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**The Challenges of Language Learning: A
Case Study of Rishi Valley School**

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Erving Goffman in his work, *Forms of Talk* (1981), takes up those meaningful utterances which lead to the formation of a conversation. When individuals are in the presence of others, they respond to the language spoken by the other to set the ball rolling for a dialogue. However, for this dialogue to be sincere and significant, the utterer and the respondent not only need to speak the same language, but also understand the underlying codes and ways of the language for it to be intelligible. According to Goffman, "words we speak are often not our own" (Goffman 1981: 3), but always oriented to the other, as a response. To be a part of the social group, a worthwhile exchange of words is necessary, which requires for utterances to be reciprocated, which in turn requires an appropriate knowledge of the language.

Social interaction leads to the shaping of a social individual participating in the processes of society. There also exists a pattern of social relations which becomes the backbone of these interactions. This pattern is both shaped and influenced by a number of number of social forms such as family, religion, gender, colour and most importantly, language. Language constitutes the means through which social interactions take place. For a child, it is in fact language, that lays the first stone of immersing the self in the world, to be a part of it. Basil Bernstein, reflecting on the writings of Sapir, remarks that, "the real world is to a large extent built up on the language habits of a group" and that, "language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" (Bernstein 2003: 95). The function of language is to give a form to future and play a role in its transmission. Bernstein also regards that a social structure, which comprises of a system of social relations, generates speech codes peculiar to it. When a child learns a language she, as a matter of fact, learns the essentials of social structure.

Language, however, not only shapes social structure but in turn also is shaped by it. As Bernstein puts it, "the social structure becomes the developing child's psychological reality by shaping his acts of speech" (Bernstein 2003: 98). It is by virtue of language, mediated through the social structure, that a child acquires her social identity and responds to this identity. Language is ever present in the environment, that influences and constrains the individual. Thus language can have both harmonious or disharmonious effects. It is in its nature to include those who know it and exclude those who do not.

It then becomes significant to look at the role that language plays in the interactions in schooling processes. In schools, language is treated both as a means of communication and a subject in the formal curriculum, making it an integral part of a child's schooling experience. However, language dynamics play out differently in different schooling structures.¹ This paper attempts to look at the workings of the two languages, English and Hindi, through the lens of the students who face difficulties in language learning in Rishi Valley School (RVS), Andhra Pradesh.² It explores how language learning processes may or may not lead to adjustment and accommodation of students with difficulties, within the organisation of schooling processes. Analysing language through the viewpoint of students facing problems in its learning will shed light on the general structure of language learning present in the environment of the school. The paper will further seek to understand the role of peers in negotiating language and a culture of reading which gets entrenched in such a way that it becomes the pillar of language learning in the school. It will also consider the fact that the languages, which exist within the schooling structure (formal and informal) of RVS, manifest themselves in ways that become typical of it. Language is a social fact. Its learning is influenced by the milieu in which it manifests itself and the problems faced in learning it might also be rectified through repeated exposure to the language learnt in a particular context.

¹There exist a variety of schools in India, ranging from government, private and aided schools. The private schools are considered more desirable than the government ones due to their better access to resources and teachers. According to the *U-DISE (Unified District Information System for Education) 2015-16*, percentage of schools by management statistics (released by the *National University of Education Planning and Administration, New Delhi, India*), 54.17% of schools are run by the *Department of Education*, 3.02% by *Tribal/Social Welfare Department*, 15.04% by *Local Body*, 5.50% are *Private Aided*, 19.38% are *Private Unaided*, 0.13% are by *Other Government*, 0.21% by *Central Government*, 1.70% are *Unrecognised*, 0.66% are *Madrassa Recognised* and 0.18% are *Madrassa Unrecognised*.

²I would like to clarify what I mean by difficulties here. By using the phrase, 'students with difficulties in language learning', I do not mean the students who are differently abled and have special intellectual needs. The focus of my study includes those students who in general face difficulties in learning and understanding language subjects. I had planned to approach this idea with the concept of remedial classes and what may be some other ways which may become useful for the school to deal with such students. However, remedials are not present in the formal system of the school and are solely need based and irregular. I was able to observe other activities which were carried out in order to deal with such students, which I

will elaborate further.

Charting the Language Map of the Field

This research was conducted during the summer of 2016 (June-July) at Rishi Valley School, which is a private, residential school, run by the Krishnamurti Foundation India (KFI) in the Madanapalle district of Andhra Pradesh. It draws its visions and ideals from the renowned philosopher, J Krishnamurti, the founder of the school. The school comprises of teachers and students from the diverse states of the country and varied professional and educational backgrounds.

The school is spread over a sprawling area which consists of the physical structures of junior school, senior school, dining hall, playground and the houses in which students and teachers live. The school constitutes classes IV-XII, in which the junior school includes classes IV-VI; the middle school includes classes VII-VIII; and the senior school includes classes IX-XII. The school is affiliated to and has to adhere to the requirements of Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE, which is concerned with ICSE examination for class X and ISC examination for class XII). However, there are no examinations from class IV-VIII. In that case, the teacher usually evaluates a student based on his/her overall performance (includes class performance and participation in co-curriculars). There is no formal weekly/monthly examination discipline to be followed in junior and middle school. Teachers frequently take dictations and occasional math tests, which are neither graded nor marked as they believe that grading induces feelings of comparison and competition among the students.

The students in the junior and middle school are made to learn three languages: English, Hindi and Telugu. The 'first' language status is assigned to English. It then becomes imperative for a student to learn English, as it functions in school not only as a language subject, but it is also spoken outside the classroom, in the assembly, playground, dining hall and in the house among peers. The student can choose either Hindi or Telugu as their 'second' and 'third' language.

English is the language present in the general environment of the school. It is also the medium of instruction at RV. It mediates learning in every other subject. Moreover, English is also the language in which the students converse with each other due to the dissimilarity of the mother-tongue backgrounds to which they belong. This facilitates communication with one's peers. The language is then learnt not only in the formal classroom environment but also in informal spaces outside the classroom (the house,

playground, dining hall etc).

