

## A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE



### Abstract:-

English enjoys the rank of being the world's most important language. The language is used not only for communication among people but also it is the medium of knowledge, science and technology. Hence the mastery over the language is very important for the people of India where English is again considered the second official language. For an average Indian student learning English is always a herculean task. In the state of Kerala, English is taught as a second language at school level-from class one to class twelve. At college first two years of most UG programmes, it is taught as compulsory common course. In spite of the twelve years of learning English at school students find it difficult to use the language with all confidence. The paper entitled "A Gender perspective on Learning English as a Second Language" is an attempt to locate the problems the girl students face, analyze them and find out remedial measures. The study focuses on the gender aspects related to the learning of a girl student. It analyses the problems of undergraduate women students' from the Other Backward Class in learning English as a second language regarding the sociological as well as psychological aspects. Moreover, the study is based on the undergraduate women students' in three districts of Kerala- Wayanad, Kozhikode and Malappuram.

### Keywords:

Learning English as a second language, Socio-economic problems, Cultural estrangement, socially and educationally backward, English language the gate way to



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### OBJECTIVES:

- To find out the problems among girl students in learning English.
- To specify the issues and suggest remedial measures.
- To bring in a change in the mode of learning and make learning effective.
- Though the study is girls centered ultimately it is to help students irrespective of gender in the actual learning process.

### INTRODUCTION

India is a country striving to bring development in all fields and become one among the world's developed countries. Active participation of all its citizens is imperative to strengthen the developmental activities of the nation. India has a tradition which considers woman a deity or goddess in different forms like Saraswathi, Lakshmi and Kali. It upholds the contribution of women in the welfare of the individual, the society and the nation as a whole. Education is one of the most important factors which enable man to attain perfection. Superstition and misconception of life has left women far behind in their contribution to the development of the country. However, there is a growing realization that opportunities should be given to women to educate themselves. As a result efforts are being made by various departments and the government to bring about qualitative improvement in the education and participation of women in every other field of work and thought.

In the present scenario English language is regarded as a gateway to the amalgamation of information and development. "[T]HE ENGLISH LANGUAGE is a tool of power, domination and elitist identity, and of communication across continents. 'White man's burden' has practically ended in a political sense, and the Raj has retreated to native shores, the linguistic and cultural consequences have changed the global scene." (Bill Ashcroft et al 291). It has got a cardinal position in the undergraduate syllabus in the state of Kerala and it has been made a compulsory subject for all students at the undergraduate level.

However, it is notable that in spite of the 12 years of learning English as a second language at school level many of the undergraduate students are underachievers and slow learners. This paper critically evaluates the problems faced by women students in the language classroom when they enter into college environment.

### PRESENTING THE PROBLEM

Boys and girls score high in their written tests. Possess an impressive academic record along with excellence in extra-curricular activities as well. But when they appear before an interview board, they fail to face the interview in English. Despite an impressive grade card they come out unsuccessful. They may have good writing skills, wonderful ideas but less equipped to make an oral presentation. The reasons are various with regard to individual performance. Some say it is lack of confidence. While some say it is 'language problem'. However students face various problems in attaining mastery over the language which is a must in the job market. The present paper is an attempt to focus on the gender issues in learning the language. It focuses on girls' difficulties in learning English though boys too have similar problems. The study is based on the under graduate women students from backward communities in Wayanad, Kozhikode and Malappuram districts of Kerala falling out in the second language. When it comes to women, the doubly challenged section of the community it is a grave matter of concern. Various socio-cultural, economical and psychological reasons account for the problems faced by the women students from the backward communities in learning English. The problems faced by women students in learning English as a second language are more or less sociological or psychological in nature than being purely linguistic. Students of this kind should be given adequate facilities and opportunities to enable them to use English language effectively so that they also could easily overcome the challenges of the time.

Of course language is the mirror of a culture. It reflects the socio-cultural, economical and psychological nature of human life. Studies show that learning languages adds to the development of the intellectual faculty. When it comes to the learning of a foreign language which is of an alien culture and geography it affects the thought process of an individual. Learning an Indian language may be easier for an Indian student as there is a cultural link among Indian languages. When it comes to the learning of English the students may have to face the interference of the mother tongue and their native culture. A survey conducted regarding the learning of English language among Undergraduate women students demonstrates the notion that the language is alien for them regarding its cultural rudiments. It summarizes Raja Rao's dictum that "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien,' yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before-but not of our emotional make-up." (Kanthapura 296)

Other Backward Class is a term used by the Government of India to classify castes which are educationally and socially disadvantaged. According to the Mandal Commission report of 1980, OBCs comprised of 52% of the country's population. By 2006, it shrunk to 41%, according to the National Sample

Survey Organization. The list of OBCs is maintained by the Indian Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, castes and communities are added or removed depending on social, educational and economic factors. There are different communities in the districts of Wayanad, Kozhikode and Malappuram that are categorized as socially and educationally backward, termed as Other Backward Class or OBC. The present paper focuses on the broader classification of the backward communities such as Mappila, Muslim, Ezhava, Thiya, Ambalakkaran, Latin Catholics, scheduled Caste Converted to Christianity etc. Women students hailing from different communities that are educationally and socially backward, have their own problems in learning English as a second language. A probe into their difficulties in learning the language is very important for a teacher who has to deal with majority of them in the classrooms of Arts and Science Colleges.

