

WHAT LANGUAGES TO INCLUDE IN CURRICULUM FOR MUSLIM CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT:

Languages are tools that connect people globally and help them acquire knowledge. It is a highly critical decision to choose a language or a set of languages for inclusion in curriculum in a manner that would be most productive at personal, community and national level. What we need to see in our next generation has to be 'sowed the seeds for' today. Our study presents an overview of choices related to languages inclusion in curriculum for Muslim children from the perspective of acquiring *local languages, Arabic, English and other international languages*. Findings suggest that learning this set comprising of 4 languages is already practiced in different cultures and institutions. However selection of languages to be included in mix needs be carefully considered. Paper also highlights factors that govern influence of a particular language globally or for communities and recommend a set of languages that can be adopted for curriculum with further research.

INTRODUCTION:

Children learn languages the most in their early childhood ("Language development," 2015). Accordingly, the language they obtain the first is language of people they live with, in most cases, their parents. However, due to social circumstances, they may need to learn other languages as well, as they move ahead in life and develop certain motives. While acquiring second language, maintaining native language is found to be highly beneficial in terms of cognitive, social, psychological and academic aspects (IDRA, 2000; Sue Fernandez, 2007). This paper will discuss some factors that can affect choice of languages that can be included in curriculum for Muslim children, formally or informally, to achieve relevant motives and intended outcomes.

DECISION TO LEARN OTHER LANGUAGES:

Whether or not other languages get selected for study depends on 'usefulness' of learning those languages to learners:

"When the numerous variables and viewpoints are considered, USEFULNESS emerges as the most important factor in predicting whether a choice of literacy instruction medium will be successful. The perception of the usefulness may be different, however: useful for national unity and technological progress, as seen from a top-down perspective; or useful for reading and writing in one's daily life and for job opportunities, as seen from a bottom-up perspective" (Baker, 1996)

'Usefulness' depends on 'purpose' or 'motive' for which language may be studied. The motivational factors for learning languages other than the local language are classified as follows (Merritt, 2013):

a. Integrative motivation:

Learners who study a language with the aim of 'better understanding a culture, language, and society' are integratively motivated. Linguistic studies show that integrative motivation yields faster and more effective language learning results than other types. Learners from

multilingual nations can be integratively motivated to learn their national languages as a way of connecting with their countrymen: English and French in Canada; German, French and Italian in Switzerland; Hindi and regional languages in India, Pushto, Punjabi and Urdu in Pakistan etc.

b. Instrumental motivation:

Learners who study a foreign language in order to achieve other goal (as compared to above) are instrumentally motivated. In these cases, language competence isn't the goal in itself, but rather the vehicle to achieving a separate professional or personal accomplishment.

Considering the context of Muslim students, both types of motivation would be required. They need to integrate more effectively with societies and people of countries they live in (integrative motivation). This intention and competence achieved in languages because of this can be used for a variety of productive purposes. Similarly, Muslim children also need to have instrumental motivation in order to understand religious literature in Arabic and gain spiritual up-lift by referring to the very sources of Islam i.e. Quran and Sunnah.

Following is further explanation of relevant aspects in line with these motivational factors.

IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING LOCAL AND NATIONAL LANGUAGE(S):

It is extremely important to learn the language of the area we live in. Not having proficiency in local language would definitely hinder integration with broader community and stir confusions and misunderstandings, as pointed out by Musharraf (2015) while discussing lack of availability of teachers in Europe who can deliver Islamic education in schools using local languages. The point is further highlighted by the recent criticism, such as in case of a prominent community leader in Australia who required an interpreter to address the media ("Mufti 'translation' under fire," 2015). If this lack of language skill persists, 'us' vs 'them' mindset would continue to prevail stirring division within communities and racism. As explained above, this should not be at the expense of learning native or other desired languages. Most governments also encourage children to learn multiple languages in line with perceived benefits of this approach (O'Regan, 2014, 2014; Sue Fernandez, 2007).

IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING ARABIC:

"Allah, the Almighty and Wise, chose and singled out Arabic from amongst all the languages of the world - past, present and future - to be the vehicle for His final Revelation to the whole of humanity. This fact alone should constitute sufficient reason for Muslims to learn Arabic" ("Ten Reasons Why Muslims Should Learn Arabic," 2014).

