CHAPTER 4

A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH-VERNACULAR DIVIDE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a critical discussion of ELT-related practices in India to show how the middle class, with its relatively easy access to English, represents an inner circle of power and privilege that, for a variety of reasons, remains inaccessible to entire groups of people in India. Based on my extended seven-year project with English and vernacular-medium teachers in the city of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India, the chapter offers a synthesized account of three inter-related local factors impacting English and vernacular educational scenes in Gujarat, namely: nation and state-wide educational policies regarding medium of instruction, a preference for teaching English literature vs. the English language, and some curricular practices as partially evidenced in English language textbooks in Gujarat. Each of these factors plays a crucial role in maintaining the status quo with the English-medium middle class and in shutting out the Gujarati-medium students from fully participating in schooling-related transactions.

INTRODUCTION

Studies of World Englishes in the last two decades have called attention to the growing number of Englishes used internationally (Kachru, 1985) by documenting features of the varieties of English (Pakir, 1991) and raising issues about the socio-ideological underpinnings of their use (Canagarajah, 1993). A key assumption has been that the inner circle of countries (Britain, the U.S., Canada, and Australia) with native speakers of the language sets English language standards for countries in the outer circle (e.g. India and parts of Africa), where English is used non-natively but extensively and has been given official language status. Research has largely concentrated on describing English language varieties or discussing the unequal power relations between inner and outer circles of countries resulting from the privileged standard-setting position of inner-circle countries (Pennycook, 1994, 1998; Phillipson, 1992), but little attention has been paid to examining how power relations operate within the outer circle itself.

Extending the study of hegemonic practices associated with English language use to the outer-circle country of India, this article examines how Indian English and the privileges associated with it remain inaccessible to those who have been schooled in the vernacular-medium (in the present case, Gujarati). Drawing on my extended exploration regarding English and vernacular education, I argue that the Indian middle-class assumes a position of relative power through its access to English. By selectively focusing on three specific educational and institutional practices influencing their access to Indian English, I show how students schooled in vernacular languages remain in less empowered positions.
The following are the three inter-related socio-educational practices I address: National and statewide educational policies regarding medium of instruction, an almost exclusive focus on the teaching of English literature instead of language, and inequities between English and vernacular medium students as reflected in textbooks. By no means a complete list, each of these social cogs or practices is part of a larger social machinery that is kept in place by the privileged assumptions of the middle- and upper-classes. A partial critical assessment of these aligned cogs (Wartenberg, 1990) allows us to see how certain assumptions get reflected, tied to, furthered, and embedded in others, thus sustaining the general social machinery and privileging the English-medium (EM) middle-class (For a fuller discussion see Ramanathan, 2005).

LOCATING THE CURRENT EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN INDIA

The current educational system in India has a long and complicated colonial history. Three famous, almost overcited measures include: (a) the East India Company being compelled to accept responsibility for the education of Indians in 1813, (b) Macaulay’s infamous Minute (on 2 February 1835) wherein he denounced educating Indians in their mother tongue and upheld the intrinsic value of the English language and literature, and (c) Charles Wood’s Dispatch of 1854 that imposed on the government the “task of creating a properly articulated scheme of education from primary school to the university” (Agarwal, 1984, p. 25). The system of education that the British introduced in India was modeled on the British system, especially in regard to higher education. The striking feature of this educational transplantation was English, which was not only taught as a language but also became a medium of instruction (Jayaram, 1993). Indeed, some scholars in India maintain that the emphasis on mastering the English language in schools and colleges became so firmly entrenched and continues to assume such importance that it has “encouraged mechanical learning through memorizing and discouraged inquisitiveness and an experimental bent of mind” (Jayaram, 1993, p. 85).

SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES THAT DISADVANTAGE VERNACULAR-MEDIUM STUDENTS (WHILE SIMULTANEOUSLY ADVANTAGING THEIR ENGLISH-MEDIUM COUNTERPARTS)

**National Level Issues Related to the Medium of Instruction in India:**

*Language-discipline Hierarchy*

Language policies related to (differences in) mediums of instruction in India partially serve to sustain and reinforce the language-discipline hierarchy that currently exits in the educational system. There has been considerable controversy regarding what the medium of instruction should be at both the K-12 level and beyond. According to Jayaram (1993), a little more than half of the universities offer bilingual instruction in one or more courses, with English being one of the mediums of instruction. This availability of choice (regarding college education) in only certain mediums of instruction preordains a self-perpetuating language/medium-related exclusivity. Students schooled in the vernacular in the K-12 years—typically lower-income children—often have little choice but to go to vernacular-medium colleges, a development that limits their opportunities for social advancement, since English and English-medium institutions appear to be tickets to the key goods of the society.