

Teaching in mother tongue

By Zubeida Mustafa

NADIA is a bright and intelligent child of eight. Her mother - a housemaid -has a dream. She wants to educate her children so that they can lift themselves out of the grinding poverty that has been their parents' lot. Happily that is what President Pervez Musharraf says he also wants. But probably, he does not have a clue as to how to go about it.

Take Nadia's case. She attends a private school (charging a monthly fee of Rs300) near her home in a low income locality of Karachi. With her mother's help she has learnt to read and write Urdu fluently. I talked to her about the moon and the stars and explained the concepts of tens and units - in Urdu. She understood what I told her perfectly since this is a language she is familiar with. That night she even went out in the courtyard to explore the celestial bodies.

Nadia reads her English book fluently, but without understanding a word of what she reads. Like all children she has a phenomenal memory. If the federal education minister's new language policy is put into effect, Nadia will be denied the excitement of discovering the mysteries of the skies for she will not understand what she reads or is told by her teacher. Mathematics will become a lot of mumbo jumbo for her. But Lt Gen (retired) Javed Ashraf Qazi wants children like Nadia to be taught the natural sciences and mathematics in English. Since her mother does not know English there will be no one to help her tide over the language difficulties as is done by the mothers of thousands of children in the elite English medium schools.

It is shocking that our education planners fail to understand this simple piece of logic. They counter the demand for the mother tongue being the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling with the argument that English is the international language of the day and if we want to progress we will have to teach in English. There is no denying the importance of English. But why confuse the issue? A child can be taught in the mother tongue, especially in the formative period of his life, and he can also be taught English as a subject. In fact if this approach is adopted, English can also be taught well.

At an age when a child is grappling concurrently with knowledge, information, literacy skills and numeracy skills, is it wise to burden him with all this in a language he does not even understand? Wouldn't it be better to let him acquire knowledge in the

language he has been hearing and speaking ever since he was born?

Mercifully, there are some who still understand the significance of teaching a young child in his mother tongue. A White Paper titled Education in Pakistan prepared by a team set up by the federal education ministry under Javed Hasan Aly, a retired federal secretary, has many wise suggestions to make. It is not an official statement and is designed to debate and finalise the national education policy, which the government says is in the making. It has suggested the establishment of a national language commission to help operationalise the policy options and cater to the development of the regional languages. It specifically recommends that the medium in the first three years of the child's education should be the mother tongue. Where Urdu is not the mother tongue it should be taught as a subject from Class I. English should be introduced as a subject from Class-III. From Class VI the medium of instruction should be Urdu for the social sciences and English for the natural sciences and mathematics.

From the White Paper it emerges that our education planners need to show some clarity of thought. This has been missing on the language question in all the education policies formulated so far. What one cannot be sure about is whether this confusion is deliberate to evade an issue that has proved to be sensitive from day one or whether it is due to a lack of understanding of the role of language in human development. Hence many myths are perpetuated that need to be exploded.

Myth #1 If English has to be taught it must be the medium of instruction. It is possible to have a mother tongue as the medium of instruction and teach English as a subject. Most countries all over the world do that. In this case English is taught as a second language and new techniques developed for ELT are applied.

Myth #2 Teaching in English will raise our standard of education. It will not, because standards depend on other factors such as the quality of the teachers, textbooks, curricula and the institutions available. A poor knowledge of English will drag down the standards of the teachers and the textbooks further

Myth #3 Proficiency in English can be developed in the students by using that language as the medium of instruction. This is a myth. In our case it has an additional drawback. With not enough teachers proficient in English who will teach the children? It is not possible to teach thousands of teachers the English language

overnight. If the policy is to make do with teachers whose knowledge of English is poor, it will never succeed in making the students proficient in English.

It seems that such a strategy is aimed at pushing the poor deeper into poverty and empowering the privileged few even further. It will ensure that the poor do not get to learn good English. In fact they will not get to learn anything at all because the essence of good learning can come only in a language they speak and understand. The White Paper speaks of an apartheid-like system in education where the disadvantaged are kept out of jobs and key positions. The introduction of English, as planned by Javed Ashraf Qazi, will marginalise them further.

The British who ruled over India understood this when they introduced a new educational policy in 1904. The policy categorically declared, "English has no place, and should have no place, in the scheme of primary education." It further states, "As a general rule, a child should not be allowed to learn English as a language until he has made some progress in the primary stages of instruction and has received a thorough grounding in his mother tongue. It is equally important that when the teaching of English has begun, it should not be prematurely employed as the medium of instruction in other subjects."

Dawn, Pakistan
10 January 2007