazi Khan, situated in the southern part of Punjab, Pakistan, is characterized by its cultural richness and geographical diversity. It functions as a convergence point for linguistic and ethnic identities, reflecting its historical role as a gateway among Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan. The region hosts multiple linguistic groups, with Saraiki as the predominant language, in addition to Punjabi, Urdu, and Balochi. The linguistic diversity in this region reflects its cultural richness but presents notable challenges in the educational context, especially at the primary level.

The linguistic landscape of Dera Ghazi Khan is influenced by the intricate interaction between local and national languages. Saraiki serves as the primary language for a significant portion of the population, facilitating daily communication and shaping cultural identity. In formal domains including education, administration, and media, Urdu serves as the predominant language and is frequently considered the lingua franca of Pakistan. English is regarded as a prestigious language, linked to higher education, social mobility, and global opportunities. The linguistic hierarchy significantly impacts the structuring and delivery of education in the region (Ishikawa, 2021).

Language policies in primary education prioritize Urdu and English, frequently marginalizing local languages such as Saraiki. The curriculum is primarily structured in Urdu and English, neglecting the linguistic and cultural identities of students whose first language is Saraiki or other regional languages. This results in a disjunction between the instructional language and the linguistic realities of the students, which poses challenges for comprehension, learning outcomes, and academic performance (Androutsopoulos & Chowchong, 2021).

The educational landscape of Dera Ghazi Khan is influenced by various socioeconomic factors. A significant number of students originate from rural regions characterized by limited educational resources and parental low literacy levels. The employment of a non-native language as the medium of instruction intensifies these challenges, resulting in obstacles to effective learning. Teachers encounter challenges when required to instruct in languages, particularly English, in which they may lack proficiency. The disparity in the allocation of educational resources between urban and rural regions in Dera Ghazi Khan exacerbates the inequality in educational opportunities. Urban schools typically possess access to qualified educators, contemporary teaching resources, and instruction in English, while rural schools frequently function with insufficient facilities and depend on rote learning techniques. This disparity reflects and reinforces the socio-linguistic inequalities in the region (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010).

This research examines the role of language policy in fostering linguicism,

defined as systemic discrimination based on language, within the primary education system of Dera Ghazi Khan. The study investigates the experiences of students, teachers, and other stakeholders to illuminate the implications of language policy for equity and inclusivity in education within a linguistically diverse and socioeconomically constrained context.

Rationale of the Study

This study is motivated by the increasing acknowledgment of the significant impact of language on educational experiences and outcomes. In linguistically diverse areas such as Dera Ghazi Khan, current language policies frequently marginalize local languages, including Saraiki, prioritizing Urdu and English instead. This presents considerable obstacles for students, whose native language is not the medium of instruction, resulting in difficulties in understanding, diminished participation, and systemic inequalities.

Moreover, teachers are often unprepared to meet the diverse linguistic needs of their classrooms, leading to ineffective instruction and limited student engagement. The gap between language policy and classroom practice is particularly evident in under-resourced regions, where local languages are excluded from formal instruction despite their central role in daily life and identity.

This study investigates the relationship between language policy and linguicism in primary education, aiming to enhance understanding of these issues and contribute to the development of inclusive and effective educational practices that respect and integrate linguistic diversity. By focusing on Dera Ghazi Khan, a region emblematic of Pakistan's broader linguistic dynamics, the research provides evidence-based insights for rethinking language policy frameworks in multilingual settings.

Problem Statement

In Pakistan, language policies—particularly in regions such as Dera Ghazi Khan—frequently prioritize national and international languages, namely Urdu and English, while marginalizing regional languages like Saraiki. This policy orientation results in systemic linguistic discrimination, known as linguicism, which creates significant educational disadvantages for students whose mother tongue is not the medium of instruction.

