



An Investigation into the Politics of English Language Assessment in Pakistan

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Abstract

This research article attempts to address the politics of English language assessment in Pakistani context. The focus of this qualitative research study is to unfold ideological factors, socio-cultural factors, political factors, economic agendas, societal elements, issues of power, teachers' roles, educational considerations, and hierarchical structures in Pakistani context with special reference to English language assessment system. Thematic Document analysis is used for analyzing the data collected from one of the leading newspapers in Pakistan i.e. Dawn. It is found out that the politics of language assessment is pluralized in Pakistan owing to decide which strata of the society is failing (the lower class) and which one is succeeding (the upper class, the elite class) in political power. This study also reveals that politics of language assessment in Pakistan is firmly linked with the purposes of English language learning i.e. lucrative jobs, education and business. Furthermore, the findings of the study highlight that in the current scenario of Pakistan, assessment and testing in general education and language assessment in particular play a significant role in imposing political policies and power in the arena of academia and intelligentsia. Likewise, the major findings of the study exhibit that there is a hegemony of English that brought linguistic imperialism in Pakistan. In Pakistani context, proficiency in English language decides future of the candidates in term of jobs and businesses. English language assessment regime is affected by the 'top-down' policy driven initiatives rather than 'bottom-up' collaborative work. It is the domain of a particular group of experts who decide Others as opposed to us. It also contributes to the marketization of English language in educational sector of Pakistan. The elite class in Pakistan set targets for the educational system in order to implement their policies to achieve political power and interests.

Keywords: Politics, English Language Assessment, Testing Hegemony of English in Pakistani context

1. Introduction

Politics is an art of struggle for power. It is an art of compromise in order to make the process and ways of struggle for power possible but this power sometimes comes through discourses and discursive practices. Discourses are produced through language and thus, power is embedded in language through these discourses. Power is discursive in nature (Foucault, 2013). All languages have the capabilities of discourses production. Therefore, all languages are equal in power but some languages are more powerful than others due to the more powerful discourses produced in/via them. English is one such languages which is used across the world, including Pakistan, for creating desired narratives and influencing social beliefs. English language is used for communication internationally for the purposes of jobs, businesses, education, knowledge and research. It implies that in all mentioned domains, powerful discourses are produced in English language. Power is ubiquitous. Language and power are intricately linked together i.e. there is crisscross relation between power and language. In Pakistani context, English language is used as tool for achieving and implementing power (Hassan,2016). Power transmits, produces and reinforces through English language in educational, governmental, economic, religious, and social institutions (Hassan, 2016, Hassan et al, 2023, Imran, 2020, Gul et al, 2022(a) and Gul et al, 2022(b), Gul et al, 2022(c), Gul et al, 2023(b) and Sajjad et al,2023 in Pakistani context.

Furthermore, in Pakistan, before its inception in 1947, under the rule of British, English language was considered a prestigious language. It was present in all domains of power i.e. policy making, Judiciary, public administration, military, commerce, education, research and academia. In present day Pakistan, English is still enjoying the same status. It is because of the power attachment and association with English language. Although, Urdu is the national and official language of the country and it is used/spoken in schools, and at the lower levels of media and administration almost in all metropolitan cities of Pakistan such as Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Multan, Peshawar etc. But, according to Tariq Rahman (1996), Urdu language was not an indigenous language of Pakistan on eve of Pakistan independence until the Urdu speaking communities or immigrants from India, as they call themselves Mohajirs. British ruling and the immigration of Urdu speaking communities could be the reasons and causes for the supremacy and dominancy of English language.

Pakistan has passed through many conflicts of languages (Urdu and Hindi) and identities (Muslims and Hindus) since its independence. Urdu language was preferred by Muslims and Hindi by Hindus. After the freedom from British, Urdu language was used as a symbol of integration by the Muslim League leaders. Soon it led to the beginning of Bengali language movement. This movement was in support of Bengali language and culture. It was

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one of the main causes of separatism of West and East Pakistan. It implies that language politics existed in Pakistan before its creation and still the politics of language (English) prevails in Pakistan in terms of teaching, learning, assessment, testing and measurement (Rahman, 2005 and Gul et al., 2022(d)).

English language politics is a socio-cultural phenomenon. It encompasses language knowledge, skills and principles. Language politics would firmly be linked with country policy, ideology, culture, and social norms, etc. and same is the case with English language in Pakistan (Mirhosseini et al, 2021). Politics is also involved in English language assessment (to assess English as a foreign language/second language) in Pakistani context and it plays significant role in educational experiences and social lives of the English language learners, English language theoreticians and practitioners. English language assessment and testing across the world generally and including Pakistan are strongly linked with internationally renowned language tests for instance, CEFR, TOEFL, IELTS, or the Michigan tests that function as gateways for numerous activities i.e., marketization, jobs, research publication, teachers' training, professional progress, knowledge and education etc. (Troudi, 2018).