The situation of Hindi differs from that of English. Hindi is not present as an obvious choice in language medium in the environment of the school. Most of its speaking and learning takes place inside the classroom. It is not a commonly spoken language at RVS. Students who take Hindi as their second language are as follows:

- Students whose mother tongue is Hindi.
- Students whose mother tongue is Telugu and their parents prefer to have them learn Hindi as their second language.
- Students who do not know either Hindi or Telugu and take up Hindi as their second language.

Thus the second language Hindi classroom broadly consists of two groups of students on the basis of their previous knowledge or exposure to the language:

- The mother tongue Hindi speakers (those who are well-versed with the language).
- Students whose mother tongue is not Hindi and are new learners of the language (those who may know a little Hindi or do not know it at all).

The focus of my study was an attempt to understand the challenges to language teaching and learning for both English and Hindi, through the students who faced difficulties in grade VI in the junior school and grade VII and VIII in the middle school. During the initial weeks when the school had just started, I spent my time interviewing the language teachers of the concerned classes. For the rest of the period, I became a participant observer during language classes and also sat in the library periods of some of these classes. The time spent also included striking up conversations with the children during juice breaks or in the rest hour after lunch. Participant observation and interviews were my main tools for research.

The desirability of English-medium schooling

English-medium education in schools was introduced by the British colonial rulers in India. In the post-independence era, English studies in the school curriculum of India have been subject to much debate and discussion. The language is associated with the notion of 'modernity', however over the years, the concern that has arisen is more about producing a national modern, "a notion of modernity that could be intrinsically Indian" (Advani 2009:2). English is not only a language of modernity, but simultaneously becomes,

"the language of colonialism, pan-Indianism, and of globalisation" (Advani 2009:2).

During colonial times and in the initial decades after independence, English language was seen as a marker of difference as it separated, the coloniser from the colonised on the one hand, and the elites who had access to the language and the others who did not, on the other. The language was seen as that which produced and promoted an urban, elitist education which was accessible only to the privileged classes (Advani 2009:32). The post-independence language politics had important bearings on the general status of English language in the country and its particular role in the education system. There were debates on whether to give English the status of national language, as that which will unite the country. These claims were pitted against those of other regional languages and Hindi. However, the demand for English language actually arose as a resistance to the imperialism of Hindi which was developing post-independence. To pacify the situation, the Indian state introduced a Three Language Formula (in the education policy of 1968), wherein the students had to learn Hindi, English and any regional language at school. Today in a rapidly globalising world, Advani argues that, the English language has achieved an entirely new significance. It is also gaining ground among the marginalised. It has become a language that is Indian, which opens a window to the world, leads to the production of a modern and enables one "to be a true Indian" (Advani 2009:23). This has eventually led to an increase in the demand for English-medium education and a burgeoning of English-medium schools all over the country.

This brief background of the history of the development of the English language in the country provides an understanding of the nature, structure, use and the function of the English language in schools. While claiming to carry the legacy of being 'modern', the language also seems to assert its ascendancy over other (regional) languages. It then becomes important to see how this linguistic ascendancy plays itself out in the everyday lives of people, particularly students in school, who are made to learn the language, even though they might or might not have any prior exposure to it. In general, English has become a language of 'opportunity', making its learning in school both essential and desirable, to keep up with the pace of the fast globalising world.

Learning the English language in schools gets tied to the idea of a better future in the job market, modernity and progress in general. At RVS, English language education is not only carried out within the classroom but also outside it, as it is the language which is also used as a means of

communication between the teachers, students and others.³ English language here acquires the status of that common language which enables communication as both the students and teachers come from disparate language backgrounds. The school then becomes predominantly anglophone in nature. It therefore is important to look at how the students who face difficulties in speaking, writing or reading English are dealt with and assimilated into the English language environment and the way in which language is studied or spoken in the school. The following sections, explore the aspects of nature, initiation and adaptation to the English language environment that persists at RVS. In trying to understand the dynamics of English language, the sections also attempt to draw a picture of how difficulties in the language are dealt with, through various practices in place both inside and outside the classroom time and space.

English language initiation and acquisition: Towards becoming 'speaking individuals'⁴

The classroom provides for a meaningful social situation for both language initiation and acquisition, as most children often begin to learn new language inside the classroom, so the "instructional element" of the classroom becomes substantial (Breen 1985:135).

³The entry point or the test through which the students are admitted to primary and middle school also includes a test in English. The school does not admit the students who do not pass their Math and English test. At present, the school does not have the physical infrastructure and special educators for differently abled students. If it does find the existence of students with severe difficulties in their studies, it refers them to the Brindavan Centre in Bangalore. The Centre provides students with dyslexia, ADHD and some other learning difficulties, programmes of remediation and equipping them with skills in reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic to cope up with the demands of a mainstream school. The reports are compiled by the English language/math teachers and sent to Centre. The Centre accordingly refers different programmes for the students. The parents are usually advised to take their child for the programmes during the break times. (Source: Interviews with teachers)

⁴'Speaking' refers to using one's voice to utter the words of a language. 'Speaking individuals' here, refer to the new learners of a language acquiring the knowledge of sounds, applying it to speak isolated words and broken sentences in the language, which may or may not mean

anything. Fluency in the language is not present which hardly makes any communication possible at this stage.

At RVS, English language initiation is carried out in the prep section and is important to consider since it reflects the general practices of the way in which the language is introduced to those students who do not have a prior exposure to it (either at home or at school which they had studied in previously).⁵ The prep section consists of children of teaching and non-teaching staff. Mostly, the teacher's children begin their English learning, with some idea of the language before, be it through some words or broken sentences that they try to speak. This, however, is not always the case with children of the non-teaching staff since most of them are hardly exposed to any language apart for their mother tongue which is usually either Kannada or Telugu. Exposure to the English language happens mainly by introducing them first and foremost, to the sounds of the language. It is through rhymes and story-telling, combined with exaggerated expressions of the teacher that the seeds of language are sown inside the classroom for the young ones. It is believed then that only when students hear, speak and then right the language while they learn its right usage. There is a recognition of the fact that language learning takes time.

