

# Schools and Their English: Language as More than a Medium of Instruction

## Abstract

*I argue that language reiterates the social position of the speaker and tends to reproduce the structures in society. As such, language in school cannot be viewed simply as a medium of communication or instruction. English in India symbolizes one's social class. Today, a common perception is that private schools are the sole providers of good English language education. It produces a hierarchy among students who could and could not get into a private school. In this way, social inequality is perpetuated in society through the education system. However this cannot be overcome by simply changing the medium of instruction in all schools to English.*

## Introduction

My research is on gender socialisation in two girls-only schools of Kerala: a government school and a girls' school with English as a medium of instruction that has a private management.<sup>1</sup> It is an attempt to understand the experiences of girls in schools of varied social status at the secondary level. The schools are located near each other, and both follow the same syllabus (of the Kerala State Board). I analysed a) how a government school and a private school socialise girls in terms of their gender identity, and b) the girls' experiences of gender socialisation in their schools.

Qualitative research methods were used to get a deeper sense of the girls' schooling and their experiences. For the research, ten girls from the private school and seven girls from the government school were interviewed. A focus group discussion was conducted among seven girls in the government school. Further, one teacher from the girls' school and three teachers from the government school were interviewed. School Observation

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the research undertaken for my M. Phil dissertation

along with secondary data sources such as school magazines, diary, newspaper reports, school websites, school Facebook page, etc. were used for data collection. The data collection was carried out for two months.

For this paper, I have chiselled out the theme on language and its role in the schooling process. The paper has been divided into two sections. The first section describes the background of the two schools. The second section is on language and schooling. The observations on language made in this paper are not representative of all government schools and private english medium schools, but rather offered as a perspective gathered while researching gender socialisation in the particular schools. This paper is an attempt to look at language (English) as part of habitus within the specific institutional setting.

## Background of the Schools

The private school for Girls is known for its academic and extracurricular activities. The mission of the school is to provide an exceptional all-round education that

integrates values. The school engages with societal issues in a humanitarian manner, for instance engaging in activities such as charity, social work, etc. Hence gender here is conceptualized within values of the Kerala society.

During my field visit, I found that the private school is a formal, clean, strict space. The buildings are freshly painted in white. The ground is all cemented and neatly marked. There are flower pots kept aesthetically along the corners. The school buildings are big and very visible. No trees, nothing covers it up. The whole campus is concretised. Therefore, when you enter you are already disciplined. The paths tell you where to walk and where not to. The whole place is super clean. The sister, who is the principal of the school, when she comes out of her room, can get a panoptic view of the school.

The school has a Value Education course for its secondary students. It is part of the curriculum and is geared towards conditioning girls on the values and norms, for instance, how to take care of the elderly, how to endure suffering, etc. It means that the school inculcates feminine qualities of endurance and care among the girls. Students are educated with employable skills, at the same time, taught to be family-oriented.

The government school for girls, was started as a free school for girls. In this school, the profile of the students and said that,

“Here we have three kinds of students: students whose parents are labourers, students whose parents are employed and do not have time, coming from dysfunctional families, etc. The third kind is the business class.”

The diversity of this extent is not seen in the private school that I have visited. While the private school moulds their girls as value oriented, yet modern, active, smart, academically sound waiting to be employed in respectable jobs, the government school prepares its girls for a wide range of career opportunities. Apart from the mainstream

courses, work education is given to the girls in the government school as part of the curriculum which trains girls in entrepreneurial courses such as cookery, handicraft, etc. In addition, they have clubs for singing, dancing, painting courses and some of the girls find it as a livelihood option. A teacher commented on work education as,

“Not everybody can excel in all spheres, for them art, or any other platform will give opportunity to excel...It is not fair on us to push them into something, they should go ahead with what they are good at, in their field. They should find out on their own and succeed in it.”

However, Manjrekar warns that such courses for girls are “highly gendered”. They only allow girls to enter into low-paying jobs in the unorganised sector (Manjrekar 2003). In both the schools, girls are encouraged to learn skills and values according to their gender role and social life. Both the schools have a different set of school activities with varied goals. However, both schools prepare girls to live and participate in a gender and class stratified society.

## Language and Schooling

Education involves the development of capacities across the full range of human practices. However, educational processes are shaped by social structures. Schools are known to reproduce the dominant habitus. Sperry et al. (2015) argues that each word and utterance has the power to represent the speaker’s stance, in terms of her gender, age, social status, and emotional state. Thus, language is part of a habitus. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, determines one’s actions and thoughts. It ‘acts as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions’ thus giving people a ‘practical sense’ of how to act, which itself embodies a social or class habitus (Bourdieu 1977). Habitus determines interaction of individuals with their society. McDonough describes organisational habitus as that which is “concerned with how the same set of class-based practices, beliefs, and rules not only provide meaning,

but also structure social interaction” (Horvat and Antonio 1999: 320).

