

PROMISE WITHOUT PLANNING: A CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN PAKISTAN'S EDUCATION POLICIES, 1947–2010

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Abstract

Pakistan has over sixty languages, but a primary concern in education policies has been Urdu, English and, up until 1971, Bengali. This study aims to look at linguistic diversity in the context of nine national education policies (1947-2009), language provisions in the Constitution of 1973 and the 18th amendment in 2010. It has a qualitative document analysis design. The data refer to the provisions of the policies in policy documents and as reported by Torwali (2016) during his review of education policies in Pakistan. The provisions were deductively coded into a framework of Spolsky's (2004) model of language policy and the orientations of language as problem, right and resource of Ruiz's (1984) model, which were linked with the concept of linguistic capital of Bourdieu (1991). Simple frequency counting is provided to aid the qualitative reading. There is evidence of the ideological framing of Islam in all nine Policies. Urdu has six, English has five and four are for the provincial languages and two are for Bengali. The nine federal policies do not mention the other mother tongues of the countries. The deadline to replace English with Urdu (1959, 1969 and 1973) has not been fulfilled and by 2009 the English had been replaced as a subject and became a main medium for science and mathematics. A rights view is used in 6 of the 9 policies, either as a theme for solving the problem of diversity through a common language or is not mentioned; the rights view is found primarily in provincial legislation as well as the Constitution. The 18th amendment provided an opportunity for mother tongue education in the province but the time of the source, it had been used only in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study finds that not much planning has been done in the Pakistan language-in-education policy, and that English and Urdu have been the ones losing their capitals while the mother tongues have been losing theirs. It suggests a mother-tongue based multilingual model, which is to be led at the provincial level and a stand-alone national language policy.

Keywords: language-in-education policy; linguistic diversity; Pakistan; Urdu; English; mother tongue; linguistic capital; language orientations.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Pakistan's inception language has been a part of its story. The nation was formed on a religion and language-based political basis and within a few years of independence, issues of the national language resulted in street deaths in Dhaka city (Torwali, 2016). At least 7 students lost their lives during protest against the use of Urdu as

the sole national language on 21 Feb 1952. In 1954 Bengali was accepted as a national language and in 1956 Bengali was incorporated in the constitution, but along with this issue there was also a feeling of exclusion in the rest of East Pakistan that ultimately led to separation in 1971 (Torwali, 2016; Butt et al., 2024). Language policy penetrates the lives of most citizens at school. The choice of language taught language to be taught and the excluded language influences educational success and failure. In Pakistan, this has been primarily taken on educational policy making forums as the country lacks a national language policy (Siddiqui, 2011). The state has formulated nine such policies during 1947-2009 of which five are formulated during military rulers (Torwali, 2016). The 18th Amendment took education to the provinces in 2010 and for the first time handed over absolute authority over curriculum and policy to the provinces.

Official stance in the case of Urdu has been quite direct while in the case of English and the regional languages it has been less clear. There is ambiguity about the status of English in the school, while Tamim (2014, cited by Torwali, 2016, p. 9) talks about strong commitment to Urdu. In the meantime, English has continued to be the language of the military, the courts and the bureaucracy (Torwali, 2016). Article 251 of the constitution of 1973 guaranteed the use of Urdu as official language within the span of 15 years, which has yet to be fulfilled (Jawad et al., 2021).

1.1 Problem statement

The country is endowed with over sixty languages but most of them (except for Urdu) are not planned for in education policies (Torwali, 2016; Abbas & Bidin, 2022). Although, policies have been shifting between Urdu, English and the four provincial languages, there is no fixed policy for any of the languages. Previous studies reveal significant differences between policy and practice in the classroom (Siddiqui, 2011; Ashraf et al., 2021) and a social hierarchy which privileges the English language and undervalues the mother tongues (Khalique, 2007). It is less clear, however, how each policy, in turn, gave a status to each group of languages, and what this tells about the understanding of diversity that the state has. If there's no picture, then the proposals for reform will be the same promises. The issue of this study is raised against all nine policies, and the two important constitutional documents, from a single perspective.

1.2 Significance of the study

There are three groups of readers of the study: It provides a single coded picture of the treatment of all groups of languages over the years of the national education policy rather than an examination of any one policy or one language. It demonstrates to policy makers, where promises went wrong and why at a time when provinces have the power to do something through the 18th amendment. For teachers and community groups, it provides evidence that the lack of mother-tongue in school is a consequence of policy decisions and therefore is amenable to policy interventions.

1.3 Research questions

The three questions below follow from the theoretical framework set out in Section 3.

