



A Qualitative Investigation of the Perceptions of *Madrassa* Students towards English Language

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Abstract

The value of English language has been on the rise since the United States of America became the Superpower. English has become important and more like a Universal Language. In Pakistan too, it plays significant role in educational as well as professional circles. It is used as the official language in Pakistan. Among the various educational streams in Pakistan, one is *Madrassa*. *Madrassas* are religious seminaries; educational entities that impart religious education to students. The argument of this study is that these seminaries do not have effective teaching mechanism for English language teaching in their curriculum. This study intends to investigate the perceptions of students towards English Language, who had been to *Madrassa* or still going there as part-time students. The data is collected in the department of Islamic Studies, University of Malakand. Only enrolled students were included in the study. The number of respondents was ascertained from the departmental office and a total of 36 students were found qualified to participate in the study. The data was collected using interview method to investigate the views of the respondents about the importance of English language in educational and professional spheres. The significance of this study is that it highlights the need as well as reforms required in the curriculum. The study concluded that majority of students responded positively towards the need and value of English Language for *madrassa* students and implementation of practical policies in this regard.

Keywords: English, Students, Pakistan, *Madrassa*, Perceptions, Islamic Studies, University of Malakand

Introduction

This research is undertaken to investigate the avenues to improve the quality of *madrassa* education. Most importantly, it is an attempt to investigate the possible way outs and resources to subtly include English language learning and teachings in the traditional system of education in *madrassas* (Anjum, 2017).



Madrassa, plural *Madrassas*, is an Arabic word. In literal terms, it means a place for education; school either secular or religious (Blanchard, 2007). It is believed that the birth of *Madrassa* happened during 9th century in the Muslim world (Ali, 2009) and then the Turks brought the system to the Indian Subcontinent. Initially, the syllabi of *Madrassas* included Qur'an, *Hadith* along with subjects like Astronomy, Mathematics and other human sciences. With the passage of time, the syllabi got restricted only to Islamic teachings (Iqbal & Raza, 2015).

The word *madrassa* is considered to be derived accurately from the Arab vocab 'Dars' which means 'to study' and since the word *madrassa* is an adverb of place therefore its complete literal meaning can be defined as 'a place of study.' Thereby, in the Islamic history *madrassa* is viewed by many as a foundation that serves as a primary medium for training religious education and to provide Islamic teachings. As per the Islamic testimony, the *madrassa* system was well considered as a carrier of knowledge. *Madrassas* have always helped in providing an alternative to the Western education system, while it simultaneously aided in providing due support for the Islamic society to withstand (Baugh, 2002).

In the early years of the establishment of the *madrassa* education system, it held profound importance and held considerable value among the people. It was a place where significant issues and subject matters were discussed including topics from astronomy, science, physics, literature, architecture, and politics etc. Hence, new things were learned. Nevertheless, *madrassas* provided the people with an opportunity to share ideas and to develop new and noteworthy wisdom. Indeed it served the purpose of learning and spreading meaningful ideas and knowledge (Anzar, 2003).

However, over the past few years, this system of education which was once considered the most appropriate and the utmost credible source of education and knowledge has now deteriorated in its quality. Multiple reasons are associated and attached with this notion. Additionally, the misconception of *madrassa* education being limited to the religious education and knowledge is rather new and self-developed recently (Bhattacharya, 2013). This notion has badly affected the image of Muslim *madrassas* and hence harmed its development.

These misconceptions have been developed lately even though the Islamic history represents *madrassa* as such a learning institute where different subjects were discussed and information was exchanged. Yet, the current *madrassa* system lacks behind in various aspects and has ruined the real image and value of *madrassa* education. The current curriculum taught at the *madrassas* also leads into another heated debate (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004). The role of curriculum in *madrassa* education system is rather shady and one of the reasons observed is that the curriculum is limited to the religious knowledge and expertise and seriously lacks any current knowledge of modern science related subjects.

At the time of independence, there were around 200 *madrassas* in Pakistan, which have now increased to 32,272 *madrassas*, according to Pakistan Education Statistics 2015-16. The number is continuously on the increase. The syllabi of these traditional *madrassas* follow the standard of *Dars-i-Nizami* and other than Shia *madrassas*, all of them teach *Hanafi Fiqh*, the texts of which are 500 years old if not more. The centuries old texts and restricted syllabus lead to stagnation of knowledge (Rahman, 2005).