According to Troudi (2018), the phrase "Politics of Assessment" refers to the process of assessment in general and language assessment in particular and it is well informed by socio-cultural, political, ideologies, factors, economic agendas, societal elements, issues of power, teachers' roles, educational considerations, and hierarchical structures and Pakistan is not exempted in this regard. Politics of language assessment also means that specific group of experts has monopoly over language testing, knowledge and skills in the field of language assessment (Rahman, 2005, Hassan, 2016, Shamim, 2008, McNamara, 2000, Rahman, 1996, and Abbas, 1998).

Politics in Pakistan in reference to Higher Education is very obvious. Many political forces struggle for political power from local level to national level which affect the field of assessment in Pakistan in terms of faculty hiring, selection for jobs and research, teaching and learning processes at university level (Hassan, 2016). Due to the politics on language assessment English language is considered a marker of prestige in Pakistani society as it was embedded in the time of British colonial rulers. It paves the way for progress for the elite class in Pakistan. It also leads to discrimination, language endangerment and ultimately to language death of many local languages spoken in Pakistan.

1.1. Rationale of the Study

Language testing (language assessment) is one of the modern trends in the research in Applied Linguistics. Many researchers conducted researches in the field of language assessment. [See: (McNamara and Roever's 2006) *Language Testing: The social dimension*, (Shohamy 2020) *the power of tests*, (Fulcher (2013) *Practical language testing*, (Hughes 2020) *Testing for language teachers* are most cited works in the field language assessment and testing. However, these works focused on the social and practical aspects of language testing. They lack the political and power related dimensions of language assessment and testing in particular. Furthermore, Rahman (2006) studied language and power relations and in (2014) Tamim conducted research on the politics of languages in general education i.e. they both studied language and education in Pakistan. However, in these studies an important aspect is missing i.e. politics of English language assessment and testing in Pakistan though they clearly elucidate the minutiae of language and general education. This research article is aimed at contributing to the existing literature on language assessment and to unfold the power and politics of English language assessment and testing visible in the stratification of social classes in the society of Pakistan in terms of jobs, businesses, knowledge and education. Finally, this research study also aims to highlight the current status of English language assessment in Pakistan with reference to previous studies' findings.

The current study seeks to answer questions such as what is the current status of English language assessment in Pakistan? and What is the relationship between English language assessment and the power politics in Pakistani context?

Pakistan's linguistic profile is very rich. It is declared a multilingual country according to the policy of language in Pakistan. More than 25 languages are spoken in Pakistan. For instance, Punjabi is spoken as a mother tongue by 44.15%, Pashto by 15.42%, Siraiki by 10.53%, Urdu by 7.57%, Sindhi by 4.10%, Balochi by 3.57% and others by 4.66% of the population of Pakistan (Imran, 2020 and Gul et al., 2023(b)).

Apart from these local languages spoken in Pakistan. Urdu is the national and official language of Pakistan. English and Urdu both are considered the official languages of the country but English enjoys higher status of prestige than Urdu. English has this status due to three main reasons. First and foremost, it is the language of the upper strata, the elite class in Pakistan (Rahman, 2005; Rahman, 2006; Shamim, 2008 and Hassan, 2016). Secondly, it is the medium of instruction in the educational system of Pakistan (Shamim and Tribble, 2005). Thirdly, the most important reason is that English is considered a passport to success in Pakistan as lucrative jobs, marketization, and access to knowledge are associated with the proficiency in English language (Hassan, 2016). All these reasons are the root cause of English language politics in Pakistan. However, English is a foreign language. It is only spoken and understood by the elite and educated class in Pakistan but still English is assessed as a medium of instruction, education and professional success. This creates political situation of power contest over English in all domains of power. It leads to the notion of Us vs Them-politics i.e. elite class vs lower class and English language vs Urdu language in Pakistan.