1. How did Pakistan's education policies (1947–2009) and related constitutional provisions allocate status and functions to Urdu, English, Bengali, the provincial languages and other mother tongues, and how far did their stated aims match what followed?
2. How did these allocations distribute linguistic capital among languages and their speakers, especially between English, Urdu and the mother tongues?
3. Which orientation (language as problem, as right, or as resource) dominates the policies' treatment of linguistic diversity, and did the 18th Amendment (2010) mark a change?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of language policy in Pakistan has come up with only one consensus: that the state has been in favour of Urdu and English and the other languages have suffered. The studies vary in regard to language, time and pattern explanation. These are grouped here under five themes and then a statement is made about the gap that the study fills.

2.1 Urdu, national identity and the unmet promise of official status

Urdu is considered the principal symbol of the unity of the nation in many studies. However, in a survey and interview study of graduates from the major ethnic groups of Pakistan, Ahmad et al. (2022) came up with a finding that most of the respondents have different views on mother tongue and religion but considered the national language as the central marker of national identity. Cheema and Baloch (2021) conducted a survey on 50 students from the University of the Punjab, and they reported that there is a long problem with Urdu and English, as it is not clear in the minds of the students. They demanded Urdu as national and official language and demanded that English and regional languages be taught as subjects. For Mukhtar (2021), Urdu's connection with Pakistan Movement meant that, the state should establish Urdu as the official language as per the Article 251. Despite a number of court rulings, English continues to serve as the working official language, as pointed out by Jawad et al. (2021) almost half a century after 1973. The multi-tiered school system, a legacy of colonial rule, hinders the development of the national language to have a real institutional influence, added Kazmi (2023). Omar et al.

(2020) conducted a study outside of Pakistan to explore the attitudes of Pakistanis residing in UAE towards Urdu outside of the country.

Socio-critical approach focuses on the image being constructed within the policy texts which are Urdu. Socio-critical approach draws on the construction of the image of Urdu within policy texts. Sarfraz and Khan (2025b) examined seven National Education Policies (1959-2018) with the lens of Fairclough's model, Van Dijk's ideological square and Bourdieu's linguistic capital. They found four rhetorical approaches: nationalism legitimation, promissory deferral, elites exclusion and the symbolic erasure of regional languages. Their study is closest to the present study but it is on the construction of Urdu as opposed to the entire spectrum of languages.

2.2 English as the language of power

The usage of English is seen throughout literature as the language of privilege. Khalique (2007) referred to the order as follows: English for masters, Urdu for common public and the mother tongues "the little boy who lives down the lane". Ammar et al. (2015) suggested that the teaching approach and the curriculum have left a divide between the English-using elite and the high level of anti-English sentiments prevalent among the majority of people who still don't speak English. In a mixed methods study of 130 undergraduate students in the city of Faisalabad Khan et al. (2023) investigated the impact of English-medium education on the learners who belong to the Punjabi, Saraiki and Urdu language groups. In the constitution, education policies, political speeches and curricula, Urdu is presented as the national language and as a language of moral sentiments while English is seen as elite and progressive and Punjabi "is not even given a platform", Hashmi et al. (2025) concluded on the basis of Van Dijk's (2010) model. In the Single National Curriculum, Sarfraz and Khan (2025a) noticed that in the curriculum, English was promoted from being a school language to a "communication skill" and none of Pakistan's indigenous languages were included in the General Knowledge curriculum. They labeled such a disconnection between promise and action "promissory pluralism". Zulfiqar et al. (2024), through their interviews with 60 participants in rural areas of Punjab, found that there are also social class and dominant ways of speaking in rural Punjab.

2.3 Regional languages and mother tongues

Description of provincial and smaller languages is primarily in terms of loss. Hussain et al. (2024) employed critical discourse analysis of documents, focus groups and interviews to demonstrate the marginalization of Punjabi and other regional languages, in favour of Urdu. Hussain et al. (2020) pointed out that although Punjabi is in use in everyday life, it is considered a marginal language in formal and public settings. Khan et al. (2025) claimed that the National Education Policy (2009) and the Punjab Curriculum Policy (2015) presently have Punjabi as an excluded language in schools. Studying policy documents and 50 tweets posted on Twitter, Butt, Shahzad et al. (2025) identified institutional neglect of Punjabi and Saraiki and the rising digital resistance. However, while there is growing value for regional languages in national identity narratives (e.g., Punjabi), there are still challenges (Hashmi et al., 2024).

The studies are conflicting on solutions. Maldonado García (2015) suggested that at least Punjabi, Pasht, Sindhi and Balochi should be taught in all the schools public or private. Abbas and Shehzad (2017) agreed that mother tongue in education was a good proposition but expressed concern for the serious sociolinguistic and political implications of education in mother tongue in a country with over sixty languages. Abbas and Bidin (2022) found that Pakistan's language planning has been biased in favour of Urdu and English, has a colonial flavour and has resulted in a high level of deprivation among ethnolinguistic groups.

