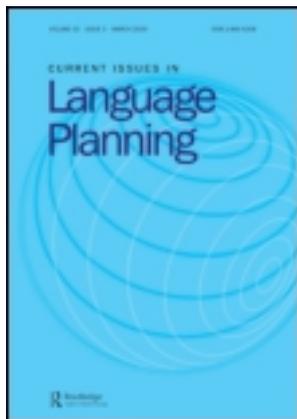


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Mediating inequalities: exploring English-medium instruction in a suburban Indian village school

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Mediating inequalities: exploring English-medium instruction in a suburban Indian village school

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India is home to 1652 languages, but only 22 are officially recognized. And while the Constitution requires local authorities to provide mother tongue instruction in schools (Article 350A, Constitution of India), a mere 43 languages are used nationally as instructional medium. An exploding demand for English-medium schooling across socio-economic divides further complicates the language-in-education context. This case study, a sub-part of a broader project drawing on four years of ethnographic work, focuses on five young multilingual children living at an *anathashram* (orphanage) in suburban New Delhi and studying in an English-medium village school. I explore the different literacy practices influencing the negotiation of the instructional medium, their impact on language learning, and their wider language policy and planning implications. Careful analyses of the teaching context, pedagogical and textbook approaches, and learning practices reveal how ‘English-medium’ instruction in a typical small, private Indian school catering to poor children leads to restricted acquisition of English, in ways that also constrain students’ ability to access educational content across subject areas. Thus, poor children who enroll in these schools in increasing numbers precisely *because of* the schools’ self-identification as English-medium institutions end up doubly disadvantaged, because they are cut off from both language and content.

Keywords: English-medium; medium of instruction; Indian education; ethnography; language-in-education; literacy; language policy

Introduction

Literacy plays a pre-eminent role in a rapidly developing India. And while it is true that literacy facilitates economic and political participation in developing contexts, it often also simultaneously ‘sets the conditions for new forms of hegemony and social stratification’ (Luke, Iyer, & Doherty, 2010, p. 3). The present Indian educational system – the second largest in the world – forms a crucial pivot in the production and reproduction of socio-economic inequalities (Phillipson, 2009). Although universal education has been a policy goal since independence in 1947, India continues to be plagued by poor literacy levels (Kingdon & Muzzamil, 2009). Only 219 million of the 361 million children of school-going age attend schools (Sancheti & Sudhir, 2009). Major systemic concerns include: teacher absenteeism (Kingdon & Muzzamil, 2009; Muralidharan & Kremer, 2008); inadequate government funding (Mehrotra, 2012); gender disparity (Bose, 2012);

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poverty and child labor (Reddy & Sinha, 2010); inadequate infrastructure (Kumar, Kumar, & Narula, 2011); high dropout rates (Sajjad, Iqbal, Siddiqui, & Siddiqui, 2012); as well as corruption, graft, and spotty enactment of policy (Grant, 2012; Tandon & Mohanty, 2003).

India's complex multilingualism also poses a significant educational challenge. With a population exceeding 1.2 billion, India is home to 1652 languages (Census of India, 1961) belonging to several distinct language families (Pattanayak, 1998). The Indian Constitution, however, accords official status to only 22 languages, and just 43 languages function as instructional medium in schools (Mitchell, 2009). Furthermore, there has been a significant decline in the number of languages used as instructional medium, down by half since 1970 (Mohanty, 2010). Arguably the most influential among the national language-in-education policies has been the *Three Language Formula* (TLF), outlined in 1956. It recommends the study of a modern Indian language (preferably South Indian) in addition to Hindi and English (for schools located in the 'Hindi belt', which refers to the Hindi-dominant region of India, primarily the north and central regions); and Hindi, English, and the regional language (for schools outside of the Hindi belt). Although a government policy recommendation has been in force since the 1960s, TLF's implementation has been largely inconsistent (National Council for Educational Research and Training, 2006). Furthermore, as Khubchandani (1978) has noted, concerns about 'language privileges, cultural prestige, and socio-economic mobility' (p. 14) have strongly influenced the selection of second or third languages within the TLF. Minority languages, if used at all, have remained underrepresented within the TLF (Vaish, 2008). Moreover, even when schools *do* privilege local languages as instructional medium, these are typically 'standardized' varieties, disadvantaging speakers of dialects (Khubchandani, 2003). The hegemony of Hindi and English within national policy has served to exacerbate local tensions as a result of a complex matrix of regional language politics (Langer & Brown, 2008). In large part due to the TLF, the vast majority of Indian children receive instruction in a language that is not their home language (Hornberger & Vaish, 2009). Such students experience a variety of disadvantages within the Indian school system (Daswani, 2001; Mohanty, 2005). Spolsky (2009) has articulated two chief disadvantages experienced by such children: one, that learning and teaching are significantly hampered when teacher and student cannot comprehend one another, and two, when a child's mother tongue is 'denied, ignored, or punished by the school teacher', he or she feels inadequate and becomes aware of his or her parents' lesser standing in the community (p. 90). Jhingran (2005), in fact, has contended that a quarter of all children attending elementary schools in India experience moderate to severe learning difficulties due to the disconnect between the child's home and instructional languages.

