

A QUR'ANIC VIEW OF MOTHER TONGUE AS THE MEDIUM OF EDUCATION

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Abstract. The study aims to find the Qur'anic perspective regarding first language as medium of education. An in-depth analysis of the text has been made. The study has applied Islamic critical theory and hermeneutic approach in order to deal with the text at two levels: contextual level and grammatical level. This article, on the basis of analysis of selected verses, argues that Qur'an supports first language as medium of education to disseminate knowledge among masses. Moreover, the results also support the view to get education through mother tongue. According to Qur'anic verses mother tongue facilitates the process of education. On the other hand, learning of other languages has also been encouraged.

Keywords: language, medium, education, mother tongue, critical theory, hermeneutic approach

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1. Introduction

The first language as the medium of education has been a vital debate all over the world (Blair 2016, Hynsjö and Damon 2016, Orellana, Martínez, Lee, and Montaña 2012). The researchers and educationists regard it as the first step to disseminate education to masses. It is the first sign of equality to deliver education to people. On the other hand, in many colonized countries, education is delivered in a second language. A big ratio of the population is educated in foreign language(s), actually alien to them. As a result of that delivering education to the masses in these countries has become a challenge (Brock-Utne 2001, 2002).

Taking Qur'anic point of view implies that Qur'an has been the single source of education of people even in the time when technology was scarce. Moreover, it is also an important point to analyze the Qur'anic perspective as it educated the people of Arabia who had no formal education. Qur'an not only explains its way

of education but also gives clear information about the previous books and Gospels revealed on other prophets. Additionally, it also offers the proper way to educate the masses. The present study is aimed at investigating the source of Qur'anic view of first language as a medium of education. Previous studies, regarding Qur'an, mostly focus on the significance of education (Abukari 2014, Alavi 2008, Halstead 2004, Meijer 2000), teaching (Basuhail 2013, Elhadj 2010, Kasim and Yusoff 2014) and translation (Almenoar 2014, Jassem 2003), but the studies about the Qur'anic perspective regarding the medium of education are conspicuous. To the best of the authors' understanding, Qur'anic text has not been analyzed from the perspective of first language as the medium of education. An attempt in this respect has been made to fill the gap. The present study has centered on the following research questions. What is Qur'an's interpretation regarding first language as the medium of education? What is the reason of favoring first language as the medium of education? What is Qur'an's view of learning other languages?

It is also important to mention the delimitation of this study. Firstly, this study is only an analysis of Qur'anic text to understand its viewpoint on language as a medium of education. Qur'an is regarded as a "powerful and the highest authoritative scripture for reference in Islam enjoying overwhelming reverence among Muslims" (Abukari 2014). Therefore, this study is only limited to the Qur'anic text and it has not included *ahadith* and other exegetical explanations of the Qur'an offered by religious scholars.

2. Literature review

2.1. Qur'anic view of first language

The literature review is based on the importance of first language in the Qur'anic perspective. Qur'an clearly explains the importance of language with respect to the different nations that it discusses. It mentions almost four main books which were revealed through messenger to different nations. The detail of these is as follows:

1. Tawrat (Old Testament) – This is the revelation that Allah sent to Musa (Moses), peace be upon him. It was revealed in the native language of that time called Hebrew.
2. Zabur (Psalms) – This is the revelation that Allah sent to Daud (David), peace be upon him. The Holy Scripture was revealed in Aramaic, the first language of the community.
3. Injeel (New Testament) – This is the revelation that Allah sent to Isa (Jesus), peace be upon him. It was in the Aramaic language, the native language spoken and understood by the Noble Prophet (PBUH) and the people of the times.
4. The Scripture of Abraham is also mentioned in the Qur'an. The scrolls of Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) may have been revealed in either Akkadian, the

language spoken in Ur, or in Phoenician, the language spoken in Canaan. Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) migrated from Ur to Canaan around 1900 BCE. (IslamiCity, 1997)

The Qur'an verifies the revelation of all the above mentioned books/scriptures. An examination of the language of these books also reveals that these books or gospels were revealed in the native languages to the communities which were addressed by Allah through His Messengers. The initial aim of these revelations was to show the right path to the humanity (Alavi 2008, Halstead 2004, Zaid 2011). In other words, one of the aims of these books/scripture was to educate the illiterate people (Abu Rabi, 1989). In this perspective, the people were educated in their native languages.