2.4 The gap between policy and practice

There is a consistent message throughout that policy, and the reality of schools are at odds. Siddiqui (2011) noted that there is no separate language policy document in Pakistan, the 1959 Commission report contained a detailed language section and the language policy and practice often did not dovetail. Hameed-ur-Rehman and Sewani (2013) briefly looked at the policy process in the years 2005 – 2009 and recommended the need for reform. Through discourse-ethnographic analysis of interviews with policy makers and teachers, Ashraf et al. (2021) discovered that there are national policy realities that are not accounted for by the realities in the region, which weakens the national policy. Mirza et al. (2024) interviewed 14 primary school teachers and observed them in their classrooms in Dera Ghazi Khan, and concluded that implementation is hindered by crowded classrooms, weak English foundation and poor training. Zafar (2021) also identified these gaps in language policies of five universities of Punjab and Nisa et al. (2023) noted the stigma and disadvantage associated with minority languages.

2.5 History and new domains

Two other threads enrich the image. To explain the feed of Bengali nationalism and break up of 1971, historically, the scholars of Butt et al. (2024) had used the Discourse Historical Approach. Recently, researchers have suggested that the same pattern is taking place with digital tools. However, Butt, Rouf, et al. (2025) revealed that weak datasets, dialect differences and inadequate state funding are preventing Punjabi from being part of artificial intelligence (AI) applications. Khan and Hussain (2025) demonstrated how platform interfaces and policies can

marginalize speakers of minority languages, while Markl (2022) demonstrated how marginalized speakers are even more disadvantaged by speech recognition systems.

2.6 Research gap

There are three gaps in the literature reviewed here. The first is that most studies are centred on one language, usually the Punjabi or Urdu language and one document (one policy or the Single National Curriculum). Very few, if any, attempt to trace how each national education policy dealt with all the types of languages, including those that were not mentioned. Secondly, the studies are largely of critical discourse analysis alone. Of all those reviewed, none have a model of policy components, theory of linguistic capital, and typology of orientations towards diversity in one design. Third, the 18th Amendment is seldom used as a turning point and is not compared to the previous pattern. This study aims to fill these gaps by coding all nine education policies, the Constitution of 1973 and 18th Amendment under one framework.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is comprised of three concepts. They each address a different aspect of the question, and they all take us from answering what the policies did, to who benefited, to how the state viewed diversity.

3.1 Spolsky: language policy as management, beliefs and practice

Spolsky (2004) states that there are three aspects in language policy. Language practices are the languages used in actual practices. The values a community assigns to each language are known as beliefs (or ideology). Management is the conscious attempt of an authority to modify in some way a practice or belief, e.g. a law, an education policy. What a policy says is not always what people say or do, Spolsky emphasizes, but these three tend to separate out. In this study, the reading of each education policy is considered as an act of management. The stated aims are then compared to the outcomes as reported in the data to test the extent of management's change of practice (RQ1).

3.2 Bourdieu: linguistic capital and symbolic power

The languages are seen as types of capital that have different values in a social "market" (Bourdieu 1991). The state, particularly the school, is a key player in the process of establishing one variety as a standard language and in the pricing of the others. Speakers of a language other than the legitimate language have a disadvantage when they start speaking. A person whose language is not in use needs to learn another language to be able to compete. The concept is employed to understand the impact of each policy on the value of English, Urdu and mother tongues in the school, and the children who benefited from that (RQ2).

3.3 Ruiz: language as problem, right or resource

Ruiz (1984) recognized three general attitudes towards language planning. In a problem-oriented approach, linguistic diversity is considered a problem that needs to be addressed, typically by a common language. In a right orientation, the speaker/s are regarded as having the right to use and maintain their language. In a resource perspective, languages are viewed as resources for development for the benefit of the language user and the nation. Here, a fourth position, silence, is also included for policies that leave a language blank, because no language is a choice. Each policy text (RQ3) is coded in these categories.

3.4 How the three ideas work together

Table 1 shows how each part of the framework is applied.

Table 1 Theoretical framework and its use in the study

Framework	Key idea	What it is used to examine	Research question
Spolsky (2004)	Management, beliefs and practice can diverge	Which languages each policy addressed; promises and deadlines against reported outcomes	RQ1
Bourdieu (1991)	Languages carry unequal value; schools set that value	Medium of instruction and compulsory subjects as a way of assigning value to languages	RQ2
Ruiz (1984)	Diversity seen as problem, right or resource	The dominant orientation of each policy towards linguistic diversity, before and after 2010	RQ3

The relationship between the three is simple. The state determines the value of languages (Bourdieu), and it's through management (Spolsky). This orientation behind that management (Ruiz) accounts for the selection of those values by the state.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

The study is a qualitative document analysis study using critical policy lens. A deductive (or “directed”) approach was taken to the drawing of codes from the theoretical framework. Simple counts of the rate of occurrence of each code are reported to give a pattern across policies. The counts are not used to test statistical significance but are used in conjunction with the qualitative reading.

