

Is English the only answer to our educational deficit?

(un-published)

By Danish Azar Zubay

Last week I met an old friend after a long time and a casual discussion drifted towards a particular educational issue. This friend of mine is a very popular and a busy TV anchor with incredible charm and an amazing talent for intellectual discourse. As I began to praise the efforts of TCF schools in Pakistan he reacted with his typical style with a derogatory remark like “they are frauds” or something like that, repeating very negative things about TCF school system. I was taken aback and this particular provocation prompted me to write this piece. One enjoys the luxury of making sweeping remarks, even using foul language in a closed room discussion as no one is watching but I was surprised at the seriousness in his thoughts, which made me even more serious and called for some thinking. Being a sensitive issue and obviously education being the most neglected and important sectors in the country, I thought I should put down my thoughts on paper and perhaps share them with a bigger audience. This may start a fruitful discussion, clear the confusion or lead to a better direction.

The main thrust of his argument was that ‘Why are the TCF schools URDU medium and not English medium’, and he also answered the question by asserting that this particular charity group wants to keep the children in the same shanty towns where they have created these schools, (why should they make them their equal) because the ‘Success ladder’ in life is only through English based education. Is it really? I still find it hard to believe. I narrated my visit to china on some design project, where I met many people and I found that not a single person could speak English; even an interpreter we met later was very poor in English. I conducted my business with the universal language of drawing and sign language with great success. I was totally awe struck by the progress the Chinese made in the last couple of decades, all without any proficiency in English language. Every German understands and speaks English to a degree but they conduct their lives purely in German language and perhaps they are one of the most advanced nations. So is the case with Scandinavian countries, the most progressed people. Turkey survived the invasion of the language by adopting the Latin alphabet but retaining its own language. Iran has a proud history of its Persian language. There are many other examples where absence of English does not mean absence of progress or success or even civilization. Language is a vehicle that delivers you to an end. It is a means to an end but not the end itself. You can reach your destination if you are proficient in any or your own language. Yes the richness and development of a particular language determines the degree of success to which it can be applied but that is another issue. With us we have a chronic case of consciously sidelining our national language at all levels.

The root of the problem lies in our colonial past and our adherence to English as our Official language. Ever since the English left we still are trying to put our house in order. Unfortunately our laws, statute books, education, governance and other systems, at almost every level is written and administered in English. There are exceptions like the first report in a police station is written in Urdu by a ‘Muharrar’(scribe). Even the constitution, though Islamic and eastern in spirit is drafted in English. Ours is a peculiar problem because not all the ex British colonies have such a severe problem of inferiority complex as far as the language is concerned. We have had more than our share of political, economical

and social misfortunes and instabilities and especially the crises of leadership. We have even lost the enthusiasm of throwing away the yoke of the colonial masters. The promise of cutting off the umbilical cord of East India Company and growing as a proud unified nation with a unified language seem to have died. The premise of slowly converting our governance and systems to our language are a dream of the past. Stanley Wolpert wrote that the Mr. Jinnah created not only a country but a nation. We have lost the zeal and zest for a unified language and a unified nation. There is no room for another Faiz, as the once a fertile ground has totally been desertified.

The Muslims inventors of the past advanced their theories in Arabic or Persian and not in English, in fact the English scholars spent a lifetime translating and copying them in English which propelled them to advancement and revolutions. Had we invested properly in the development of Urdu and Bangla with a long term vision things would have been different today. Unfortunately our first troubles surfaced because of narrow minded decisions of our politicians regarding language issues. The nature of crisis we face today also has its roots in the abandonment of our cultural heritage. We were caught up in one crisis after another. Leaders were and still are misfits and selfish. Education takes the lowest priority. The language almost lost. We are now caught in parochial, provincial divisiveness rather than unity. The only thing that is loud and visible, especially on the media, is the advancement of the English speaking world, constantly echoing with our worship of the Gora sahib and the English infrastructure that he left behind.