Another issue is the problematic role of English. Across developing contexts, English literacy skills are increasingly privileged over others, as they are perceived to be necessary for socio-economic advancement (Dua, 1994; Farrell & Giri, 2011; Hornberger & Vaish, 2009; Phillipson, 1998, 2001; Stroud & Wee, 2005). This is also the case in India, where English, a colonial inheritance, is widely viewed as offering spatio-economic mobility (Kumar, 1993; LaDousa, 2005; Ramanathan, 1999). As the government's own National Knowledge Commission (2009) has pointed out, however, English is 'beyond the reach' of a majority of Indians and characterized by 'highly unequal access' (p. 27). Now, English schooling has historically either been unavailable to or forbiddingly expensive for the average person. There is only partial consensus on how many Indians 'speak' English, and the criteria for determining what constitutes 'speaking' English vary widely. To give some sense of the numbers, the National Knowledge Commission (2009) claimed that just 1% of Indians use English as a second language, whereas an earlier estimate by Crystal (2003) put that number at 20%. Hohenthal (2003), meanwhile, pegged the

total number of English speakers at 4% of the population, whereas Mishra (2000) claimed that it stood at 5% of the population. And the India Human Development Survey (2005) found that 4% of Indians could speak English fluently, and 16% could speak it a little. While estimates differ, we see that there is broad agreement that English speakers form a minority.

Limited as it is in circulation, English skills are highly coveted. In India, socio-economically disadvantaged communities in particular have been making increasing demands for English because they recognize its role as a gatekeeper to higher education and higher paying jobs (Hornberger & Vaish, 2009; Kam, Kumar, Jain, Mathur, & Canny, 2009; Ramanathan, 2005). Unfortunately for them, government-run primary (elementary) schools, a free option for all Indian children, are criticized for the poor English-language instruction they offer (Thiyagarajan, 2008). In such schools, English pedagogy is centered on transmitting 'scholastic' English (emphasizing reading and writing) (Gupta, 1997), with the acquisition of communicative skills being secondary goals (Vaish, 2005). Moreover, English acquisition is almost 'entirely dependent on classroom experience' (Gupta, 1997, p. 9) for poorer children, because they have little or no access to the language outside of it. Poor teacher training, inadequate teacher language skills, emphasis on rote-memorization, and minimal allocation of time to language teaching also contribute to form an inferior English language learning experience for a majority of children (Vaish, 2005). Thus, disillusioned by English teaching at government schools, many parents enroll their children in private English-medium schools, despite soaring costs (PROBE, 1999).