4.2 Data source

The data consists of the policy provisions that are recorded in the Pakistan's Language Policy. The data was selected as it provides a comprehensive collection of all national education policies of the period 1947-2009, all national education policy documents in terms of language provisions, the language provisions in the 1973 Constitution and the 18th Amendment. Many provisions are quoted verbatim from the original Government of Pakistan documents as well as from Siddiqui (2016) Education Policies in Pakistan. No data was used from the literature in Section 2, it was just used for comparison in the discussion.

4.3 Corpus and unit of analysis

The corpus has eleven units: the nine education policies (1947, 1959, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1979, 1992, 1998 and 2009), the 1973 Constitution and the 18th Amendment (2010). The unit of analysis is the units of provisions reported by Torwali (2016) in that policy. In addition, Torwali mentions two other events for support: The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Promotion of Regional Languages Authority Act (2012) and the denial by a National Assembly Standing Committee of a bill for the inclusion of nine national languages (reported in Dawn, 2014 and 2016).

4.4 Coding procedure

There were four stages of coding.

1. **Organising the corpus.** A matrix was created for each provision with the corresponding policy and year, and the ruler and type of government was taken from policy table.
2. **Language coverage (Spolsky).** All the units were marked for their coverage of six groups: Urdu, English, Bengali, the provincial languages (Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi), other mother tongues and Arabic. The decisions regarding the medium of instruction were also coded in each unit.
3. **Promise and outcome (Spolsky, Bourdieu).** risk (Spolsky). All the dates and explicit promises (e.g. replacing English) were documented with the dates and placed against the findings of Torwali's conclusions.
4. **Orientation (Ruiz).** Orientation (Ruiz). One orientation problem, right resource, silence was chosen as dominant by the wording of each of the units. Cases that are mixed are indicated.

4.5 Trustworthiness

All codes are linked to a reported provision or a direct quotation, as can be seen in the tables in Section 5, to make it possible to check whether the analysis is accurate. If there is an inconsistency in the source, then the reading that was used is noted. For example, Bengali's national status was first mentioned in 1952 in a footnote in Torwali (2016), whereas it was first mentioned in the main text in 1954 and 1956 Constitution. There was no inter-coder agreement figure since coding was done by one researcher.

4.6 Limitations of the design

Secondary source were used in the study. The classroom practice is not directly observed; it is known only in terms of the results that Torwali describes and the literature he uses for the discussions. The study does not include later documents like the National Education Policy 2017 and the Single National Curriculum. These restrictions are revisited in Section 8.

5. Data Analysis

The tables below are constructed using the provisions reported in policy documents. A tick (✓) indicates that the unit has covered that item, a dash (–) indicates that there was no information available on that item to the source for that unit

5.1 The policy corpus

Table 2. Education policies and constitutional texts analysed

No.	Document	Year	Ruler	Government
1	Pakistan Educational Conference	1947	Muhammad Ali Jinnah	Civilian
2	Commission on National Education (Sharif Report)	1959	General Ayub Khan	Military
3	Proposals for a New Educational Policy	1969	General Yahya Khan	Military
4	The New Education Policy	1970	General Yahya Khan	Military
5	The Education Policy 1972–1980	1972	Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto	Civilian
–	Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan	1973	Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto	Civilian
6	National Education Policy and Implementation Programme	1979	General Zia-ul-Haq	Military

No.	Document	Year	Ruler	Government
7	National Education Policy 1992	1992	Muhammad Nawaz Sharif	Civilian
8	National Education Policy 1998–2010	1998	Muhammad Nawaz Sharif	Civilian
9	National Education Policy 2009	2009	Prepared under General Musharraf; presented under Yousaf Raza Gilani	Military / civilian
–	18th Amendment to the Constitution	2010	Parliament (PPP-led government)	Civilian

Five of the nine policies were drafted during military rule and one (2009) from a military to a civilian government. The longest period without a policy is 1947-1959 and it is the era of the Bengali language movement. Policies were also changed frequently, in average of 62 years, one every eight years, providing little opportunity for any specific policy to become established.

5.2 Ideological framing

Table 3. Ideological aims stated in each policy

Policy	Islamic framing	National unity or ideology	Key wording reported
1947	✓	–	Education based on Islamic concept; compulsory religious learning
1959	✓	✓	National unity, national culture; Islamic values
1969	✓	–	Integrated, uniform system on Islamic precepts; secular values rejected
1970	✓	✓	Inculcation of Islamic values and national unity
1972	✓	✓	Preservation of “the basic ideology of Pakistan”
1979	✓	✓	Islamisation; loyalty to Islam and Pakistan; refashion society
1992	✓	–	“Leaven the educational system with Islamic ethos”
1998	✓	–	Quranic principles part of the curricula
2009	✓	✓	Pakistani nationhood; Islam as the genesis of the state
Total (of 9)	9	5	

All policies are characterized in Islamic language and 5 policies have relation to national unity or the state ideology. No ideological objectives include language or linguistic diversity nor speaks of cultural diversity. Spolsky (2004) would say that the state's policies were based on beliefs rather than on the fact that there were many languages spoken by the state's citizens. This is significant because language choices were made in a frame already in place that had a positive value for sameness.