Rahman (2005) conducted research on English language status in Pakistan. He reported that English is the official language of Pakistan. English language and English medium institutions are considered passports to success and

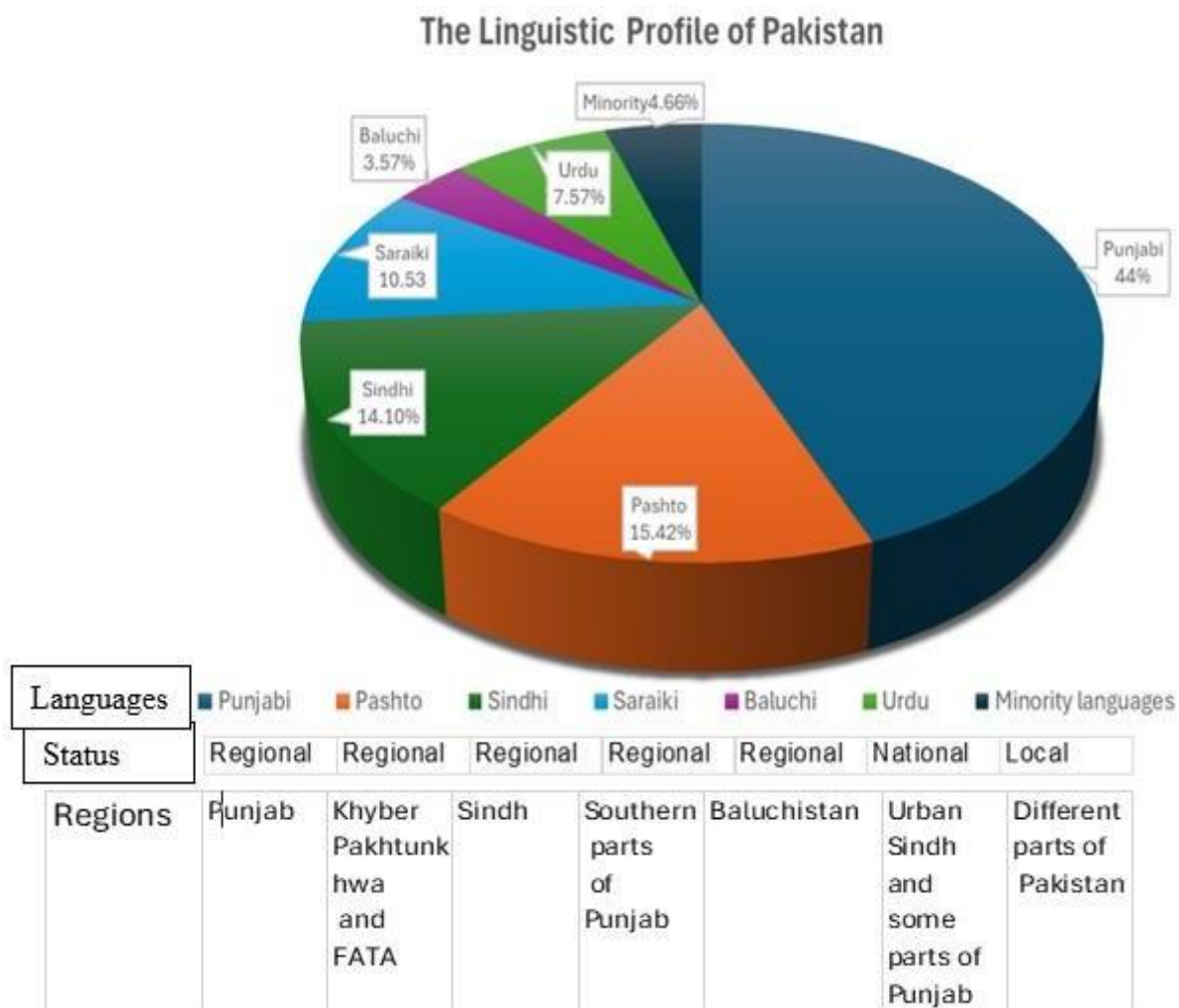


Figure 1

privileges in Pakistan. English is used in all fields and domains of political power, education, research, bureaucracy, courts, government, media, commerce and medicine. Owing to these notable reasons, English language empowering and encouraging people in Pakistan to invest their children in it for the bright future of them. So, English language decides future of the masses in Pakistan.

2. Research Methodology and Document Analysis

This research study is qualitative in nature. The main aim of this research is to highlight the power and politics of English language assessment and testing in Pakistani context. Document analysis procedure is followed in the current study as a part of research methodology. The following steps are followed in the process of document analysis.

