The Current Situation of Teaching and Learning Pashto and Dari Languages at Primary Level in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Pashto and Dari are two national and official languages in Afghanistan, which are used as a medium of instruction. According to the Afghanistan Education Curriculum goals, national and foreign languages’ skills are placed in the first position to be achieved (MoE, 2003). Though these two languages have been taught from grades 1 to 12, the report “Grade 6 proficiency in Afghanistan 2013” says that: the native languages’ reading and writing skills are at a very low level at public primary schools (Lumely et al, 2015). The Afghanistan Ministry of Education (MoE) has been undergoing reforms in an attempt to address or solve this issue.

The purpose of the study is to highlight the current situation and issues of teaching and learning native languages and to point out the problems faced by teachers and students while teaching and learning these languages at primary schools in Afghanistan. A questionnaire consisting of multiple and open-ended questions was administered to a total of 100 language subject teachers and 100 fifth grade students in 6 different primary schools in the capital city Kabul.

The findings show that the current language teaching methods are teacher-centered, where teachers use textbooks and blackboard as their instruction materials in the class. Moreover, it was found that some students and teachers do not have access to the textbook and Teacher Guidebook.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Pashto and Dari languages, teacher-centered methods

1. Introduction and Background

Afghanistan is a landlocked country located in South-Central Asia. The total population of the country in the year 2018 was estimated at around 37 million on a land area of 652,864 sq. Km, divided into 34 provinces (World Bank, 2019).

The Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) take responsibility for the entire education system. The MoE is responsible for providing school education to the entire nation. There are 4 school levels: pre-school for nursery and kindergarten, a primary school for grades 1 to 6, a lower secondary school for grades 7 to 9, an upper secondary school for grades 10 to 12, and post-secondary for grades 13 to 14 (MoE, 2003). The MoE oversees 34 provincial departments of education, which in turn supervise all district offices. The MoHE is to provide and administrate higher education (Staff, 2016). Based on the country’s constitution “Education is the right of all citizens of Afghanistan, which shall be offered up to the bachelor level in the state educational institutes free of charge by the state” (Government of Afghanistan, 2004), of which 9 years in primary and lower secondary schools are compulsory. On graduation from upper and post-secondary education, they will be accepted to universities, teacher training colleges, or vocational
institutes according to the examination result.

There are more than 30 languages spoken in Afghanistan, of which Dari and Pashto are the official and national languages. According to the country’s education law, the language of teaching shall be selected from one of the two-state official languages, based on the current language spoken by the majority of the population residing in the area, per its related rule (MoE, 2008).

After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, educational reform was initiated by drafting a new curriculum framework. In the following year, the framework was put into effect, followed by the development of textbooks according to the framework. By June 2007, the primary school textbooks were almost completed in the two official languages, Dari and Pashto (Tatto and Mincu, 2009). Meanwhile, the Teacher Guidebook was introduced for the first time in the country’s education system, which provides additional instruction for teachers on how to teach the lessons (MoE, 2010). Pashto and Dari are part of these new textbooks that have been taught from grades 1 to 12, one as a first language and another as a second language based on the native speakers’ region. The number of teaching periods depends on each school level, and the native language is given more study hours than the second language (MoE, 2018). All modern Afghan constitutions, including the country’s constitution, have provided equal status to Dari and Pashto. In addition, Afghans are free to choose their language of education. Primary and secondary educations are available in both Pashto and Dari languages (Najibullah, F, 2003).

2. Statement of the problem

Learning Pashto and Dari languages in schools and educational institutions is compulsory (MoE, 2008). Based on the Afghanistan Educational Curriculum goals, national and foreign languages’ skills are placed in the first position to be achieved (MoE, 2003).