5.3 Which languages each policy addressed

Table 4. Language groups addressed by each unit

Unit	Urdu	English	Bengali	Provincial languages	Other mother tongues	Arabic
1947	✓	✓	–	✓	–	–
1959	✓	✓	✓	–	–	–
1969	✓	✓	✓	–	–	–
1970	–	–	–	–	–	–
1972	–	–	–	–	–	–
1973 Constitution	✓	✓	–	✓	General right only	–
1979	✓	–	–	✓	–	–
1992	✓	✓	–	✓	–	✓
1998	–	–	–	–	–	✓
2009	✓	✓	–	✓	–	–

Unit	Urdu	English	Bengali	Provincial languages	Other mother tongues	Arabic
18th Amendment (with KP Act 2012)	–	–	–	✓	✓ (provincial)	–

Notes: 1970 sets general criteria for choosing a medium but names no language. The 1992 Arabic code comes from Torwali's overview of that policy's "focus on the Arabic language". The 1973 general right is the clause allowing any section of citizens with a distinct language to preserve and promote it.

Table 5. Frequency of coverage across the nine education policies

Language group	Policies addressing it (of 9)	Share
Urdu	6	67%
English	5	56%
Provincial languages	4	44%
Bengali	2	22%
Arabic	2	22%
Other mother tongues (60+ languages)	0	0%
No language named at all	2 (1970, 1972)	22%

Mostly Urdu and English are discussed in the policies. Less than half of the provincial languages are mentioned, and these languages are typically offered as an option or an additional subject. None of the 101 federal policies mention any of the many other languages. These languages (Seraiki, Hindko, Kohistani and Khowar) are only mentioned in Provincial law after devolution. There are two policies (1970 and 1972) that do not mention any language. Aly (2007, as cited by Torwali 2016) refers to the 1972 position as "benign neglect". Silence, then, is the most common treatment of most of Pakistan's languages.

5.4 Medium of instruction

Table 6. Medium-of-instruction decision in each unit

Unit	Decision reported	Language favoured
1947	Left to each province; Urdu second compulsory language; English compulsory at school	Provincial choice, Urdu
1959	National language to replace English gradually at all levels; 15 years needed at university; English compulsory from class VI to degree	National languages
1969	National languages as medium at all levels; less English	National languages
1970	Criteria only: ease of learning, clear communication, critical and creative thinking	None named
1972	No direction given	None
1979	Urdu as medium, including in private schools; a regional language taught from class III where Urdu is the medium	Urdu
1992	Provinces choose provincial language, Urdu or English; English allowed for science and technical subjects at tertiary level	Provincial choice, English (tertiary)
1998	No medium decision reported; Quran, Islamiat and Arabic encouraged	None
2009	Provinces choose up to class V; English for science and mathematics from class VI; English, Urdu and one regional language as subjects from class 1	English

The use of a language is the place where the value of a language is most clearly established. It seems like two distinct stages are present. It was announced from 1959 to 1979 that English would be replaced by the national language, which was most forcefully done by Zia in 1979. The trend changed from then on: From 1992, English was again the teaching language, and in 2009 the language used in science and mathematics shifted to English, starting from class VI. None of the federal policies had mother tongues as the required language of instruction; in fact, the selection of the language of instruction was left to the provinces in most of the policies.

5.5 Promises and outcomes

Table 7. Explicit commitments and their reported outcomes

Unit	Commitment	Deadline	Outcome reported by Torwali (2016)
1947	“Maximum scope of growth” for provincial languages as media and carriers of culture	None	Provincial languages “either ignored or considered inferior”
1959	National language to replace English as medium	About 15 years at university	English remained the “language of power”
1969	Urdu official in West, Bengali in East Pakistan	1974	Overtaken by the separation of East Pakistan in 1971; Urdu not made official
1973	Urdu for official purposes (Article 251)	15 years (1988)	“Urdu could not be made the official language despite the promises made multiple times”
2009	A comprehensive school language policy with provinces and stakeholders	None	No such policy reported; source concludes there was no proper language planning
2010	Devolution of curriculum, syllabus, planning and policy to provinces	None	“So far the provinces could not avail the opportunity”; only KP acted (2012 Act)

The state imposed a deadline for the use of a national language instead of English three times (in 1959, 1969 and 1973), and each time the time limit was ignored. The pledges for provincial languages did not have any time limit. It is the most explicit case of gap between policy and practice in the sense of Spolsky (2004) in which policy has been altered, but the role of English in the military, courts and bureaucracy has not.

