

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract

It is important to consider the contexts of learning and the influence of external factors while attempting to understand the complex phenomenon of second language acquisition (SLA). This article examines the socio-cultural aspects of learning English in India where English is used as a second language (L2). I have discussed the economically disadvantaged status of students learning in government schools in the regional medium and analysed the factors affecting their SLA. I have argued that family background of L2 children and classroom culture are the most important variables that affect L2 acquisition.

Socio-cultural Factors and Second Language Acquisition

1. Introduction

This article examines the socio-cultural aspects of learning English in India where English is used as a second language (L2). The first section reviews the literature related to the social phenomenon of language and language acquisition. The next section gives a brief overview of the current status of English in India and English language education in the country focussing on the southern state Karnataka. In the section that follows, the socio-cultural issues around learning English are discussed. I argue that family background of L2 children and classroom culture are the most important variables that affect L2 acquisition. The article ends with a summary and some implications and limitations which may pave the way for further research.

2. Literature review

Many researchers (Long 1997, Mackey 2006 cited in Lantolf, 2006: 718) argue that second language acquisition (SLA) is 'primarily concerned with cognitive processes that are exclusively situated inside the learner's head'. However, they also recognize the fact that social factors play a role in language use. Lantolf and his colleagues (2000 cited in Collentine and Freed 2004: 156) contend that SLA is primarily a social semiotic construct. They argue that learning occurs as a result of mentorship and sociocultural activity. For them, learning is a social process. Learning results from interpersonal activity; it is interpersonal activity that forms the basis for individual functioning. This is in line with Vygotsky (1986) and Bruner's (1977) view that the social, interactional domain has a great impact on the child's language and cognitive development. Lantolf and Thorne (2006: 201) argue that 'developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organized sports activities, and work places'. Lantolf (2005: 104) sees SLA as a mediated process. According to him, SLA is facilitated by social mediation by experts and peers, self-mediation, and artifact mediation (Lantolf 2005: 105). He recognizes the importance of private speech and imitation in mediating through second language. The sociocultural view of language learning is supported by Atkinson (2002: 526) who proposes that language acquisition and language use cannot be properly understood without

taking into account the social world. He maintains that language is obviously a social practice, a social accomplishment, a social tool, and points out that 'people use language to act in and on their social worlds: to convey, construct and perform among other things, ideas, feelings, actions, identities and simple (but crucial) acknowledgements of the existence of other human beings' (Atkinson 2002: 526). Further, one's participation in a language activity is influenced by the social world – societal practices and beliefs, cultural norms and the distribution of power in society (Atkinson 2002: 527). Atkinson (2002: 536) says that language is learned in interaction, often with more capable social members and 'classroom teachers are part of this group where second languages are concerned, but only a part – peers, mentors, role models, friends, family members and significant others – can also fall into this category' (Atkinson 2002: 536).

The Socio-Educational Model of Second Language Acquisition posits that the sociocultural milieu plays an important role (Gardner et al. 1999). Gardner et al. argue:

[The sociocultural milieu] can influence individuals' levels of attitudes, motivation, and anxiety as well as the relative importance that these attributes play in the language learning process. The milieu, furthermore, can be as broad as the community in which individuals live or as narrow as individuals' experiences in the home. That is, individuals' early experiences in a specific sociocultural context could be expected to play a role in the development of their attitudes and motivation associated with second language learning.

(1999: 422)

Hence, the variance in SLA can be explained not only by motivational and attitudinal variables but also by a variety of social, cultural and demographic variables. In fact, in a multilingual context such as India it is the latter that plays a predominant role in SLA. This article continues with this approach and examines how social and cultural factors can affect SLA. The sociocultural practices that operate both inside and outside the classroom will be discussed. I will first look at the contexts of learning – the status of English in India and English language education in my state – in the section that follows. I will then attempt to analyse the factors that affect L2 acquisition in the later sections.