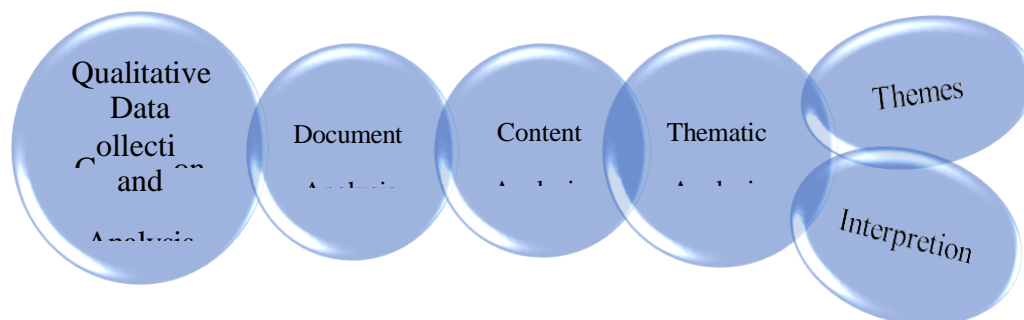


Figure 2

Documents for analysis could be a written text, images, agendas, advertisements, diaries, journals, memoranda, newspapers maps and charts etc. (Bowen,2009 and Ishtiaq et al.,2022). In this research, reports from one of the leading newspapers in Pakistan i.e. DAWN and research reports, from online websites are taken into consideration as documents for analysis in order to bring confluence of evidence and credibility to the process of inquiry.

3. Findings and Discussion

The power and notion of politics of language assessment in testing divide language learners, students, teachers, practitioners into two groups i.e. the elite and the lower class. The politics of language assessment is not bound to sociocultural, regional, national and international boundaries. It is ubiquitous in nature. Similar to power, it exists everywhere in every country education system in discourses via language. The following extract demonstrates views regarding language assessment taken from various experts works conducted in different contexts. For instance, Gibbons (2009) states: It is an account of the ultimately successful campaign of London English teachers to make available to schools an alternative syllabus and examination for ‘O’ Level students. (Context is London, England).

The process of change is explained elucidated in this work. It provides detailed account of the story of London Association for the Teaching of English (L.A.T.E.). So, implies that the power of language politics is present in the context of England where English is used as a native language.

It considers too how the standards-based tests in England are both political in the abstract and party-political in their content (Marshall, 2017) in the context of England.

The aforementioned research study looks into the paradigm shift/changes in the language assessment and examination system of England over the past twenty years. The same study throws light on the political power of politics behind these changes in assessment. It implies that this article explains how speedily centralized and uniform assessment regime came into operation.

Language is ‘intimately related to the distribution of social power and hierarchical structures in society.

It suggests that language has the power to divide people into various groups and sub-groups in society.

Language could be used as tool for foundation of hierarchical structures in society.

Language not only facilitates access to knowledge but also mediates participation in and engagement with the social world. It filters control over resources, demarcates the horizons of what is both knowable and achievable, and delimits freedom of choice and effective opportunities for wider participation and access to valued goals (Tamim (2014), Context of study is Lahore, Pakistan).

Language does open doors for learning and knowledge. It would also work to negotiate and talk to the socio-cultural and business world across the globe. It gives power to people to achieve more and more in order to expand and extend their horizons of knowledge. Language would enable them to update their knowledge with the passing of time.

Currently, the English language is essential for getting jobs in both public and private sectors. According to Rahman (2007) in all important jobs, whether State job, private or public low or high paid jobs, proficiency in English language is essential. ...

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Figure 3

English language in Pakistan is considered as an essential component for jobs in both sectors i.e. private and public sectors. Based on the assessment of English proficiency jobs are given to the candidates in Pakistan. So, one of the purposes of English language assessment in Pakistan is to give jobs to the people.

Published 12 Mar, 2021 07:51am

CSS and English

FROM THE NEWSPAPER

THE English language is the heart and soul of civil service examinations and one cannot qualify them without being familiar with the language.

It has been observed that every year many students are unable to clear the CSS examinations owing to lack of proficiency in English.

One cannot deny the fact that the nation of Pakistan is still under language imperialism.

Figure 4

In Pakistan, English decides the future of the candidates in getting lucrative jobs. It is the heart and soul for qualifying CSS and PMS examinations in Pakistan. Without high proficiency in English language dreams of CSS and PMS jobs would not be gained. It has been observed every year that due to lack of proficiency many candidates fail to qualify such exams. It implies that Pakistan is still under linguistic imperialism.