5.6 Orientation towards linguistic diversity

Table 8 Dominant orientation of each unit (after Ruiz, 1984)

Unit	Dominant orientation	Evidence in the reported provisions
1947	Resource (qualified)	Provincial languages as “an instrument for the dissemination of the culture”; but English “injurious” as medium
1959	Problem	English to be replaced; diversity handled through two national languages; provincial languages not mentioned
1969	Problem	One uniform system; national languages at all levels
1970	Silence	Learning-based criteria, but no language named
1972	Silence	No language section; “benign neglect”
1973 Constitution	Right (subordinate)	Right to preserve a distinct language; provincial promotion only “without prejudice to the status of National Language”
1979	Problem	Urdu as medium and “symbol of Muslim identity”; regional language only as an extra subject
1992	Right (permissive)	Provinces may choose an approved provincial language as medium
1998	Silence	Only religious learning and Arabic addressed
2009	Resource (instrumental, English-led)	English promoted for opportunity, also named as a cause of inequality; one regional language as a subject
18th Amendment / KP Act 2012	Right (provincial)	Regional languages to be taught gradually in pre-primary and primary classes

Table 9 Summary of orientations

Orientation	Nine education policies	All eleven units
Problem	3 (1959, 1969, 1979)	3
Silence	3 (1970, 1972, 1998)	3
Resource	2 (1947, 2009)	2
Right	1 (1992)	3 (adds 1973, 2010)

Diversity was the issue in 6 out of 9 education policies in the form of a common language and was not an issue in any other. In both the resource readings, one was qualified, in 1947 the resource was along with the demand for Urdu as lingua franca, while in 2009 the main resource was English. A rights perspective is not particularly evident in federal education policy, but is found predominantly in constitutional and provincial legislation, where it lies

after the national language. The committee's decision to reject new national languages indicates that a conception of threat to unity from linguistic diversity existed long after 1971.

6. Findings and Discussion

Under variable policies, the pattern is stable as shown by the analysis. Urdu was chosen as a symbol, English retained its authority and most mother tongues were excluded. The research questions are answered below, and the results are contrasted to those of previous studies, while each of the research questions is related to the framework.

Six of the nine policies discussed Urdu, five English and four discussed the provincial languages, but none discussed any of the other sixty-plus languages (Table 5). Provincial languages were generally seen as an 'extra' and not required as a medium (Table 6). There were three deadlines set for a national language as an alternative to English, in 1959, 1969 and 1973, but none of these were met (Table 7). By the time of the source, there was only one response to the commitment to a comprehensive school language policy in 2009 and to devolution in 2010.

The findings of the study corroborate Siddiqui's (2011) perception that Pakistan has dealt with language in a piecemeal fashion across various parts of its education policies, policy making and practice have been disparate, and that there have been discrepancies between policy and practice. They also materialise the concept of "promissory deferral" as defined by Sarfraz and Khan (2025b) in the National Education Policies, which are the deadlines mentioned in Table 7. This is evident at ground level, too. As many as 45% of time management policies were not implemented due to a lack of policy timeliness, as assessed by Ashraf et al., (2021) who also found that policy makers were oblivious to the regional realities, while Mirza et al., (2024) found that primary teachers were lacking in training and conditions for policy implementation. However, the promise made in Article 251 did not seem to be fulfilled decades later, as demonstrated by Jawad et al. (2021) and Kazmi (2023). These data indicate that the gap is not solely due to underdeveloped capacities. Many of the provisions were written as "permissions" rather than "duties". In the former, for instance, the policy of 1992 allowed provinces to opt for a provincial language and in the latter, the policy of 2009 allowed for a choice of medium up to class V. Where only one language is allowed by the policy, the dominant languages are the winners. This accounts for some of the perplexities in the literature. It is stated in the policy that there is a provision of one regional language in class 1 (Torwali, 2016) on paper. Khan et al. (2025) do not agree with the 2009 policy and the Punjab Curriculum Policy (2015) in action, however, as they argue that Punjabi is being excluded. Both things could be true: the federal text authorized a regional language; there was no obligation and no resources and thus there was no adoption of a regional language. If management doesn't change beliefs or provide incentives, practice will stay where it is, in Spolsky's (2004) words. This was exacerbated by frequent change. Each new government in nine policies, five during military rule, had to start over with the language question. In fact, the longest period, during which no policy was in place (1947-1959) coincided with the Bengal Language movement most in need of planning.