This has contributed to the exponential rise in the number of un- or semi-regulated, private English-medium schools, most of which cater specifically to the poor (Aggarwal, 2000; Annamalai, 2005; De, Majumdar, Samson, & Noronha, 2002; Jhingran, 2009; Nambissan, 2003). A key concern is that many such schools are what Lin (2005) has referred to in the Hong Kong context as English-medium 'in name if not in reality' (p. 48). Mohanty, Panda, and Pal (2010) have criticized the proliferation of such schools based on the 'myth of English-medium superiority' (p. 214). They further noted that such schools aim for 'cosmetic Anglicization', where, despite the *nominal* importance of English, vernacular languages dominate (p. 216) (Khubchandani, 2003). As Annamalai (2005) has noted, the English being acquired at such schools is not 'critical, creative and applicable to the problems of real life and the needs of the society' (p. 26). Students learn 'bookish', non-communicative language skills in English; and what they learn, he noted, is to imitate, not interpret texts. The language of instruction at such schools therefore typically reflects, maintains, and perpetuates socio-economic divides. The socio-economic system thus remains skewed in favor of the minority of English-speaking Indians. For this reason, Sheorey (2006) has called English a 'divider rather than a unifier' in India, pointing out that the 'advantages and the "power" inherent in English literacy are enjoyed primarily by the middle and upper classes' (p. 18). These advantages, as Ramanathan (1999) outlined, are beyond the reach of students who are hindered by their financial condition and/or caste. In this manner, 'English-medium education widens social fractures in Indian society by creating and reinforcing a social, cultural, economic, and discursive divide between the English-educated and the majority' (Faust & Nagar, 2001, p. 2878).

As English-medium schools proliferate across India, it is important to qualitatively identify, excavate, and understand the different literacy practices engaged in at such schools, and analyze their broader educational implications for social equity. In order to investigate the issues involved, this ethnographic case study focused on young learners living at an *anathashram* (orphanage) and attending an English-medium village school in suburban New Delhi. The investigation pivots around the negotiation of the instructional

medium, because enrollment in such schools is crucially dependent on their (self-)identification as ‘English-medium’. I approach this problem using theoretical contributions from the *language policy and planning* (LPP) paradigm. LPP, as Petrovic (2010) has suggested, ‘involve[s] a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules, and practices enacted to promote systematic linguistic change in a community of speakers’ (p. 3). The complex multilingual Indian context has resulted in significant language policy and planning challenges for the educational system, as scholars have observed (Dua, 1985; Groff, 2007; Meiringer, 2009; Mohanty, 2010; Mohanty et al., 2010). Dua (1985), for example, postulated three core issues that influence Indian language policy and planning: (1) the differing stages of ‘development’ of languages; (2) the many differences within languages, and (3) the differential distribution of language speakers. These issues continue to be critical concerns in Indian language policy and planning nearly two decades later. An LPP orientation allows us to engage with these important issues from a broader theoretical perspective. Noting that the field draws from a variety of orientations within the focal fields of linguistics, political science, sociology, and history, Ricento (2000) highlights LPP’s contemporary focus on ‘the role(s) of individuals and collectivities in the processes of language use, attitudes, and ultimately policies’ (p. 208). This study is part of that contemporary project of LPP to blend together the analyses of sociolinguistics of both language and society (Ricento, 2000) by linking the examination of micro-level multilingual literacy practices to their implications on broader policy and planning issues.

This study unpacks the politics of linguistic mediation of instruction through the exploration of school and home literacy practices. Literacy practices in this study, it is important to establish at the outset, are conceptualized as ‘observable behaviours around literacy ... [and] the concepts and meanings brought to those events and which give them meaning’ (Street, 1997, p. 50). The research questions guiding this study were: (1) *What aspects of literacy practices at the school influence the negotiation of the instructional medium?* (2) *What are the implications of these for learning at the school and at the anathashram?* (3) *What are the wider language policy and planning implications, especially for educational equity?* The first question sought to understand how teaching and learning occurred at the sites, in ways that illuminated issues around the instructional medium. The second question sought to shed light on their implications for student learning. The third and final question considered the implications of the instructional medium for classroom learning as well as more broadly for building equity through language policy and planning within the Indian educational system.

Method

The data focused on in this study draw on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork at the *anathashram* (orphanage) and village school between December 2010 and August 2011. An ethnographic approach was adopted because it afforded the close observation of literacy practices in the school and home contexts. The data are a sub-part of my larger dissertation project, which examines broader Indian institutional discourses about globalization and highlights how these discourses are confronted at the local levels, both through language ideologies and literacy practices, involving data spanning four years (2007–2011) at the same two sites as this study. While there were broader research questions framing the larger project prior to the start of data collection, these questions were refined and narrowed in focus as the data collection process commenced and continued. The data for this study included 250+ hours at the sites, involving nearly 100 hours of classroom observations at approximately 4–6 hours per week when the school was in session, and more than 150 hours at the *anathashram* at 4–6