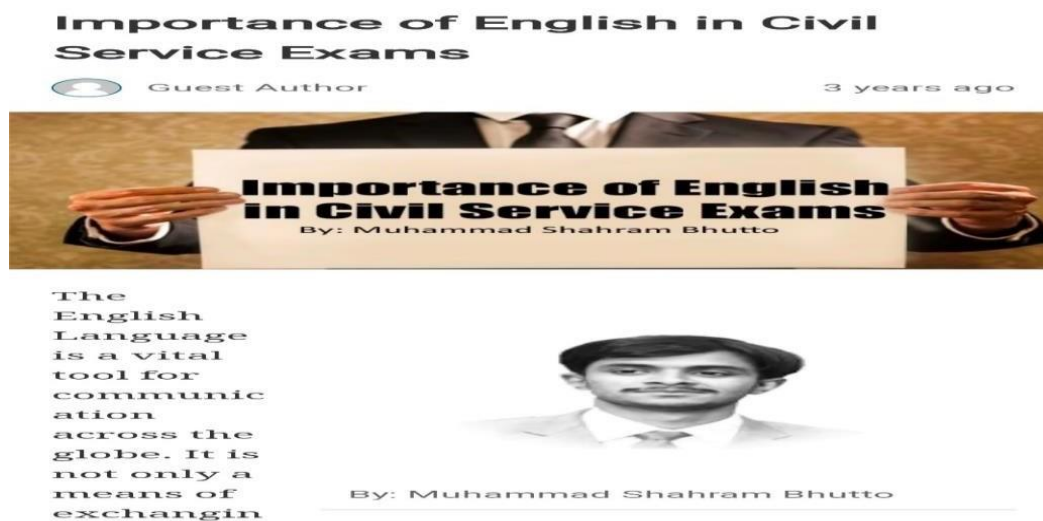


Figure 5

Across the world, English language is a means of communication. It works in building friendships, sociocultural and economic relations connections across the globe but according to this document English proficiency guarantees success in civil services examination in Pakistan. Owing to this reason the youth in Pakistan is crazy feverish to learn English language. It is also equally important to mention that candidates are assessed on the basis of their linguistic skills which reflects colonial mindset of British people.



Parliamentary committee seeks report on the exams

“Most of the students were graduates of foreign universities and of A category universities but 92pc of those who appeared in the exams failed in English and 82pc failed in English essay writing,” the official said.

The committee was told that 114 students from Punjab had passed, 13 from rural Sindh, 16 from urban Sindh, 18 from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 4 from Balochistan, 4 from Azad Jammu and Kashmir and one from Gilgit Baltistan.

The Chairman of the Committee, Rana Akbar Hayat expressed concern over the deteriorating standard of education in Pakistan and directed the FPSC to submit a report regarding the exam in a month so that the committee can take appropriate action.

Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf MNA Asad Umar said that the exam results showed that the education system of the country was faulty and that the issue needs to be addressed.

A lecturer at a government college, Dr Iftikhar Ahmed said the results indicate that the quality of education needs to be improved.

Figure 6

In Pakistani context, English is the official language of communication along with Urdu. Almost all notifications from government offices are published in English rather than Urdu or other local languages spoken in Pakistan. As mentioned in above documents English got important place in CSS examination. All business and professional written communication are carried out in English. It could be one of the responsible factors for vital role played by English language in Pakistan.

Furthermore, in civil service examination those candidates who have good command over English and those who would have graduated from foreign English-speaking countries' universities score well in written and oral examinations than those who have lack proficiency in English. For instance, as could be seen in the documents 92% of those who appeared in CSS exam failed in English and 82% of the candidates failed in English essay subject which one of the compulsory subjects. Furthermore, based on the performance in CSS exams by the candidates, Pakistan education system is being assessed and it is declared faulty. Political leaders criticize education system of the country and ill-informed decisions are made on the basis of English language assessment. English language decides future of the students in Pakistan. So, in Pakistan hegemony of English language exists in true sense. Language or linguistics hegemony refers to a form of power which disempower one group of people while empower others on the bases of language i.e. in this case is English.



Rwiti Mukherjee
Jun 2, 2021 · 5 min

Importance of English for Jobs | Be Career Ready

Updated: Jul 15, 2021

English has long been regarded as the global business language. The importance of English for jobs is unquestionable. Given that English is the most widely spoken language on the planet, it has emerged as a valuable tool in climbing the corporate ladder. A person who is well-versed in this language may make a significant contribution to his job on a bigger scale and may easily flourish in the commercial sector because he is capable of properly communicating the technical abilities he has acquired. When compared to someone who merely has technical capabilities, English can actually assist us secure better work chances.

Considering that we are citizens of India, where English is not a primary language, having a strong command of the language may open doors to a plethora of opportunities for everyone. In India, English has established itself as the official language thereby; significantly increasing its use.