These students often face comprehension difficulties, reduced engagement, and lower academic achievement, especially at the primary level where foundational learning occurs. Furthermore, teachers encounter obstacles in delivering lessons effectively due to a lack of proficiency in the mandated instructional languages, inadequate training, and the absence of culturally and linguistically responsive materials. The disconnection between language policy and the linguistic realities of classrooms in Dera Ghazi Khan compromises the inclusivity, equity, and quality of primary education. This gap perpetuates educational inequalities and undermines efforts to foster an inclusive and socially just learning environment.

Research Objectives

- To examine the impact of language policies on the educational experiences and academic performance of primary school students in Dera Ghazi Khan.
- To explore the role of language policy in perpetuating linguicism and its effects on equity and inclusivity in primary education.

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Research Questions

1. How do language policies influence the teaching and learning processes in primary schools in Dera Ghazi Khan?
2. In what ways do language policies contribute to linguisticism and affect the academic outcomes and inclusivity of students in linguistically diverse settings?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it addresses a critical and underexplored issue in primary education: the influence of language policies on educational equity and inclusivity in linguistically diverse contexts. Focusing on Dera Ghazi Khan—a region marked by rich linguistic diversity and socioeconomic disparities—the study highlights how existing language policies may unintentionally reinforce systemic discrimination through linguisticism.

By examining the marginalization of local languages like Saraiki, the research provides valuable insights into the ways dominant language policies affect teaching practices, student engagement, and academic performance. The findings aim to inform educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders about the consequences of excluding regional languages from the formal education system. The study advocates for the development of more inclusive, context-sensitive language policies that align with learners' linguistic realities, promote cultural identity, and support equal learning opportunities.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the discourse on multilingual education and language equity, offering practical recommendations for reforming language policy to enhance educational outcomes and promote social justice in marginalized communities.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's (1991) Theory of Linguistic Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory underscores how language functions as a form of symbolic capital, offering social advantage to individuals proficient in dominant languages. In educational contexts, students fluent in the language of instruction (e.g., Urdu or English) tend to perform better academically and gain broader access to social and economic opportunities. In contrast, students from marginalized linguistic backgrounds—such as Saraiki speakers in Dera Ghazi Khan—are often disadvantaged because their mother tongue holds limited institutional value. This framework helps explain how existing language policies perpetuate linguistic inequality and reinforce social hierarchies (Fukumoto, 2020; Grey, 2021).

Spolsky's (2004) Framework for Language Policy

Bernard Spolsky's (2004) model comprises three interrelated components: language practices, language beliefs, and language management as shown in the figure 1. It enables researchers to analyze how language policies are constructed, interpreted, and enacted in real-world settings.

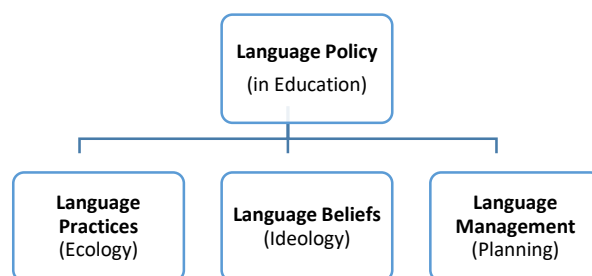


Figure 1. Language policy in Education

In the context of Dera Ghazi Khan, this model is instrumental in assessing the gap between policy formation and classroom implementation, as well as in understanding how societal attitudes and institutional decisions shape language use in education (Backhaus, 2014; Lee & Lou, 2019).

Existing Research

Language Policy and Multilingual Education

Studies reveal that Pakistan's language policies historically emphasize Urdu and English while neglecting regional languages. This dual-language orientation leads to disparities in academic outcomes, as students are often forced to learn in non-native languages, undermining comprehension and participation. Scholars argue that such policies create and perpetuate class-based and linguistic divides, particularly in under-resourced regions like Dera Ghazi Khan (Karolak, 2022; Rahman, 2008; Mehboob & Zafar, 2025).