Two phases are reflected in the medium-of-instruction decisions (Table 6): For the years 1959–1979, the stated goals were to phase out English. In the years 1959-1979 the stated goal was to phase out English. The trend has reversed since 1992, and it is recommended that English should be used for science and mathematics from class VI and it is a compulsory subject since KG 1 till 2009. On the other hand, Urdu was associated with Islam, unity and Muslim identity (Tables 3 and 8). There was no federal policy that provided for the promotion of the mother tongues in education. According to Bourdieu (1991), language values in schools can be said to be determined in a social market. This was done by the Pakistani policies in a divided manner. The English was assigned the value that will give them job opportunities, promotion to further studies and getting position in the state. Urdu was accorded the status of value and sense of belonging along with its ethical worth. This reflects its reflection of the picture of English serving the "masters" and Urdu the wider public as in the words of Khalique (2007) and Hashmi et al. (2025) that- Urdu is national, Urdu is moral, English is elite, English is progressive in the policy discourse. It also sheds light on the high level of attachment of people with Urdu as an identity marker that is observed from the surveys (Ahmad et al., 2022; Cheema & Baloch, 2021) despite Urdu never displacing English in power. When it comes to attachment, it is symbolic capital which does not become material capital, as English does.

There is a need to re-examine the 2009 policy. It identifies English as one of the reasons for educational disparities, but its solution is to promote the use of English even more, in this case by encouraging opportunities for children from low socio-economic strata to learn English (Torwali, 2016). In a Bourdieu's sense, that is the acceptance of the market as it is as well as the request from poorer children to purchase into it. It doesn't elevate the worth of the children's existing language. This is a similar step in the Single National Curriculum as reported by Sarfraz and Khan (2025a), where English was introduced as a "communication skill" and now has its own assessment. This order is perceived by the students, as well as by the rural communities in Punjab, as shown by Khan et al. (2023) and Zulfiqar et al. (2024).

The burden of the cost is on the mother-tongue speakers the most. According to Hussain et al. (2020), Punjabi is the language of everyday life but it is underrepresented in formal aspects. An Urdu-speaking child has to learn

two languages, Urdu (for belonging) and English (for opportunity) before the system of schooling pays him/her. Native English speakers begin with a full value up front. This is the unequal exchange that Bourdieu talks about – it's in the policy.

In six of nine education policies, the dominant orientation was problem (1959, 1969, 1979) or silence (1970, 1972, 1998) (Table 9). Both of the resource readings were qualified and English was the main resource in 2009. The 1973 Constitution provided for a right to preserve distinct languages, and provided for “provincial languages” to be “promoted” but “without prejudice to the status of National Language”. The 18th amendment has paved the way for a real provincial route, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act 2012 has been an implementation of the use of Seraiki, Hindko, Kohistani and Khowar in pre-primary classes. By the time of this source no other province had done that.

Ruiz (1984) cautioned that a problem orientation comes with a perspective that views linguistic difference as something that should be eliminated. This is a certain kind of diversity, as illustrated by the Pakistani case, in which diversity is defined as a threat to unity. It is ‘Bangla paranoia’ as Torwali (2016) calls it and it is clear evidence as the committee has rejected nine other national languages in 2014 with a clear reference to 1971. But the historical record tells otherwise. Butt et al (2024) demonstrate that Urdu was the culprit of giving rise to Bengali nationalism, while Abbas and Bidin (2022) caution of the potentially dangerous implications of a prolonged sense of deprivation among ethnolinguistic groups. In the light of the study's results, it is possible to say that the official explanation—that lack of diversity is the greater threat to cohesion—is incorrect.

The 18th Amendment did affect the structure, but it didn't affect the direction. It shifted the orientation of the problem in Pakistan to provincial opportunity for right orientation. During the time period studied, that opportunity was only successfully converted into law by one province. This is because a change of management does not change practice (Spolsky, 2004).

There is no consensus on the picture of a resource orientation in the literature. Maldonado García (2015) suggests that all the schools teach the four provincial languages. Abbas and Shehzad (2017) agree with the mother tongue as a subject and dub the mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction in the context of Pakistan's complexity. Torwali (2016) suggests a trilingual model which is the medium of instruction in primary schools while Urdu and English are taught as subjects. The present results support the option of the Torwali type as it is seen that the requirements for mother tongue have been ineffective in being realized through subject-only or optional provisions. They also listen to Abbas and Shehzad's warning: if it's going to free children, it has to do so with materials, trained teachers and a clear and defined pathway to Urdu and English.