hours per week, from December through August. The data collection process entailed participant observation, structured and semi-structured interview exchanges, and informal conversations to provide depth and detail (Patton, 1980). The variety of methods employed for data collection allowed for the triangulation of data (Denzin, 1970). During classroom observations, I would sit in the last row, video/audio recording and/or noting down observations as classes were conducted. After an initial flurry of excitement about my presence in the classrooms, the focal and non-focal students learned to ignore the camera and/or my note taking. At the *anathashram*, because of its physical layout and other constraints, I would walk around with my camera and set it up wherever the focal subjects were.

The data collection was broadly focused on language use. I explored both home and school sites in order to get a more complex, ethnographically rich picture of the literacy practices engaged in by the focal children. The decision to choose these two sites goes back a few years. Since December 2007, I had been volunteering at the *anathashram*, during winter and summer breaks from my graduate studies, and had come to know the children and administrators well. I first visited the village school in the winter of 2008, and returned to the site during successive visits to India. During those visits, I had multiple conversations with the principal and two of the teachers, and informally observed several English periods in three different classrooms (across six-grade levels). Thus, when the intense data collection period started, I was a familiar figure at both sites. While exploring English-medium instruction primarily though English classes is not ideal, there are two reasons I employ this approach. First, classroom observations I conducted, spanning English, Environmental Studies, Social Studies, Math and Science determined that there was no discernable difference in the manner in which the instructional medium was negotiated in these subjects. That is, while the textbooks were in English, the teaching was conducted in Hindi. Second, for the broader project I was interested in English as Second/Foreign Language¹ issues, and therefore a focus on English was preferable.

The focal subjects of this study included five focal children from the *anathashram*, the *anathashram* administrator and two assistants, and five teachers at the school (also, see the next section). Written artifacts consulted included: textbooks across subjects from nursery through Class VIII, homework, schoolwork, Unit Tests, Mid-terms, final exams, *anathashram* records, fieldnotes, and interview notes. Data analysis was conducted both during the collection process and after the collection process ended. For this part of the analysis, the data were coded for 'literacy', 'English learning', 'English teaching', and 'medium of instruction'. Codes were devised prior to the start of data collection and refined in the course of data collection. The coded data were then explored through analytic memos. These memos illuminated emerging themes; those elucidating the negotiation of instructional medium are explored through representative examples in the findings section. Potential ethical issues arising in data collection and analyses include biases inherent in interviews, pitfalls of participant observation, the researcher's own implication and influence in contexts of interaction and observation, and researcher bias (Diener & Crandall, 1978; Kelman, 1982; Merriam, 1988). These have been minimized here through prolonged periods of data collection, informant interviews, triangulation of data through multiple sources, and reflexivity regarding my own positioning. My personal history as an Indian, a New Delhi native (where I spent the first 22 years of my life), a married Hindu Bengali woman in her 30s, playing the multiple roles of *didi* (Bengali, 'elder sister') and researcher, a product of the Indian K-12 system and part of American academia, and as someone interested specifically in the learning and teaching of languages (especially English), had influenced the nature of the data collected and analysis conducted, and provided an additional source of reflection on the data.

The study context and participants

This study was conducted in Noida, a satellite town of New Delhi, the Indian capital. Noida is one of the cities comprising the *National Capital Region* (a conurbation of New Delhi and several urban agglomerations). Noida is an ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and socially heterogeneous city, with about 650,000 inhabitants, according to the provisional 2011 Indian Census. The languages of state administration, business and commerce, and schooling are English and/or Hindi, although many inhabitants speak other languages at home (e.g. Punjabi and Urdu).