The incident of September 11, 2001, sparked the need for *madrassa* reforms in the whole Muslim world. The then president of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf proposed to bring



reforms in the *madrassa* curricula, widening its scope and bringing *madrassas* to the mainstream of education (Ali, 2012). Among the various steps towards *madrassa* reforms, one was the Madrassa Reforms Project (MRP). The aim of this project was to add subjects like English, General Sciences and Social Sciences to the curricula of *madrassas* (Zaidi, 2013). This project almost failed to achieve its objectives somewhat on part of severe opposition from *madrassas* but basically because of lack of preparation and determination in the implementation (Iqbal & Raza, 2015). Other than that, the government has made several attempts to introduce *madrassa* reforms which have embraced only a tiny section of them (Butt, 2012).

The 32,272 *madrassas* in Pakistan have an enrolment of 2.26 million students as per PES 2015-16, but this figure, as cited by certain newspapers, has reached above 3 million. Moreover, *madrassas* have little or no space for English language learning or teaching (Rahman, 1999). Thus, the linguistic capital is accumulated in *madrassas*. The students rarely find means to compete in the English-oriented labour market and fall short of contributing their part in the country's progress (Ali, 2009).

The books read and taught are written in Urdu language and thereby the teacher too teaches the religious knowledge in the local language. The lack of contemporary requirement results in drop off in the standard of the entire program of study (Hussain & Qureshi, 2007). Such resistance from secular subjects within the courses taught in the *madrassa* makes it difficult for the students to do well in their professional sphere as the curriculum has not been designed accordingly.

Scholars belonging to a specific school of thought believe that certain subject areas within the curriculum of *madrassa* education nurtures provocative behaviour which in result triggers extremism and fanaticism among *madrassa* students (Bolton & Kachru, 2006). Therefore, the need for Islamic education along with a balanced amount of modern education is required for the upward progress of this education system. Religious teachings alone are not sufficient to survive in the current times of digital technology and innovation therefore the need to introduce English language along with some aspects of modern education is mandatory for the progress of *madrassa*'s (Nunan, 2003).

Moreover, language has always been a medium for communicating ideas, thoughts and knowledge. It's not only the chief source of communication but also something which makes us humans. The world has witnessed thousands of languages; all created with an intent to connect and communicate. Just like other languages, English too is a language used originally by the British natives. However, as the British rule spread across the globe, their language progressed too. With the passage of time, English became more or less the primary or secondary language of multiple countries worldwide (Coleman, 2010).

Likewise, Pakistan has had a history of being ruled by the British rulers for over a century and thereby she too has suffered a lot from the after effects of British colonialism. This has not only influenced the political system of our state but also the linguistic standards within. In the current times, the importance of English language is ever increasing, hence the need for it to be learned is essentially required (Sarwar, 2001).

Nonetheless, English language holds considerable importance in the field of education. It is among the most spoken languages globally and thereby holds humongous worth. Internationally, English holds great value and substance (Nashruddin, 2015). In addition to this, English language is widely used and is dominant in most areas of communication. These are a few of the



major reasons why the mastery of English language is becoming a necessity of the current times and is an essential need for the progress and personal development of all nations.

However, the *madrassa* does not tend to offer a thorough understanding of all important subject areas or languages and majorly sticks to the encouragement of Arabic language. The restriction to a single language i.e. Arabic halts its progression. This has been traditionally true as in the early times *madrassas* mostly served an opposite approach of the spiritual set in order to reduce the chances of English language and culture to spread within the subcontinent. English had been completely opposed by most of the Islamic teachers; thinking of it as a Western agenda, consequently refraining from its use (Hussain & Qureshi, 2007). In addition to this, English as a language was and is still perceived as a threat to Islam by many fundamentalists and that is precisely how the *madrassas* have been able to maintain the love for Arabic on spiritual basis.

Even though the national language of Pakistan is Urdu but English language has attained the status of official language within the state. The use and application of English language, therefore, is important not only within the education system but also in the professional sphere of life (Bhattacharya, 2013). Conversely, over the years the government has failed in developing policies to promote English language among the masses and that is one of the major reasons why a big chunk of the entire population cannot speak, write, read or understand English language. A relatively smaller segment is currently able to comprehend the language and most of the population remains ignorant. Since colonial rule until 2009; Urdu was declared to be the medium of communication for masses while English was limited to the elites as per the educational policy. Until after 2009, evident changes were made within the national education policy, thereby the use of English was made compulsory for masses. Nevertheless, this change still hasn't been well implemented since there has been no check and balance of these *madrassas* and their accountability is doubtful. Nevertheless the religious education institutes i.e. the *Madrassas* fail to implement this change.