Linguicism and Educational Inequality

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) coined the term "linguicism" to describe systemic discrimination based on language. This concept is central to understanding how language policy in Pakistan contributes to educational inequality. In primary schools where Urdu and English dominate, Saraiki-speaking students may experience exclusion, diminished confidence, and academic setbacks. Research across South Asia confirms that ignoring local languages exacerbates educational inequity (Leeman & Modan, 2009; Gottlieb, 2018).

Cultural Identity and Learning

Mother-tongue instruction plays a pivotal role in preserving cultural identity and enhancing student engagement. Mohanty (2009) and others argue that when students learn in their native language, it fosters belonging and motivation. Ignoring regional languages can result in alienation and lower self-esteem, particularly in younger learners. The importance of linguistic representation in the curriculum is further echoed by Phillips & Baudinette (2022), who stress that inclusive education must reflect cultural and linguistic realities.

Teachers and Policy Implementation

Several studies highlight the crucial role of teachers in operationalizing language policy. Rafique et al. (2018) found that rural teachers in Punjab struggle with unclear policies, lack of training, and scarce resources. Mesti (2020) and Din et al.

(2025) confirm that even well-intended language reforms often fail due to a lack of grassroots support and contextual relevance. These findings emphasize that without teacher capacity-building and community involvement, language policy reforms cannot succeed.

Regional Context: Dera Ghazi Khan

Recent research by Mirza et al. (2024) provides a case study from Dera Ghazi Khan, underscoring how the exclusion of Saraiki in the education system undermines both learning outcomes and social cohesion. Their study supports broader claims about the need for multilingual education policies tailored to local realities, particularly in rural and marginalized areas.

Methodology

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the effects of language policy on primary education in Dera Ghazi Khan. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to obtain in-depth insights into teaching and learning processes. Follow-up questions were included during interviews to ensure rich and contextual data.

Due to time and accessibility constraints in rural areas, a simple random sampling technique was employed. A total of 14 teachers (7 male and 7 female) were selected from various government primary schools across the region. The selection ensured gender balance and represented a diversity of school environments.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes each. The medium of communication was adapted to suit participants' comfort. All interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of participants. Each teacher's classroom was observed over two consecutive days using a structured observation checklist, followed by an interview to triangulate the data.

Data Analysis

The interview data were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy through a process of double-checking by an independent researcher. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and core issues. This process was guided by the approach of Fukumoto (2020), involving:

- Initial open coding of transcripts
- Clustering codes into categories
- Merging and refining themes through iterative comparison

The final themes were analyzed to assess how language policy impacts instructional practices and student experiences in multilingual classrooms.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Quantitative Analysis of Respondents' Responses

Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Male (n = 7)	4 (57.1%)	2 (28.6%)	1 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)
Female (n = 7)	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)	1 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	7 (100%)
Total (N = 14)	7 (50%)	5	2	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	14

Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree (35.7%)	Neutral (14.3%)	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total (100%)
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Table 1 presents the quantitative analysis of teachers' responses to the statement: "Language policies in primary schools significantly influence teaching and learning processes." Among male teachers (n = 7), 57.1% strongly agreed, 28.6% agreed, and 14.3% remained neutral, with no negative responses. Female teachers showed similar alignment, with 42.9% strongly agreeing, 42.9% agreeing, and 14.3% remaining neutral. Overall, a significant majority (85.7%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, indicating a strong consensus that language policies shape teaching and learning experiences.

Table 2: Qualitative Analysis of Respondents' Feedback

Theme	Key Findings (Male Teachers)	Key Findings (Female Teachers)	Overall Insights
Impact of Language Policies	- Favor Urdu and English; disadvantage local languages.	- Highlight the lack of inclusive materials for mother tongue.	Policies prioritize dominant languages, affecting inclusivity and student learning.
Teacher Challenges	- Face difficulties adapting policies to diverse classrooms.	- Lack of training to incorporate language policies effectively.	Teachers struggle with inadequate resources and inconsistent policy implementation.
Effects on Student Outcomes	- Marginalization of students from minority language backgrounds.	- Stress among students due to limited comprehension in dominant languages.	Language policies exacerbate linguisticism, impacting academic performance and inclusivity.