3. Contexts of learning

3.1 Status and functions of English in India

India belongs to the Outer Circle in Kachru's (1989) model. English is used in India as a second language for wider communication within the country. English enjoys far more prestige than any other language, including Hindi. The usefulness of Hindi as a lingua franca is regionally limited whereas English is more useful as a lingua franca. The language serves a wide range of functions in domains of social life, education, media and cross-cultural communication. In the multilingual Indian setting, as identified by Srivastava (1994 cited in Gargesh 2006: 92), English is used as a library language for acquiring information and as a link language for communicating with people from other states.

There are around 333 million speakers of English in India alone. The presence of English for more than 200 years has led to the nativization of the language. As Crystal (1998) says, English is no longer tagged with the colonial past. Instead, it has been shaped to meet their own ends. Local vocabulary, local cultural variations, and new standards of pronunciation are developed (Crystal 1998). As a result, English is not considered an alien language or a language of the elite. There is a growing need and desire to learn English even among the lower socio-economic groups. The spread of English may be attributed to factors such as multilingualism, language policy in education, globalization, the use of English in the media, and literary creativity (Gargesh 2006: 91).

Graddol (1997: 5) argues that languages are not equal in political or social status, particularly in multilingual contexts. Languages are often hierarchically ordered in status as shown in figure 1.1.

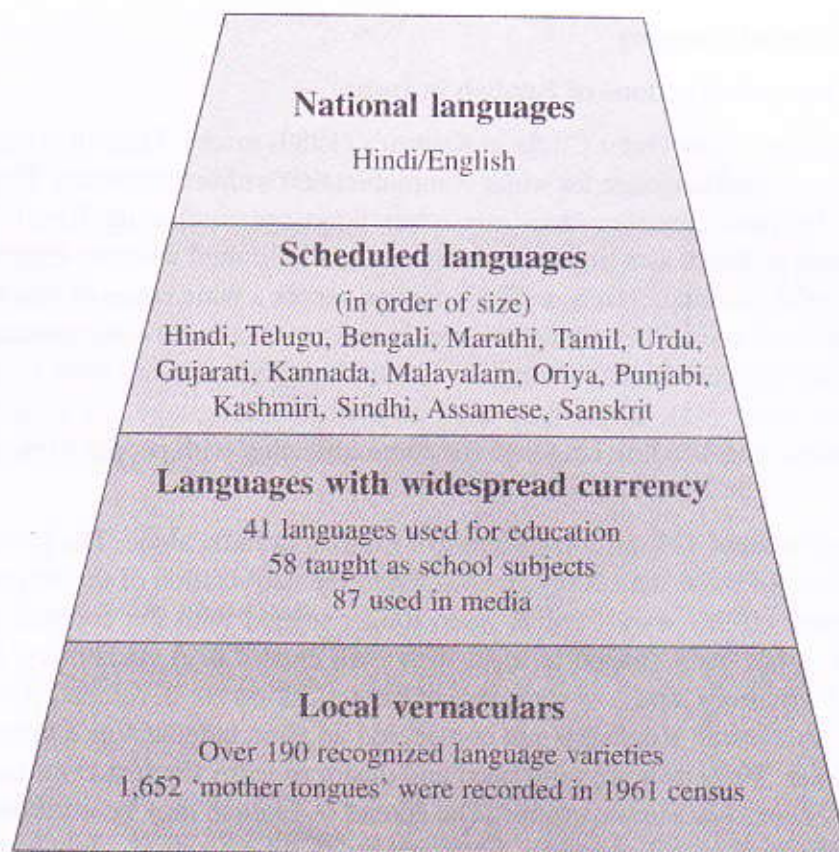


Figure 1.1 The Indian language hierarchy (Goodman and Graddol 1996: 202)

There are nearly 200 languages in India that exist with differing status. Local vernacular languages used within the family and for interactions with close friends are at the base of the pyramid. In the second layer from the base are languages which form the medium of primary and secondary education, newspapers, radio broadcasts, and local commerce. At the top of the pyramid are languages used in official administration, public domains, and for wider and international communication (Goodman and Graddol 1996: 195). Hence, Hindi and English are used as the lingua francas in most parts of the country. Hindi is used widely in the Northern regions whereas English is the preferred language for communication between people from different states in the Southern regions.