Muslims believe in Quran's *Ajazz* (distinguished and miraculous nature) in terms of its meaning and spiritual uplift it provides. Arabic is considered to be the most comprehensive language (Ad-Dausaree, 2006) in terms of depth and width of words and meanings. Judah Ibn Tibbon, who is known as 'father of translators' for his works in Arabic-to-Hebrew translation (Jewish Virtual Library, 2002; Sela, 2003, p. 140), explains the high status of Arabic by mentioning it as "in fact the most comprehensive language, full of resources concerning every subject. It satisfies the necessities of all

those who speak or write this language. Its expressions are exact and clear, and it reaches to the heart of all questions, much more than it is possible with Hebrew” (Sela, 2003, pp. 140–141).

If Muslims need to understand word of Allah in a better way, they need to understand Arabic. If next generation of Muslims doesn't know about Arabic and can't read literature in Arabic, they will not be able to refer to the huge body of Islamic literature which is written in Arabic, including classical texts which form basis of interpretation for matters related to Quran Exegesis, Hadith, Fiqh and other branches of Islamic knowledge. Translation can often not convey the same meaning as original text (Ngo, 2011), it at all available.

“Muslims holds the importance of Arabic language in very high esteem with most of their beliefs being inseparable from Arabic” (“Importance of Arabic,” 2013). Most Muslims use Arabic in their personal and spiritual lives in some capacity. Some use it for daily prayers and supplications and understanding Quran, where-as others need it for communication within their communities (Esposito, 2002; Reem, 2009).

In accordance with above points, there is no doubt about the place of Arabic language in curriculum taught to Muslim children. In our opinion, all Muslim children should at least be taught enough Arabic language to enable them understand the meaning of Quran and what they say in praying while delivering those words from their tongues.

We see variation in level of focus on Arabic language if we look at curricula taught to Muslim children. In some places, it is taught as a core subject [e.g. in Madaris Al Islamia (Moosa, 2015) or in Middle-Eastern schools], whereas in others it covers only the basic level information. We also see some secular institutions in Muslim world which do not cover Arabic language at all. Many parents choose private teaching options for Arabic reading and/or writing (Musharraf, 2015).

LEARNING OTHER LANGUAGES AND PLACE OF ENGLISH IN CURRICULUM:

The Islamic Golden age was filled with great achievements from Muslims in terms of discoveries, innovations and inventions which form basis of some the most sophisticated present day organizations, processes and technologies. The beginning of this golden age can be attributed to the mass-translation effort led by Muslim caliphs who brought in a huge amount of literature from other languages to Arabic. This massive pool of information and knowledge from various sources was not available to any other single language-speaking source or group at their own. Muslims accordingly were able to integrate this literature and build further on that to progress with their scientific and intellectual discoveries (Ahmed, 2011; Al-Khalili, 2010).

Arabic remained the official language of Muslims for centuries. But this is, unfortunately, not the case anymore. Muslims neither have such literature available in Arabic anymore nor do all the Muslims speak Arabic. In fact, research shows that recent translations into and out of Arabic language have been fewer than other languages in terms of its native speakers (Erard, 2014). The low volume of translations into Arabic has been identified as an obstacle to the dissemination of outside knowledge into the Arab world (Baer, 2014) and vice versa.

In such a situation, there are three options for Muslims to re-gain access to broader international literature:

- Learn a language, spread over wide geo-geographical areas, that has a high global-following and understanding from masses, to use as a tool to access literature in that language
- Learn sufficient level of Arabic across the board, in all Muslim communities around the globe and re-start mass-translation effort
- Learn local languages as well as selected global languages so that literary works and literature can be mutually translated to increase wider availability.

Adding Arabic to third option would further increase its vitality.

In our opinion, third option is a quick way of enable required outcomes. However, identification of a suitable language that can be considered 'global' in contemporary times is a matter that needs careful observation and data analysis.