Table 2 summarizes teachers' qualitative feedback. Both male and female teachers identified critical challenges arising from language policy implementation. These include exclusion of regional languages such as Saraiki, lack of teacher preparedness, and negative impacts on student engagement and performance. The data reinforces the assertion that current language policies contribute to educational disparities and institutionalize linguisticism.

Discussion

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses illustrate the pronounced impact of language policies on primary education in Dera Ghazi Khan. Teachers overwhelmingly recognize that language policies influence classroom dynamics, student comprehension, and academic outcomes.

The qualitative responses further underscore systemic issues: language policies in practice favour Urdu and English, creating a linguistic hierarchy that marginalizes students whose first language is Saraiki or another local language. These results are consistent with Bourdieu's (1991) Theory of Linguistic Capital, which posits that

dominant languages serve as symbolic assets, empowering certain groups while disenfranchising others.

Moreover, the Spolsky's (2004) Framework for Language Policy helps reveal the gap between official policy, everyday language practices, and prevailing beliefs about language. Teachers in this study expressed concerns about a lack of training and teaching materials, inadequate institutional support, and inconsistencies in implementing inclusive policies. These systemic issues perpetuate linguicism, reinforcing barriers to equity and effective learning.

The emotional toll on students was also highlighted—particularly stress, disengagement, and low self-esteem stemming from instruction in unfamiliar languages. This aligns with existing scholarship (e.g., Kim, 2009; Pietikäinen et al., 2011; Rowland, 2016) that underscores the need for context-sensitive, linguistically inclusive education systems.

Conclusion

This study concludes that language policies in primary schools in Dera Ghazi Khan have a significant influence on both teaching and learning processes, especially in linguistically diverse settings. The prioritization of dominant languages such as Urdu and English marginalizes local languages like Saraiki, leading to systemic linguicism, educational disparities, and barriers to inclusive learning. These policies contribute to reduced academic performance and hinder students' active participation, especially those from marginalized linguistic backgrounds.

Drawing upon Bourdieu's (1991) Theory of Linguistic Capital, the study highlights how linguistic hierarchies reflect and reinforce social inequalities by associating higher value with dominant languages. Spolsky's (2004) Language Policy Framework further reveals a disconnect between policy formulation and classroom realities, where teachers often lack training, materials, and institutional support to implement policies effectively.

Overall, the findings emphasize the urgent need for context-sensitive, inclusive language policies that recognize and incorporate regional languages into the educational framework. Such policies can play a transformative role in creating equitable learning environments that honour linguistic diversity, promote student engagement, and improve educational outcomes.

Recommendations

Integrate Regional Languages

Adopt bilingual or multilingual models in primary education that include Saraiki alongside Urdu and English to bridge linguistic gaps and improve comprehension.

Develop Inclusive Teaching Materials

Create and distribute culturally and linguistically inclusive resources to support students from diverse backgrounds.

Teacher Training and Support

Provide targeted professional development for teachers to help them implement language-inclusive pedagogies and address multilingual classroom dynamics effectively.

Community and Parental Involvement

Involve parents, community leaders, and local stakeholders in language policy

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discussions to align educational practices with community needs and values.

Policy Implementation and Monitoring

Establish transparent mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the implementation of language policies across schools, especially in underserved rural areas.

Awareness and Advocacy

Promote awareness campaigns on the value of linguistic diversity to reduce linguisticism and foster mutual respect and inclusion in educational settings.

Resource Allocation

Ensure equitable distribution of funding and educational resources to rural schools so that they can adopt and implement inclusive language policies effectively.

Research and Feedback Loops

Encourage ongoing research, feedback collection, and policy review to keep language education strategies responsive and evidence-based.

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