2.2. The modern view of mother tongue as the medium of education

The modern understanding of language learning recommends first language as the medium of education especially at elementary level. While working on elementary education, Capstick (2010) describes the advantages of first language as the source of medium at primary level and explains that the formation of fundamental concepts takes place more effectively in mother tongue because children are able to relate school education with home environment. Capstick's (2010) research can be linked to the motivation for learning among children at elementary level. Research has also been done in the context of education in countries where the first language is not the medium of education. Mehrotra's (1998) research on two different groups of children highlights the importance of first language education where a group of children was exposed to mother tongue at primary level and a second group was educated in a foreign language. His results reveal that students who learned to read in their mother tongue showed better performance learning the second language more rapidly, as compared to those who were first exposed to a foreign language directly. Lockheed and Verspoor's (1991) experimental research based on the use of mother tongue and foreign language reveals, "Students who have learned to read in their mother tongue learn to read in a second language more quickly than do those who are first taught to read in the second language" (p. 153). It is evident that the use of mother tongue not only facilitates learners' comprehension of the basic concepts, but also assists at the initial stages of learning the foreign language.

The problem of language has also been associated with literacy and progress of countries. Obanya (1980), in the context of Africa views, "An African child's major problem is linguistic because instruction is given in a language that is not normally used in his immediate environment, a language which neither children learn nor the teacher understands and uses as well". Education in foreign language is not only difficult for students but also a challenge for teachers as well. Fafunwa's research (1990) on education reveals a correlation between underdevelopment and the use of a foreign language. According to him 'imposed medium of education' is the main hurdle in the literacy of these countries. According to Brock-Utne (2001), linguistic consideration is the basic point for the

purpose of facilitating education for all. Without giving importance to learners' mother tongue in under-developed countries, the problem of overcoming the illiteracy becomes difficult.

Educational policies of different countries are also regarded as one of the reasons behind the imposed medium of education. As a result of that a foreign language is given preference over mother tongue. Coleman (2010), working on situation of languages in Pakistan, says:

Not surprisingly when a given language is given no role to play in the education system, many parents respond by not encouraging the use of that language at home. A very effective way of killing a language is to deny it any place in the education system: parents themselves will then tend to take the next step of marginalizing the local language within the family in favour of educationally privileged language or languages (pp. 17–18).

Shamim (2007) relates utilitarian purposes for sidelining one language and accepting the other as the medium of education which results in parental preferences towards English to improve their future. In conclusion, the government policies drive people to learn a foreign language by associating utilitarian benefits and then by driving parental preferences.

3. Islamic critical theory and hermeneutic approach

The theoretical model for this study is Islamic Critical Theory (ICT). ICT is in line with critical theory but works within Islamic view. The theory is equally useful to consider "specific record of human success or failure to recognize and heed God's sunnah (God's unalterable law, or practice, for mankind) as revealed and implemented by his messengers and prophets" (Stowasser, 1996). Using Islamic critical theory, the aim is to examine the Qur'anic texts in the light of first language as medium of education. The systematic analyses are made by applying hermeneutic approach under the umbrella of Islamic critical theory for this study.

Barlas (2002) specifies the objective of this approach as interpreting texts considering the contextually legitimate reading and the role of pre-understanding in the interpretative process. Abukari (2014) views hermeneutic approach as the interpretation of the text by giving detailed reading to determine implied meanings and its various parts linked to full understanding of the text.

Following this approach, two features of the text from Qur'an are apportioned to draw conclusions: contextual aspects; and its grammatical functions. The contextual side suggests the context in which Qur'an was revealed and the hints it gives about the revelation of other books and their respective languages. On the other hand, grammatical patterns are worth considering. The purpose of looking into the grammatical patterns is to analyze the importance of text according to Arabic language, which might not be possible through translation. Arabic grammatical constructions are quite complex, however, this study will only include the use of grammatical categories to analyze the structure of the text.

4. The Qur'anic view of mother tongue as the medium of education

This section deals with the important part of the study. The analysis of the text will center around four themes produced from Qur'an: These four themes revolve around the concept of language and the medium of education.

1. First language as the medium of the education
2. The language of messengers
3. Language and understanding
4. Learning other languages

4.1. First language as the medium of education

Most of the verses from the Holy Qur'an reflect that mother tongue as the medium of education is the better approach to educate a nation. First of all Qur'an cites that the books have been revealed in the mother tongue languages of the communities where the messengers were sent by Allah Almighty. The following verse gives the idea that in order to educate people and to put them in the right direction, Allah Almighty selected the first languages of the nations. Furthermore, Allah ratifies the importance of mother tongue. Allah counts his revelation of Qur'an in Arabic as blessing and portrays the situation if it had been in non-Arabic language for Arabic people. *And if We had sent this as a Qur'an in a foreign language, they would have said: "Why are not its Verses explained in detail? What! [A Book] not in Arabic and [the Messenger] an Arab?"* (Qur'an 41:44). The Qur'anic text explains that if the prophet had been a non-Arab, or if the Qur'an had been in another language, the people would not be able to understand and to believe the prophet. The main purpose of Holy Qur'an was to educate people and to make them understand the right path and that was only possible in the native language of the people and with the native Messenger from that community. The whole situation has been explained in a contradictory way to make the reader understand the importance of language.