Graddol has made the following observation about the interactions between the non-native speakers:

Not all speakers will be fluent in language varieties at the higher levels. The normal pattern of acquisition will begin with those languages at the base. Many of the world's population never require the use of varieties at the uppermost layer because they never find themselves in the communicative position which requires such language. For example, an Indian from the state of Kerala whose mother tongue is a tribal language may also speak Tulu (2 million speakers) and the state language Malayalam (33 million), or the neighbouring state language Kannada (44 million). If they know any Hindi or English, it is likely to be their fourth or fifth language. However, more and more people in the world will learn languages in the uppermost layer as a result of improved education and changing patterns of communication in the world.

(1997: 12)

Graddol (1997: 13) maintains that English is not used simply as a 'default' language; it is often used because it is culturally regarded as the appropriate language for a particular communicative context. Although English is used alongside other widely used languages, it is not uniformly used across the country. There are many differences in how people speak English. Codeswitching, for instance, is widespread. Having said that, I must immediately say that there is an extensive English speaking community in the country. Relating the use of English language to L2 learners, I can say that the exposure to English is very limited. English is not their preferred language. They do not identify themselves with the culture of the target language. For them, English is learned as an addition to their existing linguistic repertoire (McKay 2002: 35). As McKay quoting Sridhar and Sridhar reports, L2 learners' use of English in a multilingual context is significantly different from that of monolingual speakers (Sridhar and Sridhar: 1994 cited in McKay 2002: 39). They have different needs in using the language than do monolingual speakers. Monolingual users of English use English for all of their communicative needs whereas multilingual speakers use English for more restricted and formal purposes (McKay 2002: 27). As envisaged in the National Curriculum Framework (National Council of Educational Research and Training 2005: 39), the goals for a second language curriculum in a multilingual country like

India are two-fold: attainment of a basic proficiency, such as is acquired in natural language learning, and the development of language into an instrument for abstract thought and knowledge acquisition through (for example) literacy. The scenario in Karnataka, a state in South India, is not different from the one I have described. Nevertheless, the language policy and educational practices vary from one state to another and so I will focus on Karnataka in the next section.

3.2 The case of Karnataka

For the investigation of English language teaching (ELT) in India it is important to differentiate between two kinds of schools: government/state and private. This is because of the fact that the teacher's English language proficiency and the exposure of pupils to English outside the school vary enormously in these two situations. In this paper, I will focus on the English teaching situation in one of the southern states in India, namely, Karnataka, which is my own educational context. Karnataka is a highly multilingual state. According to the 2001 Census, out of 10,000 people in Karnataka, 6,626 speak Kannada as their mother tongue, 1,054 speak Urdu, 703 speak Telugu, 357 speak Tamil, 360 speak Marathi, 256 speak Hindi, 146 speak Konkani, and 133 speak Malayalam (Census of India 2001 cited in Vijayakumar 2008).

There are 54529 primary schools (classes 1 to 7) and 9498 secondary schools (classes 8 to 10) in Karnataka. The number of government secondary schools is 3335 whereas there are 6163 private secondary schools (Department of Public Instruction). There are 960416 students studying in government secondary schools and 1231306 studying in private schools. Obviously, there are more students in private schools and the reasons might be as follows:

- (a) The medium of instruction in private schools is English.
- (b) There are better facilities such as computer, library and other learning materials.
- (c) The number of students per class is less (30-35) than that of the government schools (where it varies from 60 to 70).
- (d) The schools have the flexibility of selecting coursebooks.

I will hereafter consider only the government/state school system as it represents the official attitude to language study. Kannada is the primary language which is used as the medium of instruction at the government schools in Karnataka. The government schools lack basic infrastructure and do not have adequate educational facilities. The poverty of government schools and of teachers and students in such schools is hard to grasp unless one has had personal experience of it. This in turn affects all areas of instruction – methods, materials, library facilities, and availability of latest equipment such as the computer. Teachers follow prescribed coursebooks and prepare students mainly for tests and examinations. The students who study in government schools are mostly from low socio-economic status. They are looked down upon as an inferior category of the educated, and they also suffer from the consequent inferiority complex (Jayaram 1993; 112). On the other hand, students in English medium schools have a significantly positive attitude towards English as a language and as a medium of instruction. They have an edge over their counterparts in regional medium schools in terms of employment opportunities, social mobility within and outside the country, and easy access to a large body of technical literature. The National Curriculum Framework (National Council of Educational Research and Training 2005: 10) documents that ‘hierarchies of caste, economic status, and gender relations, cultural diversity as well as the uneven economic development that characterize Indian society also deeply influence access to education and participation of children in school’. The family background and the factors that affect the SLA of students in government schools are discussed in the next section.