Languages vary enormously in 'global importance' because of historical, demographic, political, and technological forces (Ronen et al., 2014). It is argued: "The influence of any language is a combination of three main things: the number of countries using it as their first language or mother-tongue, the number of countries adopting it as their official language, and the number of countries teaching it as their foreign language of choice in schools. The intrinsic structural qualities of a language, the size of its vocabulary, the quality of its literature throughout history, and its association with great cultures or religions, are all important factors in the popularity of any language. But, at base, history shows us that a language becomes a global language mainly due to the political power of its native speakers, and the economic power with which it is able to maintain and expand its position".(Luke Mastin, 2011)

When we look at the figures, with no oversight to factor of geographical spread, we see English as being the most influential language (Pegg, 2012). "On almost any basis, English is the nearest thing there has ever been to a global language. Its worldwide reach is much greater than anything achieved historically by Latin or French, and there has never been a language as widely spoken as English. Many would reasonably claim that, in the fields of business, academics, science, computing, education, transportation, politics and entertainment, English is already established as the de facto lingua franca" (Luke Mastin, 2011). Another research from MIT reveals: "English has the most transmissions to and from other languages and is the most central hub" (Erard, 2014).

It is to be noted that, by recommending utilization of English as a 'global' language, we are not at all recommending not studying or not focussing on other languages, including native/ local languages and Arabic. In fact the notion that "English is enough" is found by researcher to be very weak (Sue Fernandez, 2007). If we confine ourselves to English alone, we may not be able to reach broader global population.

According to our study, the most useful combination, while keeping geographical spread in consideration, can be [ENGLISH]-[ARABIC]-[FRENCH or SPANISH] in combination with local language(s).

Following graphics from Pegg (2012) further clarify this opinion by explaining geographic concentration of Arabic, Spanish, French and English languages. We can see that most parts of the world are well covered by these four languages.



Figure 1 Arabic



Figure 2 French

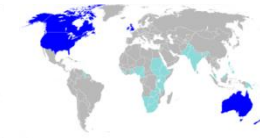


Figure 3 English



Figure 4 Spanish

However, above figures also reveal that even learning ONLY these three languages would not ensure a complete global out-reach. To fill this gap, learning of local languages should remain a priority. Some of the biggest local languages are Mandarin, Russian, Hindi and Portuguese. In this mix of proposed 4-language learning option, Persian cannot be included due to its following concentrated in smaller number of countries. It would accordingly be classified as 'local' language. For the purposes of this study, local languages are those which concentrated in certain areas and do not have a geographically spread out following¹.

As a case study, let us consider the example of Pakistan.

The two prominent languages taught in most government and private schools are Urdu and English. Arabic and local languages are taught in some instances but not with a great deal of zeal and enthusiasm. Language proficiency for most students is accordingly restricted to these two languages except in case of 'spoken' proficiency depending on language spoken at home.

In *Madaris* (traditional religious education institutions), we see **ARABIC-ENGLISH-URDU-PERSIAN** combination. English, in most cases, is not taught at reasonable level of detail or to a standard where students can easily read/ write literature and engage in effective conversations. The focus accordingly is more on Arabic and Persian. While, we recommend maintaining focus on Arabic language, inclusion of Persian in curriculum needs to be re-evaluated through further research.

In line with above graphs and discussion, a possible combination that needs to be assessed for usability in religious institutions can be: **[ARABIC]-[ENGLISH]-[LOCAL LANGUAGE]-[FRENCH or FRENCH]**. Local language, depending on geographical location, can accordingly be Urdu, Mandarin, Hindi, Bengali, Persian or other national languages that have large following.

Another important point to note here is the fact that children can become fluent in multiple languages if introduced at an early age without much struggle (O'Regan, 2014). This further highlights the importance of adding second language(s) in curriculum from early stages rather than leaving it to higher grades or adulthood.

Situations when language other than these can be recommended for Inclusion in curriculum:

If communication with special foreign community is required for a particular purpose, that language should be included in curriculum. For example, in some European countries such as Greece, many parents want their children to learn Turkish. Similarly we have come to know about cases where some dua'at (callers to Islam or Islamic missionaries) have learnt specific languages to convey the message of Islam to certain communities.

CONCLUSIONS:

¹ This point is further clarified in Appendix 1 of Vol1, Issue 1 for AJHISR (Jul-Dec 15)

With this we conclude that Muslims around the world can increase their access to international and their own religious literature by learning English and Arabic languages. Learning local languages shall remain a high priority too as in the absence of it, integration and adjustment within communities is highly improbable and often leads to disintegration. Considering the existing 4 language model adopted in religious institutions, it is considered useful to explore possibility of changing the languages included in curriculum based on their international relevant and influence. Right decision in the regard will govern what our next generation will be able to access, refer to, learn and disseminate.