6.4 The pattern beyond the corpus

There have been two recent strands of work which suggest the pattern continued in 2010. First, some of the findings of the Single National Curriculum by Sarfraz and Khan (2025a) indicated that there was no space left for the country's indigenous languages that would be termed “promissory pluralism”. Secondly, the same hierarchy is now being implemented in digital tools. Butt, Rouf, et al. (2025) identified that the lack of strong data and policy hinder the use of Punjabi in AI applications. Khan and Hussain (2025) have found that the platform designs leave the speakers of minority languages at a disadvantage, and Markl (2022) have demonstrated that speech recognition systems are not as beneficial for speakers of minority languages. The linguistic capital gap (discussed in Section 6.2) is likely to grow if languages not taught in school are not represented in technology.

6.5 Comparison with previous studies

Table 10 How the findings relate to earlier work and to the framework

Finding	Agrees with	Extends or differs	Framework link
1. Narrow attention; no other mother tongue named in any policy	Abbas & Bidin (2022); Hashmi et al. (2025); Khan et al. (2025)	Counts the silence across all nine policies, not one document or language	Spolsky: management
2. Repeated, unmet deadlines	Siddiqui (2011); Sarfraz & Khan (2025b); Jawad et al. (2021)	Shows permissive wording, not only capacity, as a cause	Spolsky: management against practice
3. English gains material capital, Urdu symbolic capital	Khalique (2007); Hashmi et al. (2025); Sarfraz & Khan (2025a)	Explains why strong survey support for Urdu (Ahmad et al., 2022) has not changed its position	Bourdieu: linguistic capital
4. Problem or silence in six of nine policies	Abbas & Bidin (2022); Butt et al. (2024)	Adds silence as a coded orientation; links the 2014 committee decision to 1971 framing	Ruiz: orientations

Finding	Agrees with	Extends or differs	Framework link
5. 18th Amendment opens a provincial rights route, little used	Torwali (2016)	Treats 2010 as a test of change; finds structural change without a change in orientation	Ruiz and Spolsky

7. Implications

7.1 Theoretical implications

This study demonstrates the importance of reading the language policy view through three interrelated perspectives. This model by Spolsky (2004) indicates the point of policy failure (between management and practice). The distribution of benefits goes beyond the ability of people to speak, as Bourdieu (1991) has suggested. The state continued to make the same decisions because of the orientations of Ruiz (1984). In a multilingual state, the languages that are not mentioned in a policy also convey a lot of information to us. This is why it was useful to add silence as a coded orientation. The study also suggests that there are differences between permissive and mandatory provisions as an aspect of the gap between policy and practice, on which future research could focus.

7.2 Policy implications

1. National language policy that is implemented separately nationally. One is still lacking in Pakistan (Siddiqui, 2011). A separate policy, co-created with linguists, teachers and provincial governments, will be put into place, to break the cycle of language being placed in a few lines of each education policy.
2. Provincial duties as opposed to options. Since 18th Amendment, provinces have a say in action. Mother-tongue teaching duties, timeline and budget should be clearly defined in Provincial laws and regulations, building on the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Act, 2012.
3. A mother-tongue based multi-lingual model. Early schooling in the child's language followed by progressively Urdu and English would allow for all three languages without forcing children to drop their language. Teacher training, materials and assessment in the relevant language is required.
4. Deadlines with institutions. All future targets, including the long-delayed commitment to Article 251, should be accompanied by a named body, resources and public reporting.
5. Digital inclusion. The policy on language should now include data and technology, by providing support to the languages of Pakistan in the digital spaces and tools that children and citizens are using.

7.3 Practical implications

Teacher education programmes can equip teachers with the skills to function in the role of bridge between home languages of children and Urdu and English. The provincial road opened in 2010 can be used by leaders and communities to advocate for mother-tongue teaching. The coded record in Section 5 will allow researchers and civil society groups to monitor governments' adherence to the obligations already enshrined in law.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The study uses secondary sources and looks at each policy within the provisions. Classroom practice was not observed. The Single National Curriculum and the National Education Policy 2017 are not part of the corpus. Future research should: (a) re-code original policy documents by more than one coder; (b) investigate provincial policies beyond 2010; (c) explore Khyber Pakhtunkhwa model in classrooms; and (d) explore shape of language policy by digital and AI systems.

9. Conclusion

Pakistan's education policies had undergone several changes since 1947 but failed to make significant changes up to 2010. They called Urdu, English and the four provincial languages, and did not name the other sixty plus languages. They have imposed three dates for a national language to be used instead of English, and none of these dates have been achieved. English maintained his grip on the power routes and expanded them. Urdu was not given the status of a national symbol with the same force as English. The least gained was for the mother tongues. In six out of nine policies diversity was a problem to be resolved using a common language, or diversity was not mentioned at all. A rights view was only found in constitutional and provincial law and invariably ranked lower than the national language. The main contention of this study is that Pakistan's language-in-education policy has been 'promise-driven' and not 'plan-driven'. With the 18th Amendment, provinces now have the power to alter this. Their use of it will determine whether or not the next generation of Pakistani children learn in, and value, the languages they have at home.

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