

'We cannot do without English': Neoliberal Ideology and English Teachers' Perceptions of Higher Education in Pakistan

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Abstract

Neoliberalism is an economic theory, ideology, and philosophy that encourages the free market and promotes individuality over collective success. Ideology shapes people's perceptions, and they accept dominant ideologies as a common-sense way of thinking. Neoliberalism, coupled with globalization, promotes education as a commodity that can be bought and sold for individuals' benefit. Moreover, its dominance in the field of education is so pervasive that people accept neoliberal models of education as significant for progress. A rich scholarship is available on the impact of neoliberalism on education; however, limited research has been carried out to explore English teachers' perceptions regarding the influence of neoliberalism on education. Thus, this paper bridges the gap by adopting a qualitative approach. Employing phenomenology, data are collected through semi-structured interviews. Charmaz's coding techniques are used as an analytical framework. The findings suggest that neoliberalism has transformed education into a commodity, and English teachers are managers who are responsible for selling this commodity to generate revenue for the universities because their perceptions are influenced by neoliberal ideology. The paper highlights the significance of raising awareness of critical thinking to question business-oriented educational reforms.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Commodification, English Teachers, Higher Education

Introduction

The study explores the teachers' perceptions regarding neoliberal ideology and commodification of education. A rich scholarship is available explaining the intricate relationship between neoliberal ideology and education. However, teachers' perception regarding neoliberalism and education is a less explored area. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore how English teachers think about the presence and influence of neoliberalism in the field of education. For this, a qualitative approach is adopted, and data is collected through semi-structured interviews with the teachers.

As an economic philosophy, Neoliberal ideology originated in the 19th century, but it has gained the position of one of the guiding models of social, political, and economic practices and thinking in the contemporary era (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism focuses on the freedom of individuals, free trade, and the free market. It posits that humans can advance within political, economic, and social arrangements (Ryan, 1993). Economic ideologies are considered the backbone of any society because most ideologies revolve around economics. As a result, neoliberalism has also received a lot of attention, and it has penetrated almost every domain of life. Nonetheless, education is one of the important areas affected by the hegemony of neoliberalism.

Globalization has changed the philosophy of language and language practice from an important indicator of the nation-state to a commodified good in the economic market. This capitalist neoliberal economy considers humans, their language skills, and capabilities as commodities (Flores 2013; Holborow, 2015). Neoliberalism promotes individuality over communal practices. As a result, it holds an individual responsible for their success. As a result, people compete, and they strive to get access to better

opportunities. Consequently, people struggle to interact with people across borders, and they look for resources available at any geographical location. Along with globalization, neoliberalism ²promotes the need for one global language, which is English, for boundaryless interaction and resources. This encourages people to learn English because learning the English language is associated with better opportunities and success. Thus, people invest in learning the English language to enhance their economic capital. In this way, education, and particularly the English language, is taken as a capital that is required for a successful life.

According to Kubota (2011), education loses its value when money is associated with it. The real purpose of education is altered when the purpose of education gets changed. Traditionally, the purpose of education was to inculcate civic sense among individuals. It was taken to transform society into a better place to live. However, in contemporary times, education is taken as a commodity to gain capital. Furthermore, the English language, being a lingua franca, is considered a commodity that can be bought and sold. As a result, many Pakistani universities promote English as a resource, and they make it their unique selling point. Moreover, they prefer English as the only medium of instruction to attract more students. Universities are promoting the English language to produce more employable learners (Costa & Coleman, 2013; Hu, 2009; Pillar & Cho, 2013).

As economic competitiveness is associated with education, there is increased competition among schools and individuals. Educational structure is reframed in the light of neoliberalism. This competition is good for the promotion of an educational quasi-market, but it is detrimental to educational values; it affects educators' professional independence (Ball, 2006). Teaching and learning have become a technical process (Clarke & Phelan, 2015) to gain capital, which has compromised the quality of education.

Neoliberal discourse promotes the English language as a language of resources, capital, and development (Bourdieu, 1991). English is considered a sellable resource that can be converted into numerous forms of capital in exchange for economic achievement and social mobility (Cameron, 2005; Park & Wee, 2012). Thus, concerning neoliberal discourse, English learners and instructors become neoliberal subjects who strive to enhance their human capital for societal development (Park, 2010). A rich scholarship is available on the role played by neoliberal ideology in the commodification of a language (Fairclough, 2002), specifically of English, in various domains (Park, 2010; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Price, 2014; Gao, 2016). These studies indicate that neoliberalism promotes English as a language of capital that affects teaching and training practices.