4. Socio-cultural aspects of learning English

4.1 Family Background

The focus in this section is on the connections between family socio-economic status and parent-child interactions as well as home learning environments. My hypothesis is that children’s success is, to a great extent, dependent on what they bring to school from the family context. I will, therefore, examine if the home environments created by parents play a major role in children’s development of oral English proficiency and literacy skills.

The students attending government schools are the most disadvantaged in Indian society. They are economically and educationally handicapped and

struggle to acquire English language proficiency. Children in many rural areas speak in dialects and often not even in the standard regional language. There are variations in the dialects spoken. Grade I children (age: 6 years) are only just beginning to learn reading and writing in the 'school language' (medium of instruction) and for thousands of children the school language is itself a second language. Their exposure to English is virtually non-existent. More importantly, they are first generation English learning students.

In order to find out the family background and the attitude of parents towards English, we at the Regional Institute of English South India, Bangalore, in collaboration with the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, conducted a survey using the questionnaire method. The survey was conducted among a sample of 100 parents: 69 from villages, 4 from small towns and another 27 from cities. The study revealed that 20% of the parents have not even completed secondary schooling and only 32% of them have had schooling up to class X. Their occupation is as follows: 21 parents are farmers, 28 are in service, 19 are homemakers, and others are either businessmen or professionals or do other kinds of jobs.

The data about their ability to use English are given in table 1.1, table 1.2 and table 1.3 below:

Table 1.1 Speaking ability

	What is your ability in speaking in English?
	Count
nil	48
a little	26
satisfactory	12
good	10
excellent	04

Table 1.2 Reading ability

	What is your ability in reading in English?
	Count
nil	35
a little	23
satisfactory	11
good	22
excellent	09

Table 1.3 Writing ability

	What is your ability in writing in English?
	Count
nil	42
a little	18
satisfactory	09
good	22
excellent	09

Interestingly, those who registered their abilities to speak, read and write in English as 'nil' or 'a little' are all from villages and towns. Further, as many as 71% parents do not read books in English, 80% of them do not read newspapers, and a majority of them (82%) do not read magazines in English. When asked if they used English at home or in the neighbourhood or at social gatherings or at their child's school, 70% of them responded negatively.

A similar survey was conducted with the children of these parents who were studying in classes V, VI and VII in government schools located across the

state. The study showed similar results for children indicating that the majority of them do not read newspapers or magazines or watch television programmes or listen to any material in English. Moreover, many of them do not use English at home or in the neighbourhood or with the peer group at school.

It is obvious from the data above that children hardly get any exposure to oral and literacy experiences in English in the home environment. However, the attitudes of the parents and the children towards English are highly positive. The majority of the parents see English as representing the key to economic development and employment opportunities. They also feel that English should be a compulsory language at the primary level. Interestingly, 75% of the parents disagreed with the statement 'English should be the medium of instruction at the primary level'.

It is also interesting to note that 52.6% of the children find learning Hindi difficult and 42.9% of them find learning English difficult as shown in figure 1.4. Surprisingly, the majority of them (82.7%) responded that they did not want to learn Hindi more; instead 79.6% wanted to learn English more as illustrated in table 1.5. They seem to recognize better prospects in learning English.

Figure 1.4 Which language do you find the most difficult?