In today's scenario, I personally feel that the basic education should start with the "mother tongue" from the tender age which the child absorbs instantly and easily. The primary education should start off with gradual coverage in national language Urdu with an introduction to English as a parallel instruction system. Finally the secondary and upper levels of education should have a combination of English and Urdu, and further specialization as per technical and other requirements. This way an individual not does lose his mother tongue, retains his ability of his national language at the same time specializing in English wherever required. But this is just an idea. The education experts should come forward and create new road maps, and plan strategies that are do-able and which do not rust in annual reports. Sounds idealistic and difficult but with careful planning, curriculum development and requisite GDP investment in education...all is possible.

And coming back to my friend's objection and the TCF Schools in Pakistan. Closing down the 90% Urdu medium schools across the country or converting them to English medium would be like living in fool's paradise but slowly introducing English to all education units is understandable. Yes English is extremely important today. It is becoming the Lingua franca of the world, it is essential to learn English but I feel not at the cost of our own language or our mother tongue. They are all important. As far as TCF is concerned I talked to Director Education at their head office and visited their website for a detailed introduction to the TCF schools and systems. I felt happy that I updated my information on the TCF. They have a course in English and also have a special course for computer literacy. They are planning for the upper tier of education level. They have a special teachers training institution where even the trainers are trained. They have a scientific approach to school and curriculum design and development. To be honest I haven't yet visited a TCF unit yet but I will. A fantastic school system which has won many national and international awards in the field of education, how could have they blundered? An NGO that establishes purpose built quality schools for the under privileged across the country, (600 primary

and secondary schools) enrolling about 80,000 students half of which are females is truly revolutionary seen in our absolutely pathetic record in the education sector. The TCF schools are a step in the right direction for an idea of empowering the extremely poor and removing them from streets and abject poverty.

Ours is unique country where politicians actually get away with schools on paper in hundreds and thousands, all for political mileage. Some schools which are built are used as stables or 'Autaaqs' (lounges) for bigshots. Our country has become famous for ghost schools. It is shameful that billions have been lost by inept ministers, parliamentarians and administrators as they claim no ownership to the schools they establish. What we desperately need is professional system of management, of checks and balances supported by a professional educational system like the TCF. I find it hard to rubbish the efforts of a group of philanthropists for such a tremendous effort. Looking at the big picture, unfortunately the gap and the deficit in education is so great that a decent school that can deliver even out in the open, under tree should also be welcome. I feel that our country could use help at all levels and all tiers and in any medium. We should welcome Urdu and English and also other schools whose medium of instruction can be Sindhi, Punjabi, Balochi or Pusto and other languages... There is such a phenomenal gap in the education sector that any school **that can deliver** should be welcome. (I certainly don't mean the Maddressahs). We need more schools and more opportunities for employment.

Sometimes ago I had the opportunity to teach at a prestigious Design School in Karachi. I came into contact with the policy making directors of the Institute who espouse a very standard for the students with the result there was a lot of frustration among the eager students and parents, and also there was a big drop out rate. Hundreds of applicants cannot clear aptitude tests or never make it to the interviews. Somehow I always felt that by slightly lowering that benchmark of excellence we would accommodate more students and create more opportunities. Every class has a first, second and a third, but one should also feel for the fifth, seven or fifteenth for that matter. One should feel compassion for the underdogs, the slower in race. If we had two dozen design schools in the city, yes, we could increase the bench mark of excellence even higher and truly turn the design school into a state of the art school. The ground reality is different and the needs of the society are different. We need to be more accommodating. We need to improve our teaching methodology, increase our capacity, have more trained teachers and increase the output. I do not profess mediocrity but a firm believer of merit. The country needs more opportunities.

So the way I see it, English by no means is the only panacea for the underprivileged. Reform and success requires more than that, you need talent, opportunities, training, curriculum, professionalism, employment etc. If I had any control in the education sector I would have established thousands of polytechnics across the country which would engage and empower the youth of the country in a more productive way. We need technicians, well trained and well informed carpenters, metal workers, welders, electricians and electronic experts etc. We are very talented a nation and could have been very productive if we have initiated such a scheme. But all is not lost we still have time...

Danish Azar Zubay

28th December 2009