Grammatically, the conditional sentence has been used in Qur'an and the condition has been set for learning foreign language. The second part of conditional sentence is related to clarity of concepts. The objection on the part of people has also been explained that concepts in foreign language demand more detail on the part of people. In addition, the word *We* in the verse refers to Allah and this reference reveals Allah's choice of selecting the language of Qur'an for community which means that the language has been selected intentionally for the convenience of the people. A similar principle has been applied to other communities which were addressed through their languages.

4.2. The language of Messengers

"And We sent not a Messenger except with the language of his people, in order that he might make (the Message) clear for them" (Qur'an 14:4). The purpose of sending the Messenger with the native language of the people has been linked with the understanding of community. This is not applicable only to last Messenger of

Allah, but it has been described as the general rule in the case of all Messengers and books. This implies that Allah has not only sent the books in the native languages but also the Messenger. The holy books are regarded as guides and the Messengers are regarded as the guiders. Moreover, this book also confirms the revelation of other books.

And this Qur'an is not such as could ever be produced by other than Allah (Lord of the heavens and the earth, but it is a confirmation of (the revelations) which was before it (i.e. Taurat (Torah), and the Injeel (New Testament)) and a full explanation of the Book (i.e. laws described for mankind) - wherein there is no doubt- from the Lord of the Alamin (mankind, jinn, and all that exists) (Qur'an 10:37-38).

Qur'an also acknowledges the revelation of other books and mentions other messengers as well. However, there is no complete detail of these books in which languages they were revealed, but it is clearly mentioned that these books were in the native languages of people who were addressed by Allah.

From grammatical point of view the word We in the initial verse implies to Allah. Usually in Arabic language the negation (i.e. We sent not a Messenger) comes first and then comes the exception (i.e. except with the language of his people) as we find in this verse. The negation in this verse reflects that language of people is the prime importance because it facilitates the way to convey the message to community. On the other hand, the word Messenger has not been referred to any specific Messenger. It refers to all the Messengers sent by God. In other words, the whole verse reflects a general principle to address people or communities. Therefore the selection of the native language and the native Messenger has been applied not only in case of Arabic community, but also in case of all communities which were addressed before them. There the native language of the communities has been the main source of their medium of education.

4.3. Language and understanding

So We have made this (the Qur'ân) easy in your own tongue (O Muhammad), only that you may give glad tidings to the Muttaqûn, and warn with it the Ludd (most quarrelsome) people (Qur'an 19:97).

Arabic was the mother tongue of the Arabs by the time of the revelation of Qur'an. Therefore, the initial purpose was to address a person in Arabic which was easier for them to understand. The other implication is that mother tongue serves as the best medium of communication from Qur'anic point of view. "Verily, We have made it a Qur'ân in Arabic that you may be able to understand (its meanings and its admonitions)" (Qur'an 43:3). The concept of understanding through first language has been mentioned time and again. "Verily, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'ân in order that you may understand" (Qur'an 12:2). Contextually, in these verses, the Arabic community has been addressed which shows that the above verses only focus the revelation of Qur'an. However, keeping in view the

explanation of other verses, explained through other sections, it can be taken as a principle of God to deal with communities through His Messengers.

The grammatical construction of the above three verses finds in common the word *We* which refers to Allah. In these verses Allah is acknowledging His choice of revealing the Holy Qur'an in Arabic. The next part of the sentences also provides the reason which relates to understanding. Only in their native languages can people understand with ease.

Understanding through language has also been termed as the main source of knowledge. On the basis of one's knowledge and understanding, people have been held literate and illiterate in Qur'an. "Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who endued with understanding that receive admonition" (Qur'an 39:9). It means those who possess better understanding are knowledgeable and those who cannot understand are not equal to them. The concept of understanding has not been associated with the superficial meanings of the words. "Those who listen to the word and follow the best (meaning) in it: Those are the ones whom Allah has guided, and those who are the ones endued with understanding" (Qur'an 39:18). It implies that understanding has been termed as a blessing which has counted time and again. The source of better understanding has been linked to the first language.