At the same time however, the mother-tongue of the of the child is not put aside but used as a bridge, to enable learning a new language. Although, the teacher speaks in English all the time, she often turns to other children in the class to translate what she is saying in to Telugu/Kannada. Thus, flexibility is exercised in language used by the teacher in classroom, to ensure that the students are able to understand her.

Formal and Public Language: Towards becoming 'communicating individuals'⁶

There exists a constant correlation between language and the culture of the setting in which it is spoken (Sapir 1912), as a result of which it becomes exclusive to that particular setting. Analysing the uses and structure of language in a particular setting gives us considerable insight into speech acts, experiences and communities which emerge out of those settings, and to which new members entering the setting may need to conform. Language acquisition takes place in a social matrix in which a child acquires not only a system of grammar but "also a system of its use, regarding persons, places, purposes and other modes of communication, etc." (Hymes 1967:640).

⁵ Although the admission to the school begins from class 4 onwards, the prep section caters to the children of the teaching and non-teaching staff who reside on campus. For the children in this section, the age group ranges from 3+ to 8+ and here they cover pre-primary and initial years of primary education (grade 1-3).

⁶ 'Communicating individuals' here, refers to those who use the language meaningfully. The

It is in such acquisition that a child is considered to be acquiring a "sociolinguistic competence" which gives her the ability to participate in society not only as a speaking, but also as a "communicating member" (Hymes 1967:640). It thus becomes noteworthy to examine the concepts of 'formal' and 'public' language as explicated by Basil Bernstein (2003).⁷ Through using these concepts, I seek to explain the two different sets of language cultures that students who face difficulties in learning language need to be assimilated into, to comprehend, embrace and reach that level of English language which generally prevails in the school. The same does not however happen with Hindi.

Language is a mechanism through which a society not only communicates but also organises itself. The setting of language in a particular social structure, slang, abbreviations and the type of language used in general, determines the nature of social interaction that individuals in that language setting might possess. Similarly, language that develops in a school setting is of a particular nature. Two varieties of English language develop in the language and communication environment of RVS: one that is spoken in class and the other that is spoken among the peers. There occur overlaps between the two. The way that the language is spoken in class, might merge with the way the language is spoken among the peers. Also, the way in which the language is spoken among the peers (such that it might be subverted, with terms abbreviated, slang created and grammar fiddled with) might come into the way in which the language is spoken in the classroom (in front of the teacher). It is in the classroom that mistakes are pointed out and corrected and a formal structure of language is infused into the student. Thus the student has to respond to and get assimilated into the two different but overlapping language structures of communication.

According to Bernstein it is "the language between social equals (peer groups), which approximates to a public language, and a formal language which permits sensitivity to role and status" (Bernstein 2003:22). Thus, according to this scheme, the English language in RVS as it obtains among the peers, may be regarded as "public language" and that which obtains among the teacher and the student within the classroom setting particularly may be regarded as "formal language".

A student of RVS has to acknowledge and react to the two linguistic usages, a formal language and a public language. Public language is expressive, personal and carries meanings that are implicit, taken for granted and also expressed through non-verbal communication.

⁷I do not use Bernstein's "formal" and "public" language in the way that he associates them with particular social classes. However, I use these terms only in a way of their characteristics and usage defined by him.

It uses "short, grammatically simple, often unfinished sentences, a poor syntactical construction with a verbal form stressing the active mood, simple and repetitive use of conjunctions (so, then, because), frequent use of short commands and questions" (Bernstein 2003:31). Thus the variant of English spoken among ones equals and peers at RVS may be regarded as public language. Learning it and absorbing oneself in the ways of this language opens the door to acceptance among one's peers and adherence to it marks one's allegiance to the group. On the other hand, a formal language is impersonal, carries meanings that are explicit and constitutes an emphasis on the grammar of the language. It uses "accurate grammatical order and syntax regulate what is said, grammatically complex sentence construction and frequent use of impersonal pronouns" (Bernstein 2003:41). This is the variant of language which obtains between the roles of the teacher and those of the students as a part of classroom interaction at RVS. It is through this language, and in the classroom, that a student is oriented to and corrected for the 'official' and 'right' use of the language. It is with the English teacher in the classroom, while speaking or writing in class or doing prep (home) work that the student is supposed to apply the correct usage of parts of speech and frame sentences accordingly. It is this formal structure that the students need to imbibe and it is through their classroom performance of formal language that the teachers identify those students who may be facing difficulties in learning the language.

Dealing with difficulties in learning English within the classroom

There are students in RVS who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds and families where English may or may not be spoken in their homes. Some students have had very little previous exposure to the language and come from schools where they have learned rudimentary writing and reading in English and not so much the spoken language. Accordingly, their language levels have to be improved and brought at par with how the language manifests itself in the school in general. There are mechanisms in place in both the classroom and the general school environment for dealing with students facing general and not severe difficulties in language learning processes. However, these mechanisms do not constitute explicit, formal guidelines laid down by the school for dealing with such students. There is no imposed and corrective remedial programme at work.

Different teachers apply their own methods and the process of "mediation" (Luk 2009:250) that takes place between the teacher and the students facing difficulties in learning the language, inside the classroom, is essential apart from the umpteen opportunities of learning such students experience outside it.⁸ This "mediation" becomes effective not only when the teacher mediates between the student and the textbook but also when the teacher takes into account of the social situation of the student and uses methods that are informal such as asking students to translate (with their success dependent upon the kind of relationship that fosters between the student, teachers, peer groups). This leads to the creation of certain practices and cultures which in turn have an effect on the nurturing the language both within the student and in the general interactive environment of the school. Language learning, thus, is not just a process which is restricted to teacher-student interaction. Instead a recognition on the impact of peers (whether inside or outside the classroom space) and a creation of a playful classroom discourse by the teacher also plays an important role and put pressure on the kind and quality of language learnt.