Refer to Appendix 1 for related graphics on size of

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APPENDIX 1

This appendix further explains the points highlighted in paper:

WHAT LANGUAGES TO INCLUDE IN CURRICULUM FOR MUSLIM CHILDREN (Pg 6-13)

(Revised in Nov, 15)

Background:

Paper recommends four languages for educators and curriculum designers to facilitate their students acquire maximum global out-reach with language abilities.

Languages recommended by paper are:

[Arabic] – [English] – [A Local Language] – [Spanish OR French]

Following graphic representation¹ clarifies the point further:

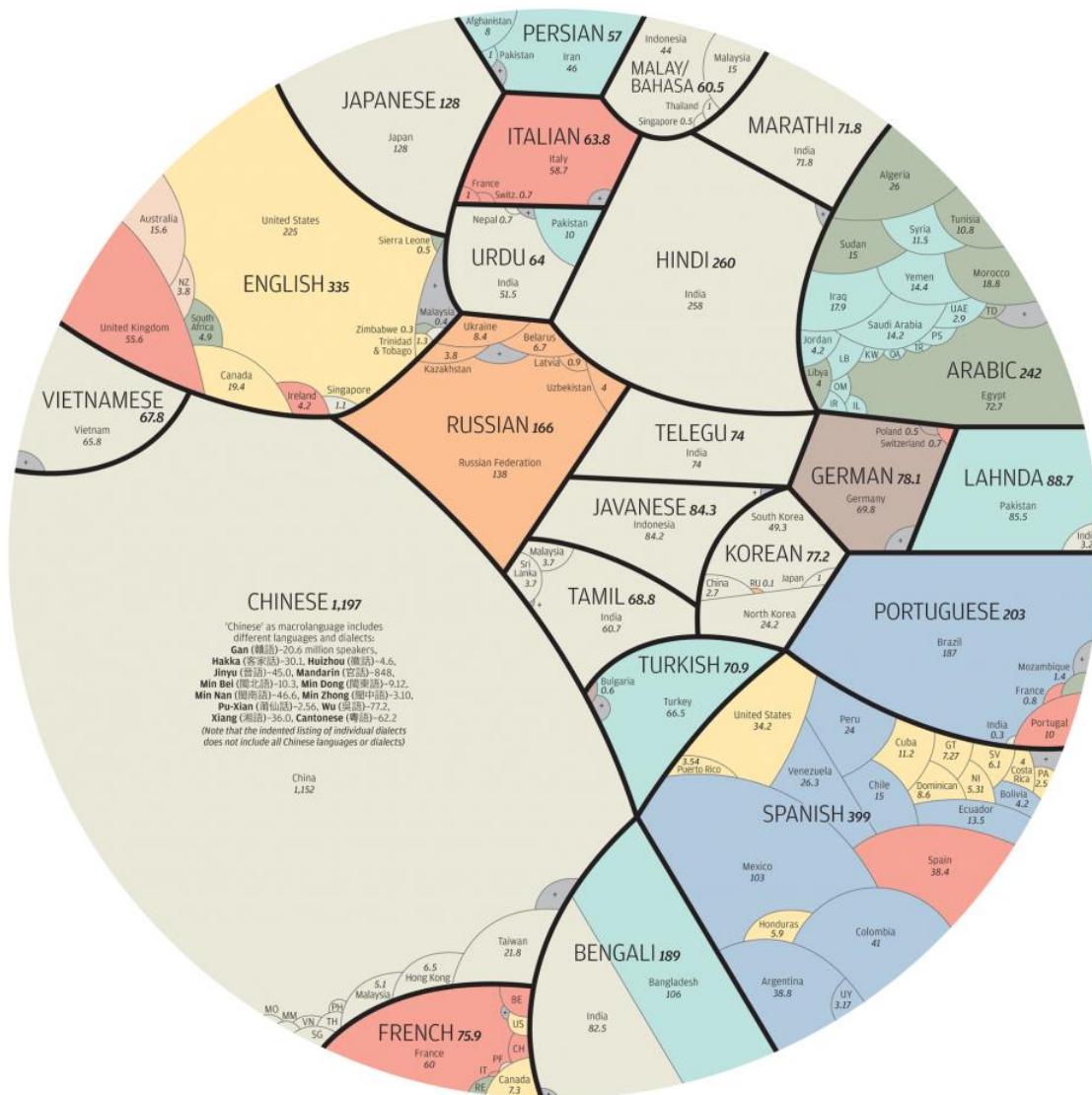


Figure 1 Languages Around the globe

¹ It is adopted from graphics presented by (López, 2015)