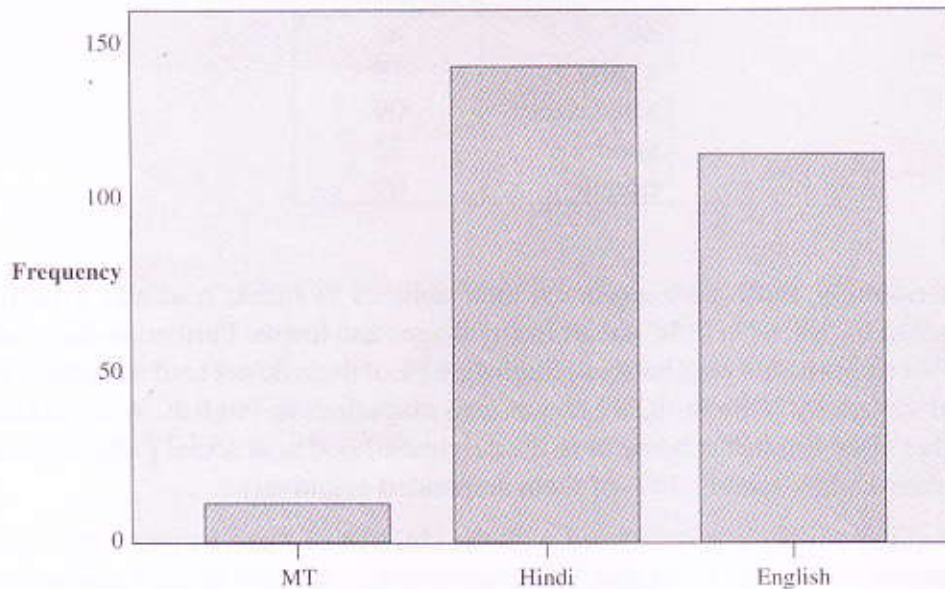


Figure 1.5 More Hindi or more English?

	Do you want to learn Hindi more?	Do you want to learn English more?
	Count	Count
no	235	58
yes	49	226

The major findings of the survey are:

- Children studying in government schools have no access to oral and literacy activities in English at home.
- They have hardly any access to resources in English.
- They have strong motivation for learning English.
- Parents want their children to study English as a compulsory language but do not want it as a medium of instruction.

These findings are consistent with other research studies carried out in bilingual contexts. Reese et al. (2000) have conducted a longitudinal study of the antecedents of emergent Spanish literacy and middle-school English reading achievement of Spanish speaking students in a bilingual context in the U.S.A. The study was carried out on second generation Spanish speaking students and their Latino parents. Reese et al. (2000: 649) recognize the long-term benefits of early (preschool) language and literacy proficiency and experiences. They argue that both early first language literacy performance and oral English proficiency will predict middle school English reading achievement.

Reese et al. (2000: 651) report that family background factors such as practice of home-based literacy activities and parent-child interactions contribute significantly to children's academic performance. They maintain that the factors that seem to be affecting second language achievement in a bilingual context are parental values, family literacy history, parents' education, and family socio-economic status. The study also reveals that family routines and development

sensitive activities that create opportunities for children to 'learn and develop through modelling, joint production, apprenticeship, and other forms of mediated social learning embedded in goal-directed interactions' are rarely found in bilingual contexts (Rogoff 1990; Weisner 1984 cited in Reese et al. 2000: 635).

Other research studies (for example, Tizard and Hughes 1984, Wells 1986 cited in Garton and Pratt 1989: 56-57) examining acquisition processes conducted on the children of middle class and lower socio-economic groups show that the reasons for differential rates of language development are the socio-economic or class differences. According to Bernstein (1960 cited in Garton and Pratt 1989), children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are being exposed to impoverished language compared with their middle-class counterparts.

Some British studies, as reported by Gass and Selinker (2008: 420) have found that there is a greater correlation between second language aptitude and social class and parental education. These studies reveal that children from more privileged classes and with higher parental education are more likely to develop greater aptitude for language learning.

To sum up what I have argued so far, SLA is not entirely based on inherent capabilities. Social and societal backgrounds, family background specifically, have a great impact on SLA. Children from a lower socio-economic class get few opportunities to engage in social interaction and literacy experiences as their parents are either illiterate or do not value adult assistance that facilitates L2 development. Early language experiences for L2 children at home or even in the preschool period are very limited in my educational context.