Due to the commodification of education and the English language, English teachers are also expected to perform in a different way. They are expected to produce employable learners, and they are instructed to focus on the soft skills of students because they are important for entering the market. As a result, the traditional role of teachers is transformed from knowledge producers to technical managers. Because English teachers are directly affected by this shift in education, it is significant to understand and explore their perceptions of knowledge and commodification.

Methodology

A qualitative approach is adopted to explore the perceptions of English teachers regarding the commodification of education. A qualitative study is considered the most suitable option to explore perceptions because it deals with opinions of individuals. Moreover, data are collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to gain insight into people's perceptions. 15 English teachers teaching at two different universities in Islamabad were interviewed. Their consent was obtained before collecting data. Each interview lasted for a minimum of 45 minutes. The average duration of each interview was 45 to 60 minutes. Each interview was transcribed manually for the analysis. Coding techniques provided by Charmaz in her Constructivist grounded theory were used as an analytical framework to explore teachers' perceptions. Following the guidelines, interviews were coded, and themes were generated based on the frequently occurring patterns. The study uses Foucault's theory of governmentality and Ball's concept of the knowledge economy. According to Foucault (2008), neoliberalism does not control people forcefully, but rather through self-regulation. People accept neoliberal principles as a commonsense way of thinking, and they regulate themselves accordingly. As a result, teachers also look at themselves through market trends. Rather than being critical of business-oriented models of education, they adopt pedagogies and classroom practices that align with neoliberal trends. Similarly, Ball (2017) argues that knowledge has become an economic resource and education a commodity. As a result, universities promote education as an economic investment. English teachers are considered producers of human capital, and students are taken as consumers. As a result, the purpose of education is shifted from personal growth and social development to global competitiveness, employability, and economic productivity. The theoretical triangulation by integrating two theories (Foucault's Governmentality and Ball's Knowledge Economy) helped the researcher to look at data extensively. The triangulation also helped to validate the findings of the study.

Findings and Discussion

The following section explains the findings extracted through participants' interviews. The interview data was transcribed, coded, and categorized into various themes following thematic analysis. Three major findings and discussions are presented below.

Reconstruction of Knowledge as Economic Value

The data highlighted an interesting finding that, in a neoliberal context, knowledge is redefined. Traditionally, knowledge was associated with civic sense and societal development. Teachers were informed to train learners so that they could contribute positively to society. However, neoliberal globalization has transformed the purpose of education. One of the participants mentioned, "I tell my students to work smart now. They should focus on their communication and presentation skills. Technical knowledge is not a priority now" (P9, Interview, 8 January). The participant's words align with Ball's (2011) idea of the knowledge economy. Knowledge is measured in terms of its economic value. Similarly, another participant mentioned, "without knowing English, students cannot get a better position" (P13, Interview, 17 January). Furthermore, another participant mentioned, "I invested a lot in learning the English language. I worked on my accent because I knew English is marketable. After medical, English could give me respect. Bus isi leay [for this purpose], I worked on my English" (P4, Interview, 3 January). These words clearly reflect people's perceptions. In neoliberal times, knowledge is considered a tool to get access to better opportunities and resources. The participant's perceptions of education and the English language as a tool for employability align with Foucault's (2008) view that individuals govern themselves according to external rationalities.

English teachers also mentioned that knowledge is measured in terms of its economic value. In the past, the purpose of education was different. However, knowledge is measured in terms of its outcome. Students get enrolled in degree programs that can bring them high salaries. As a participant mentioned, "students usually question the relevance and significance of their degree in getting a good job" (P3, Interview, 12 January). Another participant mentioned, "students rarely discuss civic sense or a better social world. They talk a lot about their future, career, and upward mobility" (P8, Interview, 6 January). The shift in students' discussions indicates a shift in their perception of education. Knowledge is evaluated according to its economic outcome and employability. Education is considered a tool for producing productive and employable learners (Ball, 2017).

English as a Commodity

In the Pakistani context, neoliberalism serves as a doxa; therefore, people accept it as a common-sense way of thinking. As a result, neoliberal models of education are accepted by the English teachers. They perceive the English language as a commodity and promote the same ideology through their discourse in the classroom. As one of the participants mentioned, "you cannot survive without learning the English language" (P3, interview, 12 January). It clearly indicates that English teachers associate success with the learning of the English language. Furthermore, they share the same ideology as well. As another participant mentioned, "Without knowing English, it's hard to find a job" (P6, interview, 17 January). This indicates that English is taken as a commodity, which results in economic capital. English teachers inform their students to learn this language if they want to be successful. In this way, they not only promote English as a commodity but also perpetuate it.