Figure 7

As it is replete in literature that English is the language of the English people. It is the language of the world's business, medicine, research, science and technology (Alber C. Baugh (History of English language). Likewise, it is an unquestionable fact that English is the language of jobs in Pakistan and across the globe. English is widely spoken and understood language on the planet. A person well-versed in English language would be able to get good jobs-it opens doors to plethora of opportunities for everyone everywhere in the world. So, in Pakistan English language is considered a symbol of qualification, intelligence and prestige. Here, English is not just a language but it defines a class of people. It is the medium of instruction in most of the schools, colleges and universities in Pakistan. Furthermore, In Pakistan and India alike, in civil services, English language has got an important place because the policy makers and political leaders have set English subjects compulsory standard for the civil services i.e. CSS and PMS.

Updated 06 Dec, 2016 08:59pm

92pc CSS candidates fail in English

IKRAM JUNAIDI



ISLAMABAD: Just 2.09pc of the students who had sat the Central Superior Services (CSS) exams passed, with 92pc failing in English, the National Assembly Standing Committee on Cabinet Secretariat was told on Monday.

The committee directed the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC) to submit a detailed report on the exams in a month.

During the meeting, FPSC representatives said

Figure 8

Published 25 Oct, 2021 07:08am

CSS failures

FROM THE NEWSPAPER

THE result of the Central Superior Service (CSS) written examination has been announced recently, with a success rate of only 2.11 per cent. It is important to do some serious introspection on where the problem lies.

Over the years, the ratio of candidates appearing in the exam has increased, but the quality has gone down, with a small percentage being able to succeed in the compulsory English subjects, such as English Composition and English Essay. One common reason for failure in the compulsory English subjects is that many CSS preparation academies focus only on the question papers of the last few years as if it will guarantee candidates' success. It is fine to study the past papers to see the trend, but it is better to prepare the candidates for newer topics.

It is also worth noting that besides good preparation, it is the brain that we take into the exam hall, and it should be fresh enough to deliver the best. It has been largely observed that CSS aspirants keep preparing till the last moment and are stressed out and exhausted.

Figure 9

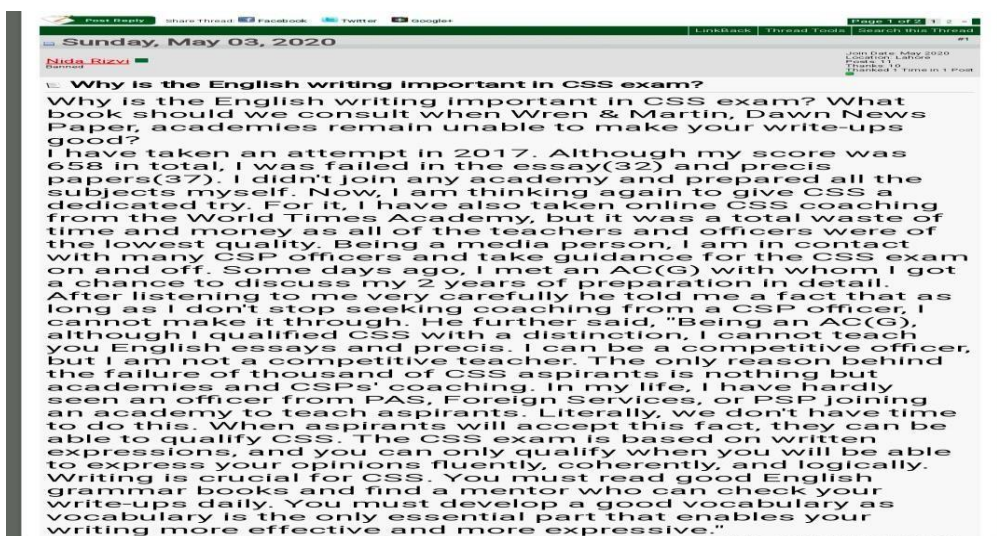


Figure 10

Importance of English Language in Pakistan
INTRODUCTION

Language is the proper and systematic way of communication between individuals. It is the tool, with which he conducts his business in the society. It is a vehicle, by which different subject matters are transmitted. A person must know something of the structure of his language, its position in the world and its relation to other tongues. A language lives in a society so long as people speak it and use it as their native tongue. A language is important because the people who speak it are important — politically, socially, economically and culturally. Importance of English language is doubtlessly great. It is spoken by more than Three-hundred-forty (340) million people as a first language in United Kingdom and the United States. The better the focus on language the more civilized people become. Every language represents a complete different background of people, culture, ethnicity or region. Similarly English language has progressed to such an extent that it is the most widely understood language in the world with French as the runner up. English is widely used as an international language throughout the world. It is one of the official languages, even in most of the countries of the third world. It is also used for international communication. English is the highly developed language which has the ability to express ideas and it is the means of revelation of modern civilization.