The anathashram

The *anathashram* was situated in an *ashram* (a Hindu religious commune) in a quiet residential area in Noida. The priest/administrator, two assistants, and the Board of Directors (appointed by *ashram* headquarters in the eastern state of West Bengal) managed the *ashram*. The five focal children's ages ranged between 5 and 14, and they received room, board, and/or education free of charge or at subsidized costs. The children spoke Bengali, Bihari, Punjabi, and/or Nepali as their mother tongue, and Hindi as a second or third language. The five focal children were selected on the basis of several, pre-decided criteria, including that they: had to reside at the orphanage for a minimum of six months prior to the start of data collection, need to be five or older, and have rural backgrounds. The decision to focus on five children was motivated by a desire to arrive at a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) of the language and literacy contexts given the time constraints. Monday through Saturday, the *anathashram* schedule entailed morning prayers, school, lunch, playtime, evening prayers, evening study period, dinner and, finally, bedtime. On Sundays, the children did many chores, but were allowed to watch some TV and call their parents or family members, and they also spent time drawing and painting. Although they lived in what was labeled an *anathashram*, not all children were 'true orphans' (Mintz, 2004, p. 157), i.e. entirely parentless. Some of the children had two living parents, and the rest had single parents, guardians, or access to family networks. The children's parents or guardians were all migrant workers, having arrived from rural parts of Bengal, Bihar, or Nepal to the North Delhi 'slums' a few years ago.

SCB Public School

The school in which the children studied was Subhash Chandra Bose Public School (SCB),² located in Madhupur village (private schools in India are referred to as 'public' schools³). The school had about 250 students. Madhupur was home to approximately 3500 inhabitants, a mostly floating population of migrant workers. The principal of SCB, *Bade* (Hindi, 'older') sir, started the school in a multi-story building, renting out the ground floor to tenants, and using the first and second floors for the school. The primary section (KG through Class VI⁴) took up one large room on the first floor, partitioned into five classrooms. Wooden desks were arranged so that students in one grade occupied one column, and those in the next higher grade occupied the other (Figure 1). The second floor had two rooms, where the higher classes were held, and the roof doubled up as a space for teaching and conducting morning assembly. School was in session from 8:00 am through 1:00 pm, Monday through Saturday. Fees were reduced for the poorest students (including the *anathashram* children), and supplies offered at subsidized rates for everyone. All the teachers were in their thirties and forties, and had grown up in nearby towns and villages.



Figure 1. A typical classroom.

They had been educated in Hindi-medium schools, and held post-graduate degrees in various disciplines from local universities. With the sole exception of Raj sir, moreover, all teachers had attended rural *multi-grade* schools (see next section). Interviews revealed that none of the teachers were confident about their English skills. Raj sir, e.g. told me several times that he found it challenging to speak English, and at one point inquired from me if I had suggestions for tutoring centers where he could learn to do so. The teachers were thus all second or third language English speakers, giving rise to what Evans and Cleghorn (2010) referred to as *complex language encounters*, a classroom context in which ‘teachers and their learners engage with each other in a language which neither party can use with ease’ (p. 32) (see also Lin, 1996; Poon, 2000).

Regarding textbooks, apart from the Hindi textbooks and the Class VIII Social Studies reader, all textbooks used in the school were in English. In addition, all textbooks were modeled on the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) curriculum. The NCERT, established by the government of India in 1961, assists the Ministry of Education and Social Welfare in educational policy-making, and helps inform educational curricula and programs nationwide. The English textbooks, the focus of my investigation, were of two types: grammar books and readers. The grammar books focused on different grammatical structures and contained exercises and ‘model’ compositions (comprising essays, short stories, and formal and informal letters). The textbooks were drawn from three series: the *Baby Birds* series (Class I, II, IV, and V); *Spring* (Class III); and the *Excellent English* series (Class VI and VII). Finally, while this study focuses on one English-medium village school, my visits to two other English-medium schools nearby, an interview with a veteran teacher from New Delhi, a review of the relevant literature, as well as my

own experience growing up in New Delhi indicate that the selected school is representative of those that cater to low-income students.

Findings

In this part of the paper, I present the findings of the study, organized according to the following themes: (1) multi-grade teaching, (2) translation, (3) communicative skills, (4) content mismatch, (5) memorization, and (6) ‘question–answers’. These themes shed light on the different literacy practices that influence the negotiation of the instructional medium as well as language learning, and point to broader language policy and planning concerns.