Within the classroom, the teachers have to first identify students who might be facing difficulties and then work with them. For the identification, the teachers focus on mainly the spoken and the written word. Class participation of these students is limited or none at all as either there is a hesitation in answering a question and often insistence on repeating it. Teachers recognise the existence of different abilities of students in their class. Some may be good orally, but they might not write well. A child may not be submitting his/her work on time, but otherwise he/she might be very sharp. Students may listen but cannot concentrate, have problems in comprehending what is being communicated and may make a lot of grammatical mistakes. Most of this identification happens when the teacher gives one-on-one attention to the child and a better sense is acquired when the teacher observes children closely in class. Stress is laid on reading and hearing the written word. Reverberations of this practice are seen in a reading culture that is built through buddy, house and library reading systems.⁹ An emphasis on listening exercise is laid in the primary school wherein the teachers devote some periods every week to read works of fiction for their students.

⁸The concept of "mediation" was given by Vygotsky, and was also one of the main component of his sociocultural theory, which regards that "mediation is essential in promoting learning as a higher human mental activity" (Luk 2009:250).

⁹I elaborate about the activities and practices in the buddy, house and library reading systems in the next section.

Learning English language in class VIth and VIIth grades involves not just learning the language in an isolated way but constantly connecting it to the lives of the students. Experiences of the student (be it at of another school, or in another language) are encouraged. An emphasis is laid on their expression and the content that the students write and not how correctly they may be writing it.

The teachers make all the students check their prep work on their own so that the students facing difficulties are able to identify where they might be facing problems and try to correct any mistakes by themselves before giving in their notebooks for checking. The teachers have to constantly take into account the peer group pressure faced by students not fluent in English. The teachers let these students make mistakes, give them comfortable time to pick up the language and most importantly, do at not point out those mistakes in front of the whole class or their peers as it might introduce feelings of inadequacy vis-a-vis their peers. The acknowledgement of their good works by the teachers in the presents of peers, act as positive reinforcements for such students. Class work and activities are mostly assigned in groups, to serve both the purposes of providing assistance through peers and despite cleavages, reducing apprehensions towards and ridiculing of such students among their peers.

Within the classroom, the teachers tend to display utmost patience and recognition of students facing difficulties in learning the language. However, it is classmates who underscore the premium placed on fluency in the English language. A student might be laughed at for not pronouncing words correctly, not using words according to the situation, or not framing sentences properly, but when in classroom, the teacher's authority is able to curb it. Outside the classroom, mocking and teasing repeatedly heppens over committing mistakes and these are the situations which these students might have to deal with on an everyday basis.

In the absence of remedials, a space is created in the classroom itself for dealing with such students. An active engagement with the difficulties of the students takes place when they are made to read and listen to the language which increases their chances to assimilate it. There are processes at work everyday and are spontaneous as opposed to structured formal remediation processes, which serve to help the student participate by speaking a meaningful language, which in turn has an effect on their communicative competence. The English language is not imposed on the student in a way that the student is rebuked for making mistakes while speaking in it or writing it. There are, however, subtle processes in place that serve to familiarise and habituate the student with the language, in which the teacher enables the student to go through this gradual process of familiarisation.

Apart from classroom and peer learning, the following initiatives in place, consciously or unconsciously diffuse the language in the environment. The constant hearing and seeing of the language leading to a whole mechanism which takes shape in dealing with students facing difficulties in learning the language.

The process of integration into a speech community

Thapan (2014) emphasises the importance of understanding schools by paying attention to the processes that go on inside the school, its classrooms and more significantly, look at the participants (the students, teachers and others) who engage in active meaning making within the confines of the school. The impact of peer culture cannot be ignored. Students are not acquiescent, but they are the ones who define and grapple with the structures of school processes by attempting to "negotiate, strategise or modify them" (Thapan 2014:5). It is also significant to point out that there is no uniformity or consistency in forms of interactions that take place in school. The criss-crossing of caste, class, gender, age, linguistic, regional or religious identities add to the complexity of these interactions (Thapan 2014:10).

At RVS, English language is one area around which peer relations are constructed and negotiated. Furthermore, for students who come from different backgrounds and speak distinct mother-tongues, English becomes the only language that acts as an effective means of interaction in such a diverse environment. A 'speech community', based on English language gets constituted, with its own rules, functions and boundaries. Familiarity with and proficiency in the English language, thus, is essential to be a part of the 'speech community'. The Buddy-Reading Programme, with the peer relations stimulated by it, serves to achieve this absorption into the speech community. Reading is considered desirable and a habit to be cultivated for the good as the English teacher and the school curriculum require the child to engage with it in a regular manner.

The Buddy-Reading Programme (BRP), a weekly reading programme designed for the students who face problems in reading, writing and understanding the English language, becomes an important realm in which student culture and peer relations played themselves out. The word 'buddy', an informal English word, refers to 'a close friend' (noun) or 'becoming friendly and spending time with someone' (verb). The programme is modelled precisely on these lines, such that a student of grade IV or V (known as 'buddy') is paired with a student of grade VI (known as the 'reader') for a

reading/listening activity. The rationale behind this activity is to help the students work in collaboration as they tend to learn more from each other. It seeks to draw on peer relations and the capacity of peers to influence one another. The BRP presents an example of certain active and ongoing processes to tackle difficulties in English language learning in the primary school. Buddies include the students who have had less exposure to the language before, leading to problems in reading, writing and pronunciation. The readers comprise the students who are considered to be possessing a good grasp over the English language which in turn made them good readers. The process of choosing the reader, buddy and the pairing is done by the English teachers of grades IV,V and VI.