Importance of English language is due to its international use. It is a fact that a vast knowledge of the universe has been demonstrated in this language. For the achievement of that knowledge, it is essential to understand this international language. We may assume that it shares with the other highly developed languages of Europe the ability to express the multiplicity of ideas and the refinement of thoughts that demand expression in our modern civilization. In this modern age when electronic media has widely spread all over the world, it is necessary to have the knowledge of this language because it is the medium of communication and a person, lacking the knowledge of this language can't get awareness of the universal knowledge. As it is obvious that the universal exploration is mostly revealed in this language, so it's worth can't be descended.

It is the age of scientific advancement and mechanical approach, the subject matter of which is demonstrated in English language, so it is an essential necessity of the people to learn this language. English is proved as a torch-bearing to the nations of the third world. It is contemplated as the means of ascending knowledge. Over the years, English has become one of the principal assets in getting a global leadership. In Pakistani context, English language is specifically spoken in international communication for the purpose of jobs, research, knowledge, education, businesses and trades. Therefore, English language has highly affected the status of Urdu and other local language in Pakistan.

Figure 11

According to this document, generally language is the proper format and systematic way of communication between individuals in that case language could be a tool or a vehicle in order to conduct or run businesses through it. From point of view of political, social, commercial, economic and cultural aspects of a country language is an important tool. Due to socio-cultural and political economy English language doubtlessly great. It is spoken by more than three-hundred-forty (340) million people as a first language in United Kingdoms and United States. In the present age of scientific advancement and mechanical approach, English widely spoken language for business. It is one of the official languages of many countries in the world and Pakistan is one of them. Due to its international uses English language is highly important in Pakistan. Great amount of scientific knowledge is disseminated via English language. English language has proved itself, as a torch bearing to the nations of the third world. It is contemplated as the means of ascending knowledge. Over the years, English has become one of the principal assets in getting a global leadership. In Pakistani context, English language is specifically spoken in international communication for the purpose of jobs, research, knowledge, education, businesses and trades. Therefore, English language has highly affected the status of Urdu and other local language in Pakistan.