What happens outside the classroom inevitably has important repercussions on what happens in the classroom. The classroom is one segment of the social world of the learner. Hence, in the section that follows, I would like to examine the classroom factors that affect L2 acquisition process.

4.2 Classroom culture

Hymes (1974 cited in Collentine and Freed 2004: 155) was the first to set the stage for recognizing the importance of contextual factors such as setting, participants, and end (purpose) on communicative interaction in the SLA process. He (1972: xix cited in Collentine and Freed 2004: 153) observed that

'the key to understanding language in context is to start not with language but with context'. Collentine and Freed (1972: xix) report that Batstone has identified two contexts that L2 learners encounter:

[L]earners essentially confront two contexts: *communicative* and *learning*. Communicative contexts require that the learner use the L2 as a tool of sorts for exchanging information and participating in important social and interpersonal functions. Learning contexts are those in which input and learner output are fashioned (normally with the assistance of a teacher) so that learners will attend to form and take risks toward the ultimate goal of improving their linguistic expertise. Furthermore, in communicative contexts, learners may or may not be as oriented toward furthering their linguistic development as they would be in a learning context. (Italics in original) (Batstone 2002 cited in Collentine and Freed 2004: 155)

However, the communicative and learning contexts that L2 learners encounter in the Indian setting are not rich and nurturing to SLA. L2 learners rarely encounter situations in their everyday life where they can apply their learning experiences. So they cannot truly benefit from communicative contexts. The formal language classroom that L2 students find themselves is heavily biased towards learning contexts. Tickoo (1993: 234 cited in Goodman and Graddol, 1996: 201) has rightly observed that '[T]he truth is that the vast majority of Indians are taught English in an acquisition poor environment and as a result the language does not become a usable means of communication'. He maintains that this is eminently true for those who live in villages where there are no opportunities to hear the language spoken.

Several other factors such as the class size, teaching methods, learning strategies, and prior learning experiences have a bearing on SLA. As far as class size is concerned, it is not surprising to find 60 to 70 students in a class in a typical government school. This is an important factor that influences the choice of desirable methods and practices that the teacher uses in the process of curricular transaction (National Council of Educational Research and Training 2005: 80). One should also note that the girls sit toward one side of the class and the boys sit toward the other, and that the two groups seldom have anything to say to each other.

An ethnographic study conducted by Ramanathan (1999) on Gujarati-medium students in India reveals that almost all language in the class – directives, vocabulary items, entire paragraphs from short stories – are translated. The almost exclusive focus on grammar, combined with little or no attention to developing speaking skills, Ramanathan (1999: 221) reports, explains why students do not develop communicative ability in English. This is also echoed in the National Curriculum Framework:

Children's voices and experiences do not find expression in the classroom. Often the only voice heard is that of the teacher. When children speak, they are usually only answering the teacher's questions or repeating the teacher's words. They rarely do things, nor do they have opportunities to take the initiative.

(National Council of Educational Research and Training 2005: 13)

Children's struggle in English language classes may be summarized in their own words: "We only get taught grammar here; we don't get to practise speaking English . . . so we find job interviews difficult" (Ramanathan 1999: 222). Teachers' role, as one teacher cynically put it, "lies in merely dispensing what is in a prescribed set of texts into the heads of the students" (Ramanathan 1999: 228). English language teaching practices are more or less the same in all government schools across the country. By the time they reach secondary school, many children who have grown up in this kind of learning environment lose their self-confidence and their ability to express themselves. As a result, they resort to memorizing the content and are under enormous pressure to perform in examinations. Some are constantly on the verge of dropping out of school because they find English classes too difficult.

Kachru (2008: 314) identifies social hierarchy and conventions of interaction management as two (the other two are cultural values expressed in specific cultural themes and conventions of writing) components of culture and social systems that have consequences for verbal interaction – either in linguistic structure or in conventions of speaking or writing or both. Kramsch (2000 cited in Collentine and Freed 2004: 156) also submitted that 'a consideration of a learning context's repertoire of discourses (e.g. topics, interactional conventions, written and oral genres, or the extent to which a lesson is or is not teacher fronted) provides the most salient data points to understand the effects of sociocultural variables on SLA'. An examination of the government

schools in India shows that the teacher plays the traditional role of an authority figure in the classroom. Classes are kept rigidly under the teacher's control. Rules such as maintaining silence in classrooms and answering only if you know the right answer may discourage processes that are integral to SLA.