Though these two languages have been taught from grades 1 to 12, the report “Grade 6 proficiency in Afghanistan 2013” published by Australian Consult for Education Research (ACER) indicated “the native languages’ reading and writing skills are at a very low level, at public primary schools in Afghanistan”. This research was conducted with almost 6,000 students in 110 schools in 13 provinces representing over 360,000 students from the 5 regions of Afghanistan. It was found that 31% of 6th-grade students could not solve a simple math problem, 14% could not write a simple word, and 11% were unable to write a simple sentence. In this research, grade 6 students proved to perform equal to or lower than students in grade 4 in neighboring countries (Lumely, et al, 2015).

3. Purpose of the study

Language is a significant part of everyday life. It is used to communicate in every aspect. The role of languages is not only limited to communication but rather extended into the vast branches of knowledge and human sciences. Moreover, language plays a central role in learning. No matter what the subject area is. Students assimilate new concepts largely through language. That is when they listen to and talk, read, and write about what they are learning and relate this to what they already know. Likewise, Pashto and Dari languages, which have been taught as a subject in Afghanistan, can play an important role in improving education quality at the school level, but looking at the recent research findings, 6-grade primary school students have shown very poor performance in these two languages. Therefore, the research aims to examine the current situation of teaching and learning these languages and to find out the challenges and problems facing by language teachers at primary schools in Afghanistan.

4. Methodology

In this research, 100 fifth-grade students (50 male and 50 female) and 100 language teachers (56 male and 44 female) took part from both Pashto language and Dari language primary schools. The teachers and students were randomly selected from 6 different schools in two districts of Kabul City. For data collection, questionnaires, interviews, and class observation tools were used. The questionnaires consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended questions.
5. Finding

5.1 Teachers' responses regarding classroom teaching

As mentioned earlier, a questionnaire was conducted in both Pashto and Dari language schools targeting 100 fifth-grade students and 100 native language teachers, to find out the current situation of teaching and learning Pashto and Dari languages. The Figure below shows teacher responses about classroom teaching:

As displayed in Figure 5.1, only 14 teachers said that they always use Teacher Guidebook (TGB), while 35 of them stated they never use TGB, but during the class observation, no one of the teachers used TGB. In the case of a lesson plan, 91 percent responded that they always prepare their daily lesson plan; however, during the class observation, only 3 out of 6 teachers had their lesson plan. Regarding homework, 92 percent said that they always give homework to the students at the end of each lesson. This was found to be valid during the class observation. In terms of feedback on homework, 57 teachers replied that feedback is always given on students' homework. But during the class observation, it was found that teachers only see whether the students have done the homework or not rather than looking for the errors or mistakes committed by the students.

5.2 Teachers' responses regarding their access and training on TGB

Based on the questionnaire analysis, as shown in Figure 5.2, 65 of 100 teachers said they have access to TGB, while 35 of them do not have TGB. On the other hand, 48 teachers stated they had seen training on how to use TGB, but a huge proportion of the participants, 52 out of 100, said they had not been trained on how to use TGB.

Figure 5.1: Teachers’ responses regarding classroom teaching

Figure 5.2: Teachers’ responses on their access and training to TGB
5.3 Teachers’ view about the usefulness of TGB

When teachers were asked about the usefulness of TGB in classroom instruction, as shown in Figure 5.3, almost half of all respondents (49%) said it is completely useful, while another 16% stated it is partly useful, and as seen in the Figure above 35% of respondents ticked “I don’t know” to the mentioned question who actually do not have access to them.

![Figure 5.3: Teachers’ responses about the usefulness of TGB](image)

5.4 Teachers’ and students’ native language versus their teaching and learning language

Looking at Figure 5.4 shows that among the 100 teachers for 40 of them, their native language is Pashto, while 47 of them are teaching Pashto. On the other hand, for 60 of them, their native language is Dari, but only 53 of them are teaching Dari at primary schools. It explains that some language teachers are nonnative speakers. Similar to that, looking at the students’ case 65 out of 100 are Pashto speakers and the rest 35 of them are Dari speakers while 50 out of 65 Pashto speakers are studying at Pashto language schools and the other 15 are attending Dari language schools, which shows that some students are attending the schools where the medium of instruction is their second language, not their first language.