A collection of colour-coded books, which are classified on the basis on levels and genres, are maintained in the spacious and comfortable space of Math Lab in the junior school. Students come once a week (usually on Wednesdays before dinner i.e. from 6:00-6:40 pm) and the readers read to their buddy. The aim of the programme is to make it more buddy-driven i.e. why the buddies get to exercise a choice over the book they want their reader to read to them. In the beginning they are encouraged to begin from a lower level and are subsequently taken to higher levels. However, this is not a hard-and-fast rule and the students often keep juggling between various levels. It is also not necessary that only the reader can read to the buddy. The buddy also has an opportunity to read to the reader. The buddy and the reader are also encouraged to have a discussion about the characters, storyline in the book after they have finished reading it. One junior school English teacher joins the students to monitor and oversee that the interactions between the students who have been paired up. She tries to ensure that their work goes smoothly and provides them assistance in terms of reading with appropriate pauses, meanings and pronunciation of words whenever the need arises. Speaking about the programme coming to the aid of the students struggling with some areas in language, a teacher says, "we want these children to listen to the language and come to a stage of comfortable acquaintance with it." It exposes them to a variety of written words, tenses and sentence structures as they get to listen to the language and closely hear the pronunciation of words.

Language involves a process of meaning-making. This meaning-making happens not only through a mere use or speaking of the language, but involves using and speaking it in a way that conveys and get across the message to the person being spoken to. Language learning, thus, involves an assimilation into the ways of the 'speech community', which is predominantly anglophone at RVS. The concept of 'speech community' explains a significant relation that arises between language and the social in general and

between social groups and their linguistic behaviour in particular. A 'speech community' can be defined as "any human aggregate characterised by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use" (Gumperz 2009:66). A speech community involves a group of people who "share a set of norms and rules for the use of a language" (Romaine 2000:23).

The concept of a "communicative competence" (Hymes 1996; Romaine 2000: 23-25; Morgan 2004:18) which has to be acquired to become a participant of a speech community, becomes significant here, as it is based on "language use and socialisation within cultures and one becomes knowledgeable of both grammar and appropriateness across speech acts and events that are evaluated and corroborated by others" (Morgan 2004:8). Since English is the language of interaction at RVS, its verbal behaviour constitutes a system, which produces rules for language usage and shared norms for interaction. Through the BRP, the buddies, by means of reading and interaction with their readers, get accustomed to the grammar of the English language, how to use it, a general behaviour about the language and shared rules that are significant in order to be a part of the 'speech community' that emerges at RVS. Participation in the anglophone speech community of RVS, thus, means a meaningful participation in the cultural environment constituted by it. It is through this participation and exposure that difficulties in learning get dealt with.

However, assimilation into the 'speech community' does not come without frictions. Through the creation of categories (the buddies and the readers) of students, the BRP tends to establish a distinction between the students who are good readers and those who are not or a group of students who 'already' know and are 'familiar' with the ways of the language and another group of students who 'need' to know and 'get accustomed' to the language. For the buddies, their selection into the programme is accompanied by an air of embarrassment, which is dispelled by constant efforts by the teachers as they tell the buddies that they should not feel bad about it as it is for the improvement of their own skills that they are a part of the programme. Both the buddies and their readers maintain an awareness of reasons for their participation in the programme.

The interviews with both the buddies and the readers reveal that their interactions usually begin with hesitation. Clash of interests also take place when the buddy wants the reader to read a book of her choice but the reader does not want to do so. There are also times when the buddy does not pay attention. The flexibility of the programme makes it possible even for the

Vlth graders to become buddies, if the teacher thinks that the difficulties faced by some of them are apparent. This adds to the hesitation and discomfort of the Vlth graders who are buddies, as most often they are paired with their fellow classmates, who become their readers. This unease becomes a part of the consciousness (sensitivity to their knowledge of the language) of the buddies in being a part of the programme, however, things do not go to the extent of being ridiculed by their peers. Although, there exists a cognisance of the situation of their buddies, the readers try to reduce the feelings of reluctance, establish better and friendlier relations with their buddies over time to be able to proceed with the programme productively. The buddies, despite their initial anxieties and reluctance to be a part of the programme, claim that, with time, they are able to get over their hesitation and enjoy being a part of the programme. In most cases, their interactions with their readers also happens outside the hours of the programme. The buddies count on their readers for any kind of help in academics or otherwise. The teachers also play a particularly important role in relieving anxieties of the buddies by constantly telling the buddies that it is for the improvement of their own skills that they are a part of the programme. The attitude of readers of treating their buddies with contempt is also kept in check.

The repertoire of practices in BRP, reveals how the programme serves as a critical point in the initiation and assimilation of the buddies into the RVS 'speech community', thereby helping them overcome the difficulties they are facing in learning the language. It is actually through interaction with their readers that the buddies begin to identify with the language, learn the rules of its use and not only interact but communicate meaningfully with their peers. Membership of the 'speech community' is, thus, achieved. It is through the gradual process of becoming aware about and being involved in rectification of their mistakes through interaction with their readers, that the buddies learn to act communicatively and make efforts to be a part of the 'speech community'. (Hymes 1996: 32-33)

English language is not treated just as a subject in the curriculum. For the students with difficulties in the language, learning it is not just textbook and assessment based. The idea is to cultivate and infuse the language in such students to an extent that there are no barriers for thoughts to flow in the words of the language. Since the language dwells in the general environment of the school, all the students need to converse in it to interact and more importantly, use it to communicate with their peers and the teachers. BRP tries to enlarge the child's experience of the spoken word, through listening more by the way of the books read to them, so as to tackle difficulties in any sphere of the language. Thus the rationale behind BRP is that, the more such

students hear the language, possibilities of their improvement will increase due to increase in exposure and awareness of the ways of the language by a gradual assimilation into the speech community. However, it is essential to look at the kind of impact that the student culture has on the aspects of the programme. Being assigned with the category of 'buddy' might cause feelings of disquietude on being looked at among their peers as those who do not have the same hold over the language as the 'readers'. Whilst, the BRP, builds on the strength of peer relations, there occur cleavages which are tried to be filled in by instilling an attitude of adequacy, importance and helpfulness of the programme, on an everyday basis. Boundaries of the speech community may be difficult to traverse, however, incorporation into it is a gradual process, which can be directly related to overcoming of the difficulties faced in learning the language.