From the chart, we see that Chinese has the highest number of speakers. But they are all mainly concentrated in China with small followings in other countries. It would accordingly be considered a local language and can be included in proposed 4 language model as such. It can also be included in curriculum if required for communication with people within China for certain reasons, such as missionary activities, education or other purposes. Seeing this with analysis presented by Pegg (2012) further clarifies the argument above:



Figure 2 Concentration of Mandarin Language

Same is the case with Russian which is also concentrated in one connected geographical location.



Figure 3 Concentration of Russian Language

On the other hand, we see that our recommended languages English, Arabic, Spanish / French (in combination with a local language) are spread across a number of geographical locations which can ensure better geographical out-reach. This point is further explained by following graph (Weber, 1999) which shows that by learning the first four languages in the chart below, one can have maximum global outreach.



Figure 4 Language and Number of Countries they are spoken in

Further to this, it was already established in the paper that the English is considered to be the language in which message can most easily get across the globe (reference to study conducted at MIT).

To strengthen this point further, following graphics (López, 2015) show the number of people learning English language are considerably higher than other languages.

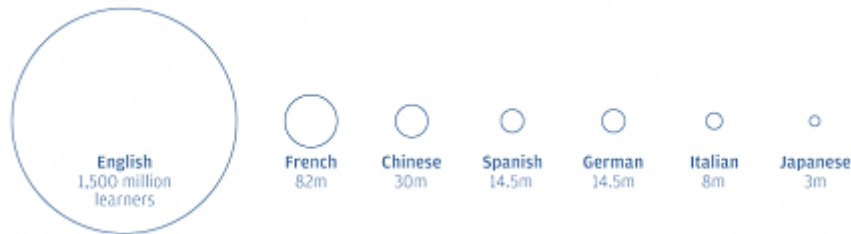


Figure 5 Language Learners across the globe

Same figures were also presented by Noack & Gamio (2015) using graphics which make this comparison even clearer:

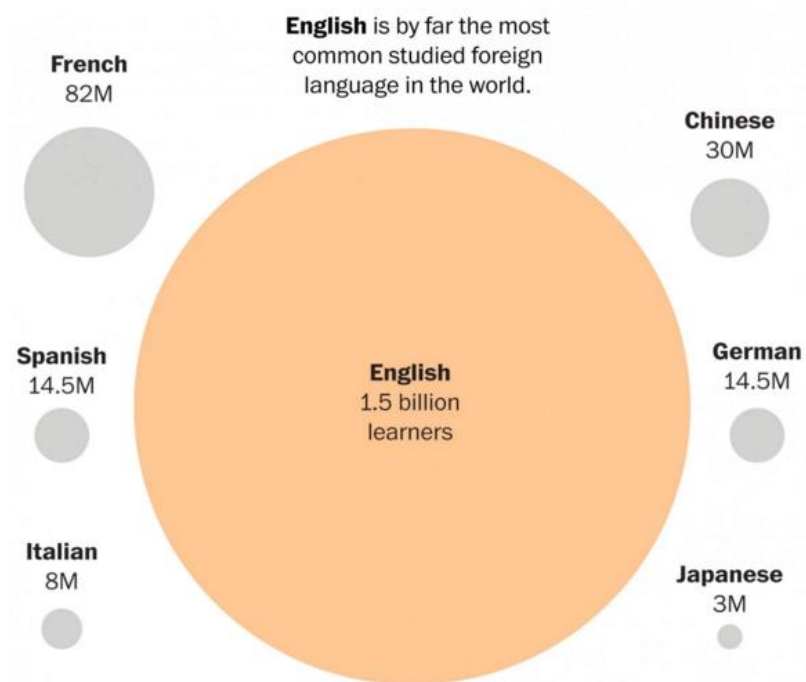


Figure 5 Language Learners across the globe (Washington Post)

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