![Figure 5.4: Teachers’ and students’ native language and their teaching and learning language](image)
5.5 Current teaching materials

According to the current classroom teaching materials, as illustrated in Figure 5.5, all the teachers said they are using textbooks and board, and 70 of them said they are also using charts, while 35 of them replied that they are using flashcards as well. On the other hand, looking at students’ responses, it indicates that teachers are only using textbook and blackboard as their teaching resources in the classroom. This was also noticed during the class observation, where teachers did not use any teaching materials except textbooks and board.

![Figure 5.5: Teachers and students’ responses about the current teaching materials](image)

5.6 Most difficult language skill

When teachers and students were asked about the most difficult language skill for them to teach and learn. As shown in Figure 5.6, the majority of teachers and students said that reading and writing are the most difficult skills for them to teach and learn. Following that, some of them stated that understanding the context is also a challenge, but regarding speaking skills, it seems to be a challenge for a small number of teachers and students in the classroom.

![Figure 5.6: Most difficult skill for teachers to teach and students to learn](image)

5.7 Challenges facing by the language teachers

As shown in graph 5.7, 60 out of 100 teachers said that a large number of students is a huge challenge for them while teaching the class. 54 out of 100 also mentioned that teaching other subjects besides the main subject is another problem, following that 44 of them replied, that lack of textbooks is also problematic for them, and 19 out of 100 said teaching materials, which they hardly able to prepare. Also, 5 percent of them mentioned the time shortage as another problem that prevents them from conducting any class activities that need time.

![Figure 5.7: Challenges facing by the language teachers](image)
5.8 Teachers' recommendations

During the interview, teachers were asked to write their recommendations towards improving students' language skills. As shown in Figure 5.8, 32% of teachers suggested that new teaching methods and materials should be used in the classroom, and 15% of them insisted that preparation of a good lesson plan and its proper implementation is required, while 13% of them emphasized on increasing the reading and writing activities in the classroom, and other 10% of them said that students should be encouraged to read books other than school one and to give last 5 minutes of the class for writing activities. Some of them (9%) insisted on parents' support in order to improve students' language skills in the school.

6. Summary and Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to highlight the current situation of teaching and learning native languages at the primary level in Afghanistan. The study was successfully carried out in 6 different primary schools in the Capital city, Kabul. The study was based on questionnaires, interviews, and class observation. The participants were 100 fifth grade students and 100 primary school language teachers.

The findings show that the majority of the language teachers follow the teacher-centered approach in the classroom, and textbooks and blackboards are used as the main teaching material for the teachers. At the end of each lesson, teachers give plenty of homework to the students, but while checking the homework, they hardly ever provide feedback. It was also found that a number of the language teachers are nonnative speakers or not majored in the language. Likewise, some of the students are attending the schools based
Moreover, primary school teachers in Afghanistan hardly use TGB as their teaching resource. Meanwhile, 35% of primary school teachers do not have access to these books. And, 52% of the teachers said they had not seen any training relevant to TGB.

Finally, during the class observation, it was found that teachers do not conduct any other class activities rather than reading the book themselves first and then asked the students to read, while language learning requires practical teaching practices. It was also observed that during checking students’ homework, teachers only see whether they have done it or not rather than looking for the errors or mistakes committed by the students. However, as shown in graph 5.1, 57% of the teachers stated that they give feedback on homework.

To conclude, the current Pashto and Dari teaching approaches are teacher-centered based, while the textbooks are designed based on an active teaching approach that strongly requires sub-teaching materials and student-centered activities to be used appropriately. Using only the student textbook cannot be effective in teaching the contents. Therefore, to improve students’ native language skills, teachers are strongly recommended to follow the student-centered approach by providing sub-teaching materials. It is also recommending to follow TGB instruction while teaching these two languages at the primary level in Afghanistan.

References