On the other hand, those who do not understand have been termed as the worst of living creatures. Moreover, their lack of understanding renders their other senses useless (Zaid 2011). "Verily the worst of living (living) creatures with Allah are the deaf and dumb, those who understand not (i.e. disbelievers)" (Qur'an 6:22). As a result of that they have been referred to as worst not merely among the human beings but all the living creatures. "The similitude of those who were charged with the (obligations of the) Mosaic Law, but who subsequently failed in those (obligations), is that of a donkey which carries huge tomes (but understands them not)" (Qur'an 62:5). The people who do not understand have been termed as illiterate.

Linking all the previous verses it can be determined easily that the first language is linked to better understanding and in addition it is the primary faculty that sub-serves the use of other faculties of human mind. That is why the focus on language has been counted multiple times in referring to the revelation of the Holy Qur'an itself in Arabic.

4.4. Learning other languages

Learning other languages has also been encouraged. Qur'an terms the different languages as the sign of Allah's creation. "And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colours. Verily, in that are indeed signs for men of sound knowledge" (Qur'an 30:22). Learning other languages has also been termed as the *sound knowledge*. Learning other languages paves ways to knowledge where one is able to exchange his knowledge with others and vice versa. Difference of *languages* and *colors* has been termed as *His Signs*. Colors in this verse refers to people of different

identities, which have again been termed as the sign of Allah's diversity. Therefore diversity in languages and identities is a sign of Divine power.

The comparison of the above with all the previous verses unfolds that all the verses in Qur'an which relate to the importance of mother tongue focus on learning and understanding of the communities, addressed by God. However, the verse regarding the second language learning has been explained as a sign of blessing to get awareness about other cultures. This encourages learning other languages as well.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the importance of the first language as the medium of education. In this perspective, the references from Qur'an were sought to find out the underlying view. A number of references were found regarding the importance of language and education.

The Qur'anic perspective regarding the importance of the first language as the medium of education can be seen from three main perspectives. Firstly, the language of the community, where the religious books or scriptures were revealed, secondly, the language of the community upon which the books or scriptures were revealed, and thirdly the language of messengers who introduced these books to the respective communities or nations. According to Qur'an, all three sources were bound to the mother tongue of communities, addressed by God. The reason is quite clear to educate illiterate people and to show them the right path. On the other hand, Allah regards it as blessing for people, reminding the fact that if anyone of the above three agents would have been in a foreign language, it would have become difficult for the masses to understand them and hence disseminate the message itself.

Therefore, Qur'an clearly mentions that in order to educate a community, there should not be the barrier of language among the main agents involved. The holy books in this case may refer to the content, the messengers refer to the guide/scholars and the communities refer to learners, students. According to Qur'an, the language of content, the language of scholars, and the language of learners, should be common and this can be achieved easily by involving the learners' mother tongue. The Holy Qur'an explains this commonness of language, content and community in the case of all the books revealed by Allah. The modern research also supports the same view by stressing the importance of the first language especially in the case of primary education. According to Capstick (2010), "Teaching a child in the language it speaks at home brings parents closer to education process and allows them a participation in their child's education that is impossible if the language the child is taught is in foreign- be it English, Urdu or anyone".

The reason which has been counted time and again in favor of the first language is related to the strength of understanding. It has been repeated more than

thrice that Qur'an was revealed in the Arabic (which was the first language of Arabs) so that people could understand it easily. Language without high level of mutual understanding cannot deliver the desired results of learning and education.

Learning of other languages has also been supported by Qur'an and has been termed as the source of sound knowledge. We know that Islam spread in many regions of the world even during the time of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) including non-Arab countries. The teachings of Islam once transferred from Arabic to other languages could be spread to people belonging to various non-Arab nations/race. Moreover, people also started learning the Arabic language. But the main focus of the study is to examine the rule of Almighty Allah in Islam to educate illiterate people and the first blessing which is counted time and again by the Almighty Allah in his Qur'an is the language of the prophet and the language of the nation. The study also implies that Qur'an is not against learning other languages, but when it comes to educating a nation, then it is the mother tongue which has been preferred in delivering knowledge to masses.

6. Conclusion

From the examination of specific verses noted above, it is evident that Qur'an explicitly favors the mother tongue of people in disseminating knowledge among them in order to make them understand the message. Hence, the ability to understand the particular concepts in any field of knowledge, has a close link with the first language of the people. However, the Qur'an unequivocally supports the learning of other languages. Diversity in languages has been described as one of the Signs of Divinity.

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