Madrassa education system seems to be unsuccessful in meeting the requirements of the current competitive times. Its curriculum is thus unable to deal with the modern challenges and that is why the quality of students that it produces is relatively low as compared to other students. These students fail to make a mark in their professional careers and struggle in finding a place for employment. Additionally, these students are unable to contribute in the mainstream economic activities and barely make the two ends meet. The *madrassa* education system does not provide possibilities to its students to progress in the professional sphere of life, thereby alienates the students from the true essentials of the viable life (Coleman, 2010). The studies depict that the graduates of the *madrassa* education system are at a substantial loss within the job market as compared to their peers from other school systems as it is often believed that these *madrassa* student lack the necessary skills to compete in the hard-hitting job environment. These students have significant amount of deficiency in their communication, comprehension and social skills; therefore, fall behind others. They have almost narrow career opportunities and struggle to get better employment.

These *madrassas* are marginalized due to the lack of using English language; therefore, the centrality of this language requires great focus. It is the need of the hour to empower these students in order to able them in setting up a stable and secure professional career. One cannot progress by excluding English but by including it within the system of education. Likewise, this reflects the need for the integration of modern and traditional education within this system which



is principally needed to improve its standard. It is also observed that the facilities of English language within these *madrassas* are equal to none and they do not have the urge to work on it either. Nevertheless, the teachings and learning of English as a language cannot be considered in a vacuum; instead, it needs to be scrutinized in the broader social context (Nashruddin, 2015). Additionally, there are multiple positive outcomes of including English language within the curriculum and *madrassa* education system. It would not only improve the literacy rate but would also enhance the competencies of these students. This language development would help them in their higher educational and professional career (Bolton & Kachru, 2006). This would also help in producing highly valued and qualified individuals within the competitive market. Lastly, English language would help them in communicating with the world and would make them able to explore the unknown. Hence, it will open doors for better avenues and opportunities.

The increasing value of English language in our daily lives and its lack in the *madrassas* arises the grave need of English language reforms in *madrassas*. The reforms that were made in the past in *madrassas* acclaimed negative response with fault both on the part of the implementation process as well as the *madrassa* students and teachers. Therefore, before implementing any new reforms it is necessary to understand the perceptions of the *madrassa* students (as well as teachers) and their level of acceptance towards any reforms in this regard, to avoid future failures. Therefore, the current study has been designed to get an understanding of the perceptions of *madrassa* students about the importance of English language.

Research Questions

The current study is intended to answer the following research question:

What are the perceptions of the *madrassa* students towards the role and importance of English language?

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to investigate the perceptions of the *madrassa* students about English in the context of its significance in educational and professional sphere.

Methods and Procedure

Nature of the Study

This research study is qualitative in nature. It aims to investigate the perceptions of students about the role of English language, especially in educational and professional spheres.

Population and Sampling

Target population of the study is *madrassa* graduate/students enrolled in Department of Islamic Studies, University of Malakand. The subjects belong to B.S, M.A and M.Phil degree programmes. Their general education before university varied from B.A to B.Sc, M.A and Diploma. The total number of the respondents was 36, out of which we were able to reach out to 26, due to the limitations of time and access. The rationale, for choosing these specific students, as population of the research, is that these *madrassa* students have a better experience of the life



outside *madrassa*. Hence, they may better perceive the role and need of English language in their lives as Islamic Scholars.

Locale of the Study

The subjects are students of University of Malakand, who went to *madrassas* mainly located in various villages and towns of Malakand Division and a number of them also went to *madrassas* in Peshawar, Islamabad, Karachi, and Punjab.

Tools of the Data Collection

The data is collected through open-ended interview questions. We opted for this tool in order to get a large amount of in-depth data in short time and also because perceptions are psychological and requires in-depth understanding.

Analysis and Ethical Issues

The collected data is analysed thematically, placing similar responses of the respondents under one theme and carrying out a discussion on it. Considering the research ethics, a complete code is derived for the respondents, keeping their identities/names confidential. The codification is adapted from Roney (2000).

Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the main findings of the study and its analysis. Inductive approach was adopted to collect data through interview method. The data in this section is analysed thematically, and discusses various themes arising from the participant's views guided by the objectives of the study. Direct responses of the participants are also ^{coded} based on the profundity and detail of their experience; direct quotations from the subjects are also included (See appendix for identification key).