The library reading system and reading and other forms of supervision within the house, which although, function differently but aid BRP in achieving its purpose. The junior school library plays the most significant role in creating and sustaining a reading culture in the junior school. It also becomes the place where students with difficulties in language are subjected to reading inside it and also outside it through the books issued every week, which they carry to their respective houses. The librarian along with the junior school English and Hindi teachers maintains an elaborate reading list for students from classes IVth to VIIIth. They accompany the students to the library and sit through the process of issuing them two books each by encouraging the students to read the blurb and make a choice on what they wish to read. In case, the students are not able to decide, the teacher herself chooses the book for them. The teacher identifies students who are facing some difficulty in the language, and closely monitors their reading by suggesting them books by gauging the kind of writing or type of books they will be interested in and if they would be able to read the books throughout the week. Sometimes, the number of books issued is reduced to one.

The library, thus, functions as a space outside the classroom where the English teachers not only interact meaningfully with all the students but are also willing to give some extra time and assistance to those students who are facing problems in learning the language. It is not that all the students like to read or develop the habit of reading but through whatever they read, they get to uncover the world of the written word. Reading is considered as an important part of the language learning process and the hour of the library period is taken to be as crucial, quiet and "reading to yourself" time. When subjected to reading consistently every week, it gradually adds to the knowledge of and gives insights into the structures of the language. This adds

to their language experience, which if kept up helps the students to remedy most of their difficulties. There is a constant insistence on the idea of exposure to the language which brings forth the importance of the idea of practical experiences in shaping language learning. The library as a space outside the formal linguistic and limited environment of English is instrumental in producing learning.

The respective houses of students also act as a paramount and mandatory space for dealing with the students facing difficulties in language learning. The house-parent is made aware by the teachers regarding the classroom performance of every child.¹⁰ In that case the house parent plays an instrumental role in supervising that the child is doing extra work given by the concerned language teacher, or might give work on their own keeping in mind the difficulties they might be facing and deal with the emotional aspect of the student. The house parents supervise the *asthachal* time (when the students are supposed to sit quietly and read), oversee that the house prep goes smoothly (the time in which students in a house complete their homework), manages the pile of extra work that concerned language teachers might have given them to ask the student to practice those whenever they have completed their homework early and are not doing any other important task. The house also becomes a space where such students have to interact with the others in English as it is here they come in close contact with the 'speech community'. This is also another space where they get exposure to the language and are hence gradually able to pick it up.

Language, while playing its everlasting role of uniting people who know it and excluding the people who do not, also requires for it to be spoken in a certain way, as developed by the speakers of that language community. The English language community of RVS plays a similar role. Schisms and anxieties, created by the student culture and peer relations are also negotiated through it. The BRP, the library reading system and the house presents an example of the processes carried outside and apart from the formal setting of the classroom and becomes a part of the larger school processes trying to work towards rectifying the difficulties in language learning processes. It involves more of student-student and less of teacher-student interaction, and focuses more on the practical aspects of language learning and interaction with the 'speech community' on an everyday basis.

¹⁰Houseparents are the teachers in charge of the respective houses in which the students live. They oversee the routine of children, their overall performance in classroom including co-curricular activities and their general physical and emotional well-being.

The second-language Hindi classroom: Learning as a collective, negotiated endeavour

The use and function of Hindi has also been a subject of intense debate and discussion both pre and post-independence. The history of the language includes its intense rivalry with English, particularly in the post-independence period in India. Post-independence there arose questions on assigning the status of 'national language' to Hindi. This issue raised significant questions on language equality and language rights. The opposition to Hindi arose particularly from the non-Hindi speaking states, since these states saw it as language of domination and oppression. Shalini Advani in her book (2009) remarks that "the proponents of Hindi called for its recognition as a 'national' language but non-Hindi states insisted that their languages were equally 'national' and that Hindi could only be the 'official' language of the Union". The non-Hindi speakers wanted to retain their own languages and use English for inter-state communication, administrative and official purpose of the state (Advani 2009:34). Attempts to make Hindi as the language of the nation did not quite succeed. The tradition of Hindi language learning in schools is such that in Hindi-medium schools, learning is mediated through Hindi and it has the status of 'first language' that must be learnt by the students. Whereas, in the English medium schools, learning is mediated through English and Hindi usually acquires the status of 'second-language' (or even 'third-language'). Reflections on the importance given to learning and speaking 'second-language' then becomes significant here

A very important aspect about learning a second or third language is the kind of direction and guidance received for learning it, the setting in which the language is used or taught and the fact that its learning not only involves acquiring the lexical, grammatical, spoken or phonological traits but also participating in the social-cultural milieu constituted by that language (Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000: 155) . The second language learning (in this case, Hindi) begins and is nurtured in the classroom, with little or no manifestations of it outside its confines, in terms of interaction in it. The classroom, thus, plays a significant role in second language learning as it provides the ground for mediation between the learners and the teacher. It is full of subjective definitions and conceptions about the language with regard to how the learners perceive learning a second language, its relevance in the everyday and what the teachers think about the learners and how the language may be best taught.

I have pointed out above on how a second language Hindi classroom consists of broadly two groups of students on the basis of their previous knowledge or

exposure to the language: the mother tongue Hindi speakers and those who do not have Hindi as their mother tongue and are new learners of the language.¹¹ However, the two groups of students are not taught in a similar manner or not even in the same classroom. The group of students who choose Hindi as their second language are divided according to the levels/stages on which the students are at in learning the language, and thus, assigned to sit in the classroom of their respective level. The groupings are vertical and across grades. The second language Hindi takers in the Prep section, grade IV and V are taken together and divided into 3 groups: Advanced, Intermediate and Beginner. The second language Hindi takers of grade VI and VII are also taken together and divided into 4 groups: Advanced, Higher Intermediate, Lower Intermediate and Beginner. Teacher's knowledge of how much the student knows Hindi is the basis for dividing groups for prep, classes IV and V. Whereas, for classes VI and VII, teacher's knowledge is also combined with a test that is conducted during beginning of the term, that becomes the determining factor of placing the student in the different types of groups.