Children are not active participants even in the first language acquisition process. They are passive recipients of the input given by the teacher. It is the teacher who initiates a talk, usually by way of asking display questions and students answer his/her questions. Conversation in the classroom is, hence, limited only to questions and answers. If at all there is any peer-to-peer interaction in the classroom, it happens in L1. Teachers translate and explain texts before dictating answers. As reported in the Position Paper National Focus Group on Teaching English (National Council of Educational Research and Training 2005: 12), the mother tongue enters the English class as a surreptitious intruder. These factors hinder L2 development and students are at great disadvantage when it comes to using English in natural contexts.

Added to this, as some research studies (Wilkinson 1995; Talburt and Stewart 1999 cited in Collentine and Freed 2004: 159) carried out in immersion classrooms report, learners may develop knowledge of grammar and grammatical structures but pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic skills do not appear to develop quickly in the L2 context. This is partly because only a single, formal register of communication is taught in the classroom. It is also because children are not exposed to or sensitised to conventions of other varieties of language use (Kachru 2006: 373). So they do not seem to be aware of the use of fillers, rhetorical strategies, and conventions of politeness in spoken and written discourse. Consequently, L2 children tend to write what they speak and speak what they write without knowing the differences between the conventions of spoken and written modes.

Another important factor that influences SLA process is the classroom structure. Williams and Burden (1997: 192) define classroom structure as the way in which learning experiences have been organized. There are three kinds of classroom structures: competitive, co-operative, and individualistic (Williams and Burden 1997). What we find in a typical Indian classroom is a competitive environment. Success and failure are measured by comparing oneself with others. Right answers are rewarded and mistakes are not tolerated. This affects the psyche of some learners. As a result, they are fearful of making mistakes

and too shy to communicate in the classroom. Williams and Burden say that this is not conducive to learning a language. They also argue that if the classroom is arranged in a competitive way, it is difficult to promote positive interdependence, face-to-face positive interaction, social skills and group processing, which, in my view, are important for SLA.

5. Conclusions and implications

The main argument of this article is: it is important to consider the contexts of learning and the influence of external factors while attempting to understand the complex phenomenon of SLA. I have discussed the economically disadvantaged status of students learning in government schools in the regional medium and analysed the factors affecting their SLA. I have focussed on family background factors and classroom culture and argued that they are significant predictors of oral proficiency and literacy development in English.

The implication of this argument is that we must provide contexts that maximise learning opportunities for such children. It also implies that we must facilitate negotiated interaction (Kumaravadivelu 1994:34). What is meant by negotiated interaction is that 'the learner should be actively involved in clarification, confirmation, comprehension checks, requests, repairing, reacting, and turn taking' (Kumaravadivelu 1994: 34). It also means that the learner should be given the freedom and encouragement to initiate talk, not just react and respond to it.

In sum, educational policy is a key factor in achieving equality, equity and uniformity. 'Selective bilingualism' (Jayaram 1993: 102) in schools i.e. the introduction of the regional language as an alternative medium of instruction along with English in selected subjects may be a viable alternative. However, as Goodman and Graddol (1996: 203) say, it must be admitted that 'it seems to be extremely difficult to find the mix of language education and language planning decisions that will work for everyone in a postcolonial and multilingual society'.

This study is limited to examining the SLA process in government school children from low socio-economic status. I have mainly relied on questionnaires, on personal observations and experiences as a teacher and teacher educator and on other research studies carried out in similar contexts. However, there is a need for conducting a longitudinal study comparing the

SLA processes in government and private school children which may throw further light on the factors that facilitate or hinder L2 development. Further research, essentially an ethnographic type, is required in measuring the effects of home environments on L2 development in cases of children from a range of first languages. Future studies can also examine how classroom interactional patterns influence SLA in multilingual contexts.

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