The issue in schooling today is that of ‘quality’ and quality education is perceived variously by different social classes because of which there has been a shift from government to private schooling. English-medium schooling is often equated with ‘good education’ by low-income parents, this idea is exploited by players in the private sector who are advocating low-cost private schools for the poor (Nambissan 2012). English medium private schools today are symbols of the middle class status. This discourse is created by marginalising and questioning the quality of education in government schools. In tandem, the private educational institutes often claim to have global or international standards.

In that particular girls’ school speaking in English is compulsory for all students as well as teachers. Students have to pay a fine if they do not speak in English. On the other hand, the government school does not insist on speaking in English although it is an English medium school. The teachers and students speak in Malayalam. Agnihotri (2010), in his paper, argues that the widening of gap between the rich and poor is maintained and reproduced by having different set of schools with varying degrees of the use of English language. “It is no longer possible to ignore the socio-political matrix in which English functions” (Agnihotri 2010: 5). Further, the language is “acquired as the child’s language faculty interacts with processes of socialisation and language becomes inextricably linked with the social, political, gender and power structures of society” (Agnihotri 2010: 6). Vulli (2014) observes that only parents with sound economic capital can afford to send their children to English medium school and the language learning outcome in English medium private schools are better than the government schools. Private schools emulate the culture of the elite and that of the west into the school curriculum. This is why English is being referred to as language of the elite in India (Vulli 2014).

A focus group discussion was conducted among five students in the government school for one hour 15 mins. The purpose was to know about the school rules and norms, curricular and extra curricular activities. The discussion on English language came up when I told them that I had visited the particular private school.

S1: The Students in that school must have spoken to you in fluent English no? Those students are very arrogant. If we go near them, then they will speak in English.

S3: That is too bad. In their school if they speak in Malayalam then they are punished. In that case our school is better. Here (in government school) we have freedom.

S2: Here also we are asked to speak in English, we rarely do it

Interviewer: But the students of the school approves the use of English, they do not seem to have a problem with it.

S1: They are all rich kids

Although both the schools are English medium schools, there is an assumption that the private school girls can speak fluent English. The discourse that private schools are the better educators of English language still continues although today more and more governments schools are turning to English medium.

Chaise LaDousa, in his paper, analyses the ideologies that envelope the languages and are projected by them. He shows the hierarchy between the languages in terms of class mobility, status, etc. in the context of school system. He argues that “English-medium education derives much of its cachet from its orientation outwards, providing pan-national and international connections and possibilities” while the regional language education gets the community-affirming ethos from the idea of ‘mother language’ (LaDousa 2014: 42). For those in regional medium education, English-medium

education is cast as a moral opponent. La Dousa argues that the English-medium school indicates a dissatisfaction with the local life and a desire to go elsewhere, and for those in the lower class, the regional language lends a sense of belonging and security (La Dousa 2014). This aspect came through the discussions with the students in the government school. There is a sense of identification with Malayalam and they are skeptical of students who do not know or use their mother tongue. When I asked “Don’t you want to speak in English?” One girl replied,

S3: We do not want to speak in anything by ignoring our mother tongue. Those girls may not know how to read and write in Malayalam properly. I have a friend in the tuition class. She scored good marks in all the subjects but scored poorly in Malayalam.

## Conclusion

The primary aim of the school is to transmit knowledge/the curriculum, nevertheless, schools, as theorists have argued, can reproduce class, gender and other

inequalities. Today, the common sense is that the private schools are the sole providers of good English Language education. It in a way produces hierarchy among students who could get into an elite private school, and those who could not. In this way, the social inequality is perpetuated in the society by the education system. The difference in schools, often hierarchical, is reproduced through the habitus of the schools such as dressings, language, discipline, activities, etc. Language is not simply a medium of communication or instruction in schools. It is a habitus. It reiterates the social position of the speaker and tends to reproduce the structures in the society. There are many factors that equip one to have English communication skills. Hence it is not enough to only change the medium of instruction to English in government schools if we are to achieve equal standards/ ‘quality’ in private schools and government schools which is often equated with the proficiency in English. The diversity of students and their needs must be thought through in order to enable all students to learn and empower, to speak, understand and write effortlessly in English and in their mother tongue.

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