Significance of English in Preaching and Communication

English has become an important language to communicate all around the world. It is widely used among non-native speakers for interaction which makes it the most common language for communication worldwide. Generally only one out of four users of English is the native speaker of the language (Crystal, 2003). It has got the status of global language (Crystal, 2003; Gnutzmann, 1999) so, needed for interaction on international level. Therefore, it has become the medium of intercultural communication (Meierkord, 1996) and has become a universal language. Through our study we find that majority of the subjects showed full awareness and agreement about the current status and importance of English language. And because of this status of Universal Language they wanted to learn English language in order to communicate around the world to preach the message of Islam. One of the subjects said that Islam is a true and humble religion. Its message should be spread to the other nations of the world as well. And because of the universal role of English language, its learning is important (24M31_P1_10F).

The informants also wanted to learn English language in order to understand and answer the objections that non-believers raise on Islam. While answering a question about the importance of English language in communication, one of the respondent said that learning English to them is



important because ‘to explain our beliefs and thoughts perfectly to the non-Muslim world and to make ourselves ready to defend ourselves with proper arguments and answers (26M26_P1_10F). Greater number of participants considered English as an important and worth learning language for *Ulama* and *madrassa* students. Due to its current importance it has become a necessary or can be’ helpful for *Ulama* to depend themselves impressively and preach the message of Islam to the world.

Importance of English in Higher Education and Profession

English is used as a medium of instruction and documentation in universities worldwide. It has got the status of official language in Pakistan. Higher level examinations are also held in English language in Pakistan.’ Passing examinations in English then opens doors to higher levels of studying and to employment opportunities (Coleman 2010), as English is the most commonly used language in business world. Almost 93% of the subjects said that it is impossible for a *madrassa* student to understand and fill the forms for admission at college and university level without doing any English language course. One of our subject mention an important point that ‘this year 2000 candidates applied for M.Phil Islamyat, UOM but only 22 passed and majority of them were non-*madrassa* students while there were majority of *madrassa* students among the overall candidates, the only reason for this was the lack of *madrassa* students in English even though they were/are more competent than non-*madrassa* students’ (25M30-P1-12C). In Pakistan majority of the tests and interviews for higher education and jobs are conducted in English language or contain English as a compulsory portion.

One of the respondent who completed her *Darsi Nizami* Course which is equivalent to masters in Islamyat and Arabic language from Jami Ayesha Siddiqa Madrassa Islamabad share her story that “I lost Gold medal in B.S Islamyat just because I am not good at English, and because of the English problem I had to take admission in B.S even though I am qualified for M.Phil” (15F23-B3-8A). Many subjects even said that *madrassa* students are more competent in their subject than the students who did M.Phil or masters in Islamyat because they spent almost 10 to 12 years for learning those things but they always lag behind because of this incompetence in English language. As a subject said, “*Madrassa* graduates always face great difficulty in their professional lives just because they don’t know/are not competent in English” (26M26-P1-8F). Another respondent added, “Even tests of specific posts like *Qarya* and *Tajweed* for *madrassa* students, are conducted in English language” (21F18-B1-6B). In countries like Pakistan where English enjoys the status of official language one needs to have good communication skills in English before stepping into professional world.

Open Doors to Modern Research and Development

Around 86% of our subjects showed interest in learning English language and making it a part of *madrassas* curriculum because it is the language of modern development, computer, media, press, international travel and communication .most of research and studies in a given scientific field is published in English language. In education, at postgraduate level, undergraduate level and research level English is used nowadays. The status of global language made English a language of science. Around 98% online scientific research papers are published in English. Learning English is not only important to learn from others but also for publishing own work that will help it to recognized globally (Rajwani & Gohel 2012). The participants of our study



showed agreement on the point that through English they can get access to vast collection of knowledge. As one respondent said, “English open the doors to study the research advances and developments of other especially non-Muslim countries” (24M31-P1-10G).

Inclination of Madrassa Students and Teachers towards English

Through our study we find that large number of students and teachers are inclined towards learning English language. As a participant mention “My *madrassa* teacher asked me that if I teach him English, he will teach me further Islamic knowledge in exchange. *Madrassa* teachers and students are very inclined towards English but the lack of environment and funds are responsible for our lack in English” (12M22-MF-4D). Other view regarding this is “Majority of the *madrassa* students as well as teachers are very much inclined towards English because of its growing need in today’s life especially for Islamic Scholars and their responsibility of spreading the message of Islam and tackling the anti-Islam beliefs and notions of the Non-Muslim countries but *madrassas* can’t afford the wages of English teachers and the government do not supply us with enough funds or usually none at all” (26M26-P1-8F).