Multi-grade Teaching

An important finding of this study was that the multi-grade classroom context had an effect on the learning *of* and *through* language. Multi-grade pedagogy is defined as ‘the teaching of students of different ages, grades and abilities in the same group’ (Little, 1995, p. 1). Typically, in multi-grade settings, the instructor teaches across two or more different classes or grades in one class period (Little, 2001). In India, 80% of primary schools have three or fewer teachers: multi-grade teaching is, out of necessity, a norm, especially at lower levels (CREATE, 2011; Blum & Diwan, 2007). Multi-grade teaching is ubiquitous in the state of Uttar Pradesh (the state where this study was conducted), particularly in poorer areas (Kingdon & Muzzamil, 2009). In Uttar Pradesh, the average number of classrooms per school is 4; the average number of teachers 3.6; and the student teacher ratio 44:1 (DISE, 2012).

At SCB, 12 grades were packed into six classrooms. For the 2010–2011 academic year, four men and three women were officially listed as teachers at the school. However, in January 2011 two of the female teachers left the school, but no replacements had been hired at the time data collection ended. This added to the existing workload of the remaining teachers. During a typical class period, a teacher taught one group while the other group (belonging to a different class, and physically separated by a narrow aisle) was assigned a writing task. For the most part, the teacher’s body was oriented toward the class he or she was teaching. The teacher would physically orient to the class that was not being taught only when those students grew noisy, became visibly distracted, or to check in and make sure they stayed on task (which occurred once or twice during each class period). In Figure 1, Class VII is shown on the left and Class VI on the right. Half-walls, to the right and to the left, separated this classroom from the adjoining classrooms (the sunlight was streaming in through open, grilled bars on the ceiling). While most children could not see the other classrooms from where they sat, they could hear noises, since the classrooms were not fully separated. Further, while this is not visible in Figure 1, the partial walls did not adjoin the back wall; the backbenchers, because this left an opening between the side and back walls, were barely separated from other children in the adjoining classrooms.

The multi-grade classroom raised several concerns. The context was challenging for SCB teachers, who would often resort to shouting angrily when students became noisy, although this technique worked to make the students to remain calm only for brief periods. The pedagogy, as Raj sir expressed it, had to be focused on the ‘handling’ of children, that is, on managing them. Two key issues arose. One, the class not being taught (but in the same classroom) needed to be kept occupied. This meant teachers assigned extensive

'quiet' work. This was referred to as *ka:m de:na:* ('to give work'), which either involved assigning copying work, 'doing question answers' (which almost always meant copying into a 'fair notebook'⁵ answers previously provided by teachers), handwriting practice, or silently committing texts to memory. While this afforded extensive English writing practice, it came at the cost of more engaged, interactive learning. Two, when a class was being 'actively' taught, the pedagogy was shaped by the need to keep noise levels down, in order to lessen the disturbance to others across the aisle. The multi-grade context thus led to classrooms that were strongly teacher-centric, with teaching being predominantly lecture-style: students' language production was secondary to this concern. The need to manage difficult classroom arrangements also meant that teachers relied heavily on Hindi, the language in which they had most proficiency and could more easily exercise control.

One motivation in maintaining this classroom configuration was financial. The higher the number of children taught per teacher, the greater the school's revenues. Lal sir, a veteran teacher with several decades of experience under his belt, e.g., said (in Hindi) that if they did not have multiple grades in one classroom, the school could 'not take that much payment [from the parents]'. He further asked, 'If there aren't more children then how will you give money to your teachers? To give teachers [money] also it is necessary to take payment from children.' *Bade* Sir, on the other hand, said that it was the constraint of resources that led to the multi-grade context. They were poor, they had little space, and could only access a few qualified teachers. Furthermore, multi-grade teaching, he felt, was an acquired skill that the teacher could develop: they had to be innovative and give appropriate assignments so that they would be able to 'handle' the context. Children, he said, easily 'adapted' to these conditions and were not troubled by them. Interviews revealed the focal children did not complain about the multi-grade context, except to note that they became angry when they had to wait for long periods for the teacher's attention.

