

A short critique of Urdu teaching materials

I have chosen to examine the first two sections of Unit 1 of *Spoken Urdu (ibtada'i urdu) Volume One* originally published by the Institute for Islamic Studies at McGill University by Muhammad Abd-al-Rahman Barker, Hasan Jahangir Hamdani, Khwaja Muhammad Shafi Dihlavi and Shafiqur Rahman. This volume is divided into 15 units, each one of which contains 7 sections arranged in the following order:

1. Conversation
2. Word Study
3. Phonetics
4. Analysis
5. Supplementary Vocabulary
6. Vocabulary and Grammar Drill
7. Vocabulary.

In the introduction, the authors indicate that this book is a text for an intensive elementary course in written and spoken Urdu. The English and Urdu titles on the cover page have different meanings. The Urdu text is best translated as *Introductory Urdu* instead of *Spoken Urdu*. The Urdu title reflects the purpose of the book more accurately than the English. The authors do not consider this to be a good teach-yourself resource, rather it is designed as a resource for experienced language teachers who are familiar with basic linguistics. Roman text is used to phonetically spell out Urdu words instead of the Arabic script used to write Urdu.

The poor visual design of this book hinders the language learning task. The typeface used makes the text hard to read and the publishers have further aggravated this by using a small font size. They have not employed bold or italicized text for section headings or to distinguish words in vocabulary lists. Section headings are larger than the normal text and are set in capital letters. But the size difference is not readily apparent. This results in eye strain and makes it hard to navigate to specific points in the text. I have included a copy of pgs. 1 and 3 at original size to illustrate my point.

The first unit, like all the others, starts with the transcript of a conversation. The line of text immediately after the section heading describes the scenario, which is a conversation that takes place between two people at a party. The characters are two professors which suggests that their interaction is somewhat formal. New Urdu words are defined in English before each line of the conversation. The English text is given on the left of the page and its Urdu equivalent is given on the right. This layout is cluttered and unintuitive. The Urdu text should be on the left and its English equivalents should be on the right. People who are fluent English speakers are used to looking at the unknown information before the explanations because of the way dictionaries and thesauruses have been formatted. The word definitions are confusing since the reader is expecting to read a conversation and sees a gloss instead. The same text is repeated in the first line of the conversation. The repetition of the text may be used to aid the memorization of the vocabulary, but it complicates the task of reading the conversation transcript.

The use of dialog is appropriate in the first chapter of the book since students cannot be expected to have a conversation using a flow diagram such as the one presented on pg. 122 of Cook. They have no Urdu vocabulary since they are presumably starting the course and so giving them a conversation they can read or possibly reenact can help them identify the phonological characteristics of the language. However, the particular conversation presented appears to be constructed. The scenario is easily imagined and can easily be adapted to a situation that the student may find herself in, but the tone is extremely formal. Some of the phrases used such as *mizaj sherif?* (How are you?), which Dr. Rahim (the Pakistan professor) would not normally be used in conversation between two people at a party, even if they have just met. A student adopting and using such a phrase to open a conversation would appear quaint to the average Urdu speaker.

The glosses preceding each line in the dialog contain notes in square brackets in addition to the meaning of each word. These notes can provide helpful insight into the distinctions between the Urdu words and their English equivalents, but most of them are too brief to be useful. This information would be better placed in the oddly named Word Study section that follows the conversation. This section does not exclusively examine the individual words, it also provides information that the student may use to build an initial cultural schema. It The discussion of the appropriate greeting term (1.101) is overly strict in defining which greeting to use with Muslims and which one to use with Hindus. The dual purpose of this section results in it appearing unfocused. It would be better if it was divided into two different sections, one for the cultural information and the other one for the examination of words.

The authors have not provided and exercises or activities after either one of these sections. Asking some questions on the content of the dialog may have aided comprehension. This comprehension could have been further honed when combined with exercises utilizing the information presented in the Word Study section. As previously mentioned, all the chapters in this book follow the same format. The dialog becomes more complex with each chapter, but the format remains the same. As the student becomes better acquainted with the language and the culture, and as her vocabulary increases, the format of the chapters should be changed. Perhaps using a flowchart to guide a conversation or suggesting a topic for discussion instead of working with canned dialog would reduce the monotony of the learning process and make it more stimulating for both teacher and student.