In Pakistan, English has always been taken as a passport to success and opportunities. With the rise of neoliberal principles,

English has become a commodity. People do not learn the English language to enhance their knowledge and scholarship; rather, they invest in it to get better job opportunities. This depicts that English is considered equivalent to opportunity. According to one participant, "Universities hire teachers who have a good accent because students like those teachers. They get impressed" (P2, interview, 14 January). The participant's words indicate that the ideology that English is a capital has penetrated society. Everyone looks at it through an economic lens. Universities hire teachers with good accents because they can attract more students. Similarly, students get impressed by accents because they imagine themselves to be fluent speakers of English. Another participant mentioned, "Now the market is of soft skills. Technical knowledge can be delivered through AI. People are expected to present well. For that, English language matters" (P11, interview, 15 January). In addition, the English language is not taken as economic capital only but symbolic and cultural capital too. A participant mentioned, "Many people learn English because people give you respect when you speak English" (P1, interview, 7 January). This highlights people's perception of the English language. They learn the English language to get cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital. In this way, the English language serves as a commodity.

Universities as Business

In the neoliberal context where education is commodified, universities also act as industries. According to Foucault (2008), in contemporary times, governance is operated through indirect mechanisms where universities are encouraged to regulate themselves according to dominant prescribed norms. As a result, Universities follow a business-oriented education model where students are considered as consumers, teachers as producers of employable learners, and universities as industries (Slaughter & Rhodes, 2004). Participants perceived universities as the corporate sector. Rather than focusing on intellectual growth and development, universities are more engaged with generating revenue and profits (Giroux, 2014). They launch programs that can capture more customers, and they get more money. They run special campaigns to attract more students. One of the participants mentioned, "we are asked again to advertise our department. We are instructed to highlight every minor activity on different platforms for promotional purposes" (P8, Interview, 6 January). This highlights that universities want to increase enrolment to generate more revenue. Similarly, another participant mentioned, "initially, it was hard to get admission due to merit. But now, I think, university does not discourage anyone. They make more sections to accommodate students with low merit" (P7, Interview, 13 January).

Discussion

The findings of the study highlight that neoliberal principles have influenced higher education. Neoliberalism has redefined higher education as a business, education as a commodity, and knowledge as a knowledge economy (Ball, 2012). Moreover, findings also align with Foucault's (2008) notion of governmentality that neoliberal market logic is internalized by universities and educators. These rationalities go beyond policy reforms. People accept these logics as normal and common sense. In this way, commodification of education is not only institutional but a process through which these subjectivities are first produced and later sustained. In this changing landscape of education, English teachers feel a lot of pressure to align with neoliberal expectations of higher education. As a result, English teachers not only perceive English as a commodity but also spread it among students. Participants in the study perceived that education is taken as an economic entity that is measured through its monetary value. The

traditional meaning of education has changed, and people get an education to gain capital. Similarly, universities also work within neoliberal frameworks. They struggle to enhance their enrollment, visibility, and market value. For that, universities run campaigns and use the English language as a tool to attract their customers. This neoliberal approach has added to the value of the English language. People don't learn the English language to communicate with people from different nationalities, but to enhance their social, cultural, and economic capital. Participants also perceived that students are treated as customers. As a result, universities give a lot of value to their students because they don't want to lose their customers. English teachers adjust their pedagogies and classroom practices to accommodate students, which sometimes becomes challenging for them (Molesworth et al., 2011). These tensions reflect that the marketisation of higher education is a site where English teachers negotiate their pedagogies, aligning with neoliberal trends. Overall, higher education is redefined by the logic of the knowledge economy.

Recommendations

Employability is important, and it has always been one of the objectives of higher education. However, a complete shift towards marketability is not productive for societal development and growth. Policymakers should not focus only on the economic output of education. Critical thinking, logical reasoning, civic sense, and intellectual growth should be part of the curriculum and pedagogy. Similarly, Universities should not only focus on publications, visibility, and enrollment. The social impact of research and higher education should be given priority. Besides, faculty and academic staff should be given a chance to share their opinions and experiences related to curriculum and institutional development. Moreover, Universities should focus on students' soft skills to get a better position in the market. However, they should not ignore the importance of critical thinking and intellectual growth for a better society.

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Credit authorship contribution statement

Mehwish Haider: Writing – Editing, Writing – Original Draft, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Conceptualization. **Dr. Hazrat Umar:** Writing –review & editing, Supervision, Conceptualization.

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