According to British council report, the representatives of numerous *madrassas* in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and [ex-]FATA contended that English language is their basic need for advanced level education, government employment and as a door to knowledge present a bright and positive reflection of Islam to the West, to spread the significance of Islam and to be part of harmonious relationship among nations of the world (Coleman, 2010).

No importance of English for the Life Afterworld

According to Zaidi (2013), people in *madrassa*, traditionally, oppose the heavy changes in their system due to the fact that to them they only need prayer leaders and teachers. In their opinion, the prevailing curriculum is sufficient to provide that stuff. Though we discussed the importance of English language from different perspectives and majority of our subjects showed full agreement with the fact that English language is necessary to move in the modern world. But some of our subjects showed disagreement with this view that being *madrassa* students we need any exposure to English language. According to them, “English language has its importance for worldly life but for the Afterlife, it has no value at all” (11M20-B1-4B; 20M19-B1-3B). Two of the subjects remain neutral in their views. They were aware of the importance of English language in current context but according to them, “No doubt English has become very important in today’s life but *madrassas* are basically for Islamic knowledge and Arabic so, English could be taught at higher level like *Ilm* (education) but there is no particular need at primary level. One should learn only enough of English to get by in this life.” (21F18-B1-6B; 22F18-B1-4A).

Findings

From the discussion of the major themes derived from the analysis of the data, the researchers have deduced the following findings:

- The analysis of the data collected results in the findings that majority (92%) the students of *madrassas* (as well as the teachers) are significantly inclined towards learning of English Language.



- The students (**100%**) show full awareness towards the role and importance that English language has gained in today's world.
- The subjects (**92%**) also showed complete understanding of the need of English language for education and profession in the current context of English as the *Lingua Franca*.
- Around **85%** of our subject showed interest in learning English language and making it a part of *madrassas'* curriculum because it is the language of modern development, computer, media, press, international travel and communication.
- The subjects (**92%**) accept and show the need of English language teaching and learning for them in order to carry out their role as Islamic Scholars in particular.
- Only **7%** agreed that English should only be taught in higher levels of *madrassas* like *Ilm*, since they don't really need it before that. Further, **7%** said that there is no need of English language in the After Life and it is the After Life that they seek.

Conclusion

Thus, it becomes clear that English language has become a need for *madrassa* students and teachers to compete the challenges of the modern world. They need exposure to English Language to upgrade their social status by getting opportunities to higher education and better employment because as English has gained a significant role in higher education and professional life. The findings of the study show that the majority of the subjects have positive perception towards English language and showed inclination towards learning English language, as they fully understand the need of English in educational and professional sphere. Despite of their positive views and inclination, their syllabus does not include English language because of the scarcity of proper environment, funds and skilled teachers in English Language.

Suggestions

It is a well understood that the *madrassa* education system within Pakistan needs further improvement and development. There are various loop holes and flaws within this system of education that needs to be worked out. Therefore, some vital suggestions for its betterment and success are stated as follows:

- i. Firstly, the government of Pakistan needs to develop and simultaneously implement such educational policies which work on improving the curriculum taught within the *madrassas*.
- ii. The government should work on implementing both religious and formal education so that a balance is created within this system of education.
- iii. Integration of contemporary and religious subjects i.e. the inclusion of subjects like English, Mathematics, Science, Literature etc. should be done in order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of this fragile education system.
- iv. Professional development trainings should be provided to the *madrassa* teachers to enhance their skill set.
- v. Workshops related to teaching-learning methods and communication skills can help making the teachers capable of improving the standard of students studying within the *madrassa* education system.
- vi. The introduction of English language since the preliminary stage should be made mandatory so that the students become well acquainted with the language.



- vii. English should be included within the curriculum and for this matter their course could be set by the government's educational board so that all students studying in *madrassas* would acquire same education at an equivalent standard. Redesigning of the syllabus would serve the purpose in this regard.
- viii. The registration of all *madrassas* should be ensured and significant steps should be taken in order to check its accountability.
- ix. Effective literacy programs can be initiated by the Government of Pakistan in order to make improvements within the *madrassa* structure in order to make their students more competent and compatible with the modern requirements.
- x. Lastly, by increasing financial and technical support, the government of Pakistan can make these changes smooth for this system of religious education.

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