### METHODOLOGY

As an English teacher in the last eight years I have understood that the students hailing from remote places in the rural area find learning English a herculean task. To find out the problems they face and suggest solutions a questionnaire was prepared. The questionnaire was distributed among the undergraduate women students belonging to the districts of Wayanad, Kozhikode and Malappuram. The questionnaire was used as a tool to analyze the socio-economical, cultural and psychological factors influencing the task of learning English as a second language. Handouts of the questionnaire were distributed among the women students. They were asked to fill up the details within a time span of ten minutes, so that they could answer all questions without any hesitation. If they are asked to give answers orally, they may shy away to answer all questions in public.

Yet another method was that of collecting data from different English teachers. The tool used for data collection was interview with teachers concerned. It was basically focused on their experience in teaching English at the undergraduate level. There was an informal interaction with some parents in remote areas of the district. Apart from the samples that have been collected, a few scholarly articles and books on research findings regarding the learning experience of undergraduate women students in India also have been used.

### FINDINGS

The survey conducted among undergraduate women illustrates that women students belonging to the districts of Wayanad, Kozhikode and Malappuram of Kerala experience cultural estrangement with English. It's even more an alien for a student from a rural background as opposed to a student from a sophisticated urban familial atmosphere. Home and social environment put in the congenial setup to make the language close to one's soul. May be the changing country which herald globalization evading the cultural differences makes the English language less alien to a typical Indian student. To quote Savithri Sharma "Intelligence is higher in upper classes because of the environment superiority they enjoy. As compared with Western countries, the relationship between social class and intelligence is expected to be higher in India because of more serious adverse effects of economical and cultural deprivations in lower classes."(116).

#### That is to say:

Cultural estrangement  
Lack of exposure  
Home environment fails to provide a congenial atmosphere  
Highly motivated but lack of proper reinforcement  
Lack of confidence  
Feel less satisfied with the syllabus they follow

-are the issues to be tackled. According to the survey conducted 75% of the girls show the above mentioned problems in learning English. They find their parents keen on their education. They get ardent support as well. They do get freedom to choose their subjects for higher education. They are highly motivated but they are not confident with English. The kind of feeling that prevails among students is that it is not possible to achieve fluency or mastery over English language. This kind of tendency prevents students from learning new languages like English. They fear if English holds them back since English is the medium of expression for higher studies. Another aspect is that most of them are first generation learners. They find it difficult to get proper guidance from their parents and other members in the family. In this context, it is appropriate to cite A.S.Hornby in his work "A Dialogue on Democracy", that intelligent parents will be aware of the importance of their children's education where as some others want them to leave school and earn money.

Yet another reason stated for this is that they study subjects from the examination point of view only. This is same with English language as well. However the syllabus or curriculum is restructured the examination system is the very old type where students are tested for their skills in memorizing rather than

testing their analytical and creative skills. Eventually little importance is given to the practical aspect of learning the language. Union Minister of State for Human Resource Development Shashi Tharoor at a meet on 'Curricular reforms and classroom practices in English' stated that "language teachers in Kerala should not teach English as a textbook exercise, but as a living experience that enabled students to communicate effortlessly to fellow human beings." (The Hindu March 31, 2013). He also said that English should not be treated as an elitist language in Kerala as the knowledge of English is a passport to economic, social and educational advancement. Shri Tharoor, also a well-known award-winning writer, said

If we deny our children the opportunity to learn English, we are denying them their future. Malayalis certainly have to interact with non-Malayalam speaking people, especially because they are forced to go to the rest of the world as their land cannot offer them vast employment opportunities. English is thus more important to Malayalis than it is to Biharis or Tamilians. (The Hindu March 31, 2013). (The Hindu March 31, 2013).

A child brought up in a multilingual lingual society is sure to learn any language with all ease and comfort. Therefore, learning a foreign language like English for a child with an exposure to multiple languages is not as difficult as for a child in a mono linguistic society. "Bilinguals who are highly proficient in two or more languages are reported to have enhanced executive function and are better at some aspects of language learning compared to monolinguals." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multilingualism> 30/6/14 12:17)

Analyzing the various factors of teaching and learning experience, it is important that socio-economic and psychological aspects are considered. Nevertheless, the individual is always influenced by the society around. According to A. Furnham the definition and measurement of intelligence have always been academically controversial, more than the aspect of heritability of IQ and environmental effects on IQ; it has been the group differences (gender or race) in IQ that has led to much discussion. (Personality and Individual Differences). The fact of social class and socialization come under the purview of discussion of acquisition of English language of a girl child. The social systems in a social construct influence the molding of a personality. "The influence of the social class is pervasive in spite of its being inarticulate and implicit, as the individual is constantly exposed to a particular set of attitude, values and concepts which characterize his class." (Savitri Sharma 16).