The division of the students into groups according to the how much Hindi they know and if they have problems in learning it makes the situation not only about addressing the fact of 'difficulties' per se but it can also be discerned in terms of the cognisance of the idea of 'levels' in language learning. Through these groups, students are taught in accordance with what is intelligible to them at the level of language which they are at, in line with their pace of learning and progress in the process. The students of RVS, with Hindi as their second language, get an exposure to it only within the classroom during the Hindi class time as the language is not present or not spoken at all in the general environment of the school (exceptions being of some mother-tongue Hindi speakers conversing in Hindi among themselves, within or outside the classroom). This makes a huge difference to the pace at which the language is learnt and resolving difficulties in learning Hindi.

¹¹ At RVS, students come from diverse language backgrounds. The languages taught in the school include English, Hindi and Telugu. English comes under the category of first language and Hindi and Telugu occupy the position of the second and the third language. In the junior and the middle school, i.e. from grade 4-8, students have to choose which of the two languages they would have as the second and the third. For instance, if students take Hindi as their second language then Telugu becomes their third language and vice-versa.

However, classroom does not cease to be the sphere of active interaction between the students and the teacher, the content of which is determined by student-teacher negotiation which results in deciding the discourse of the lessons, correction of errors, stringing along the path for the student to answer correctly to a question posed, framing and demonstration of complex concepts by the teacher, hesitation, diversions, initiatives and interests displayed by the students (Breen 1985). Collectively, the teachers and the students create that environment in class which tackles students facing difficulties in learning the language.

Levels in Hindi language learning: Exposure to the language and apprehensions about learning it

There are two important components of language learning: one involves acquiring the rules and facts of it and the other pertains to an active application of the language and participation in speaking it. While acquisition of language involves an incorporation of it within the self, participation entails an engagement with it through interaction, leading to grounding and a certain degree of affinity to use the language (Pavlenko and Lantlof 2000; Sfar 1998). Hindi is not the language of the 'speech community' at RVS. Learning and applying it in interaction scarcely ever takes place outside the classroom. Participation or engagement with Hindi, which is restricted to the classroom, renders its space salient in terms of both learning and tackling difficulties faced by the students.

The Hindi teachers have adopted various methods to identify the difficulties experienced by the students and to address them as effectively as possible. At the VI-VII grade level, they are given reading and written exercises in the beginning of the term to get a sense of the level of language they are at. The teachers believe that teaching Hindi at RVS is a challenging task because it is not the language of the everyday life of the place. That is why it becomes very important to deal with difficulties faced in learning the language. The teachers, after a month of gauging notebook work, spoken aspects and the in-class participation of children, start taking remedials (by either calling them to their own house or going to the student's house) or give extra work on a regular basis. Moreover, within the classroom, the teachers try to retain the interest of the students and increase the opportunity to experience the written word by devoting less time to the structure of the language and grammar and more to the story or the literature part. The division of students into groups based on the levels of language learning facilitates the process of dealing with students facing difficulties because it places the students with similar level in one group (likewise, there arise 4 groups) making the teacher teach according

to level of that particular group.

The following are the groups into which grade VI-VII second language Hindi takers are divided:

The Beginner Level: This group has to start from the basics of language which includes letters, vowels, words and sentence structures. It includes some of those students who have done Hindi for a year (the erstwhile Vth and VIth now in VIth and VIIth respectively) but are not yet ready to be transferred to the higher levels. It also includes those students who are new in RVS. The kind of difficulties that students face at this level include distinguishing the letters and their sounds, pronunciation problems come for the students who do not have Hindi as their mother-tongue and most of them make mistakes with the subject verb agreement in the sentences and need to be reminded of some rules in every class.

Since there are just 12 students in this class, the teacher deals with the problems faced by them by trying to divide his class time among each and every student and give them some individual attention. Time and again he calls some of them to read and through this he makes an effort of rectifying their pronunciation and gives demonstration of the way his mouth moves while pronouncing the letters. He makes two or more students sit together and read or give dictation to each other, as he believes that it is through each other that they will learn the most.

The students in the beginner group find Hindi to be a "hard language". They feel that it is a complicated language and the gender of the nouns is difficult to learn and remember. Although they like learning the language when the teacher explained them better, but they do not see the utility of learning the language. They do not mind being placed in the lowest group. They regard that they can not have been any better if they would have been in higher groups because they would not have understood anything. Students from other groups did not ridicule them for being in the lowest of the groups, but often told them that they are lucky and get easy homework.

The Lower intermediate Level: The students of this group stand at a slightly higher level than those of the beginners insofar that they have learnt some Hindi before but still understand very little of it. They have problems both in reading the language and writing in it. Their expressions and sentence structures are problematic.

The teacher tried to focus more on their reading the text in the beginning. The children did not read to themselves but aloud to everybody and in this process

the teacher corrected their pronunciation. Stressing the importance of pronunciation, the teacher told the students, "*aap jaisa bolenge vaisa hi likh paayenge*" (you will be able to write by the way you speak). She urged them to pronounce the alphabets correctly and try not repeat their mistakes. The teacher constantly tried to dispel the divide that is created between learning English and learning Hindi by remarking that, "both English and Hindi are languages. Neither of them is superior or inferior. While learning any language you have to try and give your best in that."

Some students from this group were placed in a higher group last year. They said that they found Hindi quite tough then. However, now that they are in this group they find it better and easy to learn.

The Higher Intermediate Level: This group understands the language and reads satisfactorily in it because they have learned some of it before but they have problems in writing it. Thus, the teacher laid emphasis on the writing aspect along with the reading part. More of "*chitra dekho vaakya banao*" (look at the picture and make sentences) exercises were encouraged. Hindi storybooks are given to read and thereafter, a writing exercise is conducted which requires them to write about the characters in the story, the main event in the story and the climax or the end of the story. In such exercises, the students are not only encouraged to write simple sentences in the language but also feel and think in the language. Also, since the group reads from the Hindi Ki Duniya book series, the tapes in which the chapters are recorded, are played along with the students simultaneously reading from them. The teacher emphasises on the importance of exposure to the language: "*In bachon ka bhasha mein interest jagana zaroori hai. Hindi Ki Duniya books moral aspects par kum aur un aspects par jyada baat karti hain jo bachon ke matlab ke hon, kyunki jab tak bache topic ka khud se sambandh sthapit nahi karenge tab take nahi seekh paayenge*" (It is important that students are able to develop an interest in the language. The Hindi Ki Duniya books talk less about the moral aspects and more about those subjects which interest the students, since it is important that students are able to relate better to what they are studying, as it is only then they will be able to learn).