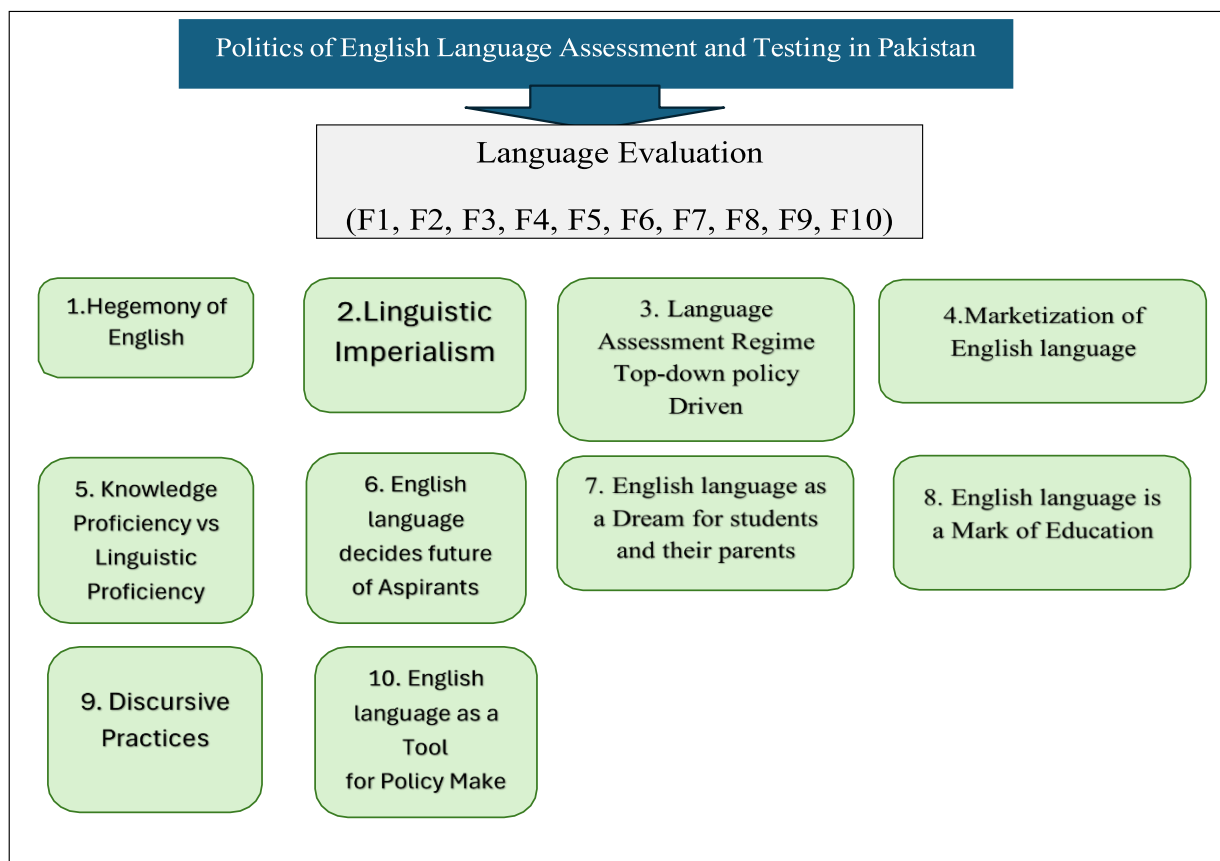


Figure 12

4. Major Themes and Factors

- i. There is hegemony of English in Pakistan. It implies that linguistic hegemony is prevailing in Pakistan. Hegemony of language is a form of power that empowers some while disempowering others via language.
- ii. In Pakistani context, language assessment regime is affected by ‘top-down’ policy driven initiatives rather than ‘bottom-up’ collaborative work. It is the domain of particular group of experts who decide others with respect to them i.e. the politics of us versus others.
- iii. English language assessment also encourages students to pursue their degrees in the disciplines of English BS/MA/MPhil English in Pakistan.
- iv. In Pakistani context, candidates’ knowledge proficiency is judged/assessed based on their linguistic proficiency i.e. High proficiency in English language.
- v. English language assessment and proficiency in English decide aspirants’ future in terms of lucrative jobs such as CSS and PMS etc.
- vi. English language learning in Pakistan has become a dream for students and their parents alike.
- vii. English language is still a marker of prestige in Pakistani society as it was embedded in the past by British rulers.
- viii. The power dynamics of English language affected other languages in Pakistan through political power, socioeconomic, and cultural dynamics. It implies that linguistic imperialism is also existing.
- ix. English Language assessment also contributes to marketization of English language in education sector of Pakistan.
- x. In Pakistan, language assessment and testing are used as a tool by the policy makers in order to impose systems that emphasizes accountability i.e. certain levels and rubrics are used.
- xi. English language in Pakistan is passport to privileges to success and bright future of the learners.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study’s findings it would be concluded that in Pakistan, the elite class of the country have realized the politics and political power of the English language, assessment and testing. Therefore, they have institutionalized and educationalized the process of English language learning, teaching and language assessment. They are doing so-called struggle for national language Urdu in Pakistan but in reality, for material gain they prefer their children education in English and language assessment as prevailing in the current scenario in Pakistan. It is also revealed through careful analysis/investigation of the documents that there is a hegemony of English in Pakistan that contributed to linguistic imperialism. It is also clear from the study’s major findings that the educated and elite people speak English at their homes, and communicate in English for jobs and business purposes at national and international levels. English language assessment and testing are strongly linked with the purposes of English learning such as lucrative jobs, businesses, high and sophisticated life style, scientific knowledge and professional development. Furthermore, English language assessment is highly influenced by the state’s policy and political leaders because they consider English language as a symbol of prestige and well education’s certification in Pakistan. In the current scenario of Pakistan, English language assessment and testing encourage students to pursue their degrees in English and from English medium institutions in Pakistan or abroad.

6. Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion the following points are recommended.

1. English language teachers in Pakistan need to be introduced to the theoretical, practical and technical knowledge of language assessment and testing in order to enhance language assessment literacy and literature.
2. In Pakistani context, EFL/ESL teachers need to be well aware of language assessment theories i.e. Criterion-Referenced Testing (CRT) Theory (Brown & Hudson 2002) and Classical Test Theory (CTT) Frey, F. (2017) because these theories deal with the designing of standardized tests of placement and proficiency for decision making.
3. It is recommended to have an equal voice of all candidates in the process of language assessment and testing.
4. English language assessment and testing system need to improve in accordance with the standardized tests such as CEFR, TOFEL, CELTA etc.

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