In the case of a girl child limited space is there for her exposure to the world around her to analyze the social constructs and develop something of her own. By and large a girl child's world of learning also gets shrunk into the limited purview of her immediate circumstances. For a child of affluent parents there is supposedly an ambience of learning in a technologically sophisticated atmosphere, which makes the process of learning especially English language feasible. Whereas a child from a poor background remains aloof and feels herself far away from the rest of the world, belittling herself to her routine drudgery. As a language is rooted in its culture, people and the land, it is essential that a learner should be exposed to the different functional aspects of the language. Hence for the trouble-free learning English language has to be learnt by understanding it through its culture. People with verbal-linguistic intelligence learn foreign languages very easily as they have high verbal memory, and an ability to understand and manipulate syntax and structure. As pointed out by Howard Gardner, the spokesman of the theory of multiple intelligences, every individual is gifted with one or another talent. Each individual is different regarding his/her aptitude and attitude. Hence learning experience has to be provided catering to the aptitude of the student.

According to the survey conducted in the district of Wayanad, the problems that students experience are far graver than that of the adjacent district, Kozhikode. As for the typical geographical features Wayanad is more or less in a secluded state. The people of Wayanad have little contacts with people from adjacent districts unless they commute. Wayanad is the least populous district in Kerala. It is the only district in Kerala that shares border with both the neighboring states Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Wayanad shares border with Kozhikode, Kannur, and Malappuram districts in Kerala. The population of Wayanad consists of mostly of tribal community. The rest is that of settlers from neighboring states and other districts in Kerala. The tribal populations still practice age-old customs and rituals and live a nomadic life.

Some of the tribal populations include Paniyas, Adiyas, Kattunayakan, kurumans and Kurichiyans. It is the district with the highest share in the adivasi population (about 36%) of Kerala. Wayanad also has a large settler population. The Jains from Karnataka came in the 13th century. The Hindu Nairs from Kottayam-Kurumbranadu, in Kannur district, made an entry in the 14th century and established their feudal system. They were followed by Muslims (26.87%). There were large scale migrations from southern Kerala in the early 1940s. Christians came in the 1950s from Travancore region. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayanad\\_district](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wayanad_district))

Apart from the tribal community, the section of population that belongs to the Other Backward Community is, basically Muslims and Latin Catholics, converts from the tribal community. Muslims and scheduled Caste Converted to Christianity is the people who belong to the OBC in Wayanad. Most of them work in farms and tea plantations. Some of them own land where they grow crops like coffee, cardamom etc. Hence most of the students hailing from Wayanad are first generation learners as their parents were more concerned of farming than that of modern education. Therefore the support that the parents could lend them is very less. The students especially girls say that they little exposure to world of English language outside the four walls. In the district of Kozhikode, the situation is rather different. Though many of them are first generation learners, they get ample opportunities to learn. In the rural areas too, attempts are made



to make learning effective. They need to cultivate an attitude towards learning English to make task easier. Students from urban area find it less difficult as they get enough chances to listen and speak the language. Their nurturing at upgrade English medium schools in addition to the congenial atmosphere that they enjoy at home serves them with better learning. In Malappuram district learning English is a very hard task. Girls find it even tougher in the sense that the kind of orientation that they receive from the environment they are brought up. In the most interior parts of the district very few girls come out from schools with an ambition for a career or a profession. Most of them are married off soon after their twelfth. There is lack of interest, motivation and proper reinforcement from the parents and the society. Those girls who come out for higher studies with a strong will and support from parents find English of all other subjects difficult. It is basically as per the data collected from the students, the environment which provides hardly any help towards familiarizing the language. They get little chance to listen or speak the language. It's only their mother tongue that surrounds them. They do not have the habit of reading English newspaper, books or watching English programmes on television and remain aloof from the world of internet. In short the practical aspect of learning a language is ignored.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS:

Much research has been conducted regarding the problems of teaching and learning English as a second language. But still the problem pertains as a problem for an average Indian student. Culture is the cradle of a language, to which it is born into. In the case of English either the student has to be familiarized with the culture of the language or English language has to be brought close to the learner's cultural contexts. Literary works whether they are fiction, poem, drama or short story or quoting real-life incidents experienced by students themselves can help the learners appreciate a culture and learn better.

Women students of socially and economically backward classes from rural areas are often found having little exposure to the cultural dynamics of the target language. The reason as stated above may be the home and social environment they hail from. Students have to be provided with an ambience of learning at home as well. They should be given ample chances to use the language. Encourage them to read, listen, speak and write in English beyond the prescribed format at school and college. Build a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language. One of the best ways to make learning easier and effective is to set learning catering to the 'multiple intelligences' of the learner providing them with various contexts of learning the language as the language of the 'heart'. The curriculum of undergraduate programmes has to be structured considering the multitudinous learners with multiple intelligences too.

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