The Advanced Level: Hindi is the mother-tongue of students who are a part of this group. They get to hear it at their homes and places where they belong to. They can understand the language very well and read and write in it. It is commonly held by the teachers that there is scope to further develop the Hindi language skills of these students, by working on the creative part of the language, in both writing and reading. At this level, there is an emphasis on speaking in Hindi during the class time. The teaching does not entirely

involve text reading but active discussions where the student-teacher interaction takes place in Hindi.

The students feel that since Hindi is their mother tongue and they know it, it is easy and interesting for them to understand and learn it. Discussing about the students who are placed in groups lower to theirs, they regard that, "though they do not know Hindi much but that does not make us unequal. They are trying to learn more. There is no competition and the groups are only there to make all of us comfortable."

Although, the classrooms are comprised of students at different levels of Hindi language learning, they possess a commonality about the culture that is created in classrooms for each of these levels. This culture develops as the language class unfolds and is based on a negotiation between the teacher and the students' definition of the teaching and learning process. Both the students and teachers at RVS, involved in learning and teaching, respectively, the second-language Hindi, hold different subjective views about the language. While the students consider the language "hard to learn" and often express displeasure about learning the various words in accordance with their gender, face difficulties in acquisition of subject-verb agreement while framing sentences, the teachers stay keen on increasing the exposure to the written and spoken word of the language. These two conceptions have to be continually balanced and negotiation has to be achieved between the conflicting ideas. The culture of the classroom evolves in such a way that "does not erase these differences; it contains them" (Breen 1985: 144). The actual workings of the Hindi language classroom depend on collective endeavour, where the students learn the language despite their misgivings about it and the teachers try to both address and overcome the difficulties in learning Hindi.

Language is eminently social and it is best learnt when it is spoken in the environment in which the individual is living. This, however, is not the case with Hindi at RVS. The idea behind any language, including Hindi, is that it can be learnt through communication. However, the students neither hear much of it around them nor get to converse in it in more than the given Hindi class timing. Although, the Hindi Ki Duniya books and the Hindi teachers try to create an environment in classroom through which students get accustomed to it in a way that the language feels less alien, it cannot be denied that the gender of nouns and sentence structures get cleared only through constant listening and internalising the language.

Peer relations play out differently for the speaking and learning of Hindi language. Most of the students do not really like learning the language. The

ones in lower level groups like to stay where they are so as to avoid learning the hard language as they improve in their own levels. Owing to the fact that Hindi is not spoken in the environment of the school and has a 'second-language' status, the peer relations also do not comprise of schisms and being laughed at for not pronouncing a word properly, or framing a sentence in an incorrect manner etc. Since, they are not driven by the need to communicate in the language, they are hardly attracted to it or motivated to actively pursue their correction of difficulties in learning it.

Nevertheless, student-to-student interaction and assistance is also very crucial. A community of students is created which is geared towards learning a language, but only in the restricted space and time of the classroom. Attempts are made by the teachers to provide students with difficulties, the space and scope to become better in the areas they lack as the language is consciously incorporated and inserted in the individual and the setting of the classroom in such a way that the student is able to hear it more and gradually do away with the apprehensions and difficulties faced in learning the language. The Hindi language environment at RVS is 'created', within the confines of a classroom. Unlike, the English learning and speaking environment which comes about and persists actively, the Hindi speaking and learning does not stretch out of the classroom.

Conclusion

Language exists with relevance to the human need to express and communicate and thus, becomes a crucial factor in the formation of identity. Schools act as major institutions in which language socialisation takes place. The use, function, structure, frequency of language use, the number of languages taught in school, the language which is generally spoken in the school among the teachers and students becomes peculiar to a social setting of that school. However, some students might face difficulties in grasping, speaking or reading in a language. The process of assimilation and learning the rules of the language come into play but their efficacy depend on the kind of presence that the language has in the school environment and consequently, in the consciousness of the student who learns it.

At RVS, the English language is not only a formal language subject to be taught in the curriculum but also that which functions as the medium of interaction and becomes a form of expression, an apparatus around which the quotidian of the school is based. This, however, is not the case with Hindi, which is confined to the four walls of the classroom or at the time of the Hindi period. This nature of different manifestations of the two languages has an

effect on dealing with students who face difficulties in learning either language. English language is ubiquitous at RVS and the reading culture instilled through the various mechanisms in place tend to reinforce its presence. The students with difficulties in learning English gradually get absorbed in the prevailing anglophone environment, which leads them to express themselves in the language in every form, bringing them into a frequent contact with the ways of the language. Thus, resolving difficulties in English language involves an active and spontaneous mechanism. Whereas, for learning Hindi, which has interactive ways designed for dealing with difficulties and teaching the language in a way that it does not seem intimidating (as it does to most of the students who do not have Hindi as their first language), its dormant presence in the environment of the school does have an effect on its learning and the attitude of the students towards the language.

Since English has a predominant presence, it also has an effect on peer group relations as it produces a kind of a peer group culture in which all the students need to think, feel and speak in the language. The language enjoys an ascendancy among the peers and a sort of peer group pressure is generated to speak right in language.

According to Halliday, "language does not consist of sentences; it consists of text, or discourse- the exchange of meanings in interpersonal contexts of one kind or another" (Halliday 1978:2). The context in which words are exchanged, has a form which is derived from the culture constituted by the 'speech community' of that setting. It is through learning the ways of the language, acting out and fulfilling the requirements of the language setting that one can engage in a meaningful dialogue with the others. Consequently, it is through a gradual process of utmost exposure to the written word and spoken language that difficulties in language learning are redressed.

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