Given that multi-grade contexts are commonplace in India, this classroom feature deserves critical attention, especially from a language policy and planning perspective. Little (1995) has previously noted that regardless of the widespread prevalence of multi-grade classrooms, education ministries, curriculum developers, and teacher education organizations rarely attend to this issue. Blum and Diwan (2007) also make a plea for recognizing multi-grade pedagogy as a key feature in most Indian classrooms. Little (2001) offered an excellent series of questions that are helpful to consider in reconceptualizing pedagogy under such conditions. These include exploring teaching strategies, identifying effective practices employed in underserved communities, and evaluating teacher training programs for their attention to multi-grade pedagogical concerns. Further, multilingual, multi-grade contexts raise additional questions. What happens when multiple languages are mediated in classroom instruction? What are best practices to attend to complex linguistic negotiations and contexts? How do we integrate best practices into teacher education programs, and also disseminate these to the broader community of teachers? As the number of small, private, English-medium schools continues to rise, the complex issues entailed in multi-grade language-in-education pedagogy influencing the acquisition of English skills in particular will only become more salient.

Translation

Another crucial finding was that teachers taught texts in English primarily by translating words, phrases, or sentences into Hindi. After assigning tasks to the class not being taught, the teacher would stand near the blackboard with his or her body angled toward

the students s/he was teaching, and start with a 'lesson reading'. During this time, the teacher would read the lesson (a short story, poem, text) out loud, doing simultaneous translation into Hindi of English words, phrases, or entire sentences. The following, for example, is an extract from a lesson-reading sequence, of Chapter 12 from a Class V *Baby Birds* English textbook (observed on 2/7/2011). *Bade* sir read the text and translated it as follows (all words in *Italics* have been translated from the Hindi by the author):

Once a mouse was roaming a house. "Once" *meaning one time*, "mouse" *meaning [Hindi word for mouse], the mouse was roaming around*, "in the house." *One time one mouse was roaming around in a house*. "He was also hungry" *He was also hungry*. "He went into all the nooks and could not get anything," *the mouse had entered the house, was hungry, also therefore he went to all the rooms but he could not find anything to eat, he was not able to get anything to eat*. "At last" *meaning at the end, where did he reach?* "Kitchen" *he reached, in the [Hindi word for kitchen]*. "In search of food," *he was searching for food*.

Comprehension checks of the English texts were conducted in Hindi, with students responding in Hindi. Later that same day, e.g. *Bade* sir was teaching a different lesson, 'The Large Cats' (from *Baby Birds* Book 4) to Class V. During the lesson, he read out in English that the lion had turned into a mouse. He translated that at the sentence level, and then asked in Hindi, 'What did the lion turn into?' The children responded in a chorus, 'Into a mouse!' in Hindi.

The teaching-in-translation approach resulted in a series of problems. Texts were translated and paraphrased into Hindi without pointing out which syntactic and lexical items were being introduced or excluded in the translation process. This affected students' ability to identify the meaning of individual words, as I would discover during one-on-one interactions with focal children when they studied the same texts at the *anathashram*. Let us return to the sample lesson-reading excerpt provided previously. *Bade* sir translated and explained the English text 'He went into all the nooks and could not get anything' into Hindi as 'the mouse had entered the house, was hungry, also therefore he went to all the rooms but he could not find anything to eat, he was not able to get anything to eat'. Because the translation and explanation were melded together, the meaning of individual words was not clear. Take the word 'nook', for example. During observations at the *anathashram* later that day, I found that focal students in that class had not understood the meaning of 'nook'. This occurred repeatedly over the course of my observations, where unsystematic paraphrasing and translations contributed to children's difficulties understanding English texts taught in class.

On 22 February 2011, for example, I was observing 10-year-old Prateek studying English. He was memorizing a text from his English reader, *Baby Birds* Book 3, 'It does not pay to be lazy.' I asked him to explain the meaning of the title of the story. Prateek thought for a minute, eyed the pictures of an Indian king dressed up in gold finery accompanying the text, and then offered in Hindi: 'The king is very rich.' I asked him to try again, and he shrugged. This was not an atypical event. Across different grade levels, the focal children, when asked the meaning of something from their books, would first scan the pictures that accompanied the texts, and then give an account in Hindi of the text as they remembered it *in translation*, using illustrations to prompt their memory. This teaching approach did result in some *moral socialization*, since many of the stories and lessons had moral tales that were transmitted in translation. While this moral socialization is beyond the scope of this present study, it should be noted that it was, regardless, not an explicit goal of language instruction at the school.

A heavy reliance on translation in conjunction with unsystematic translation practices in teaching led to problematic concerns. Such practices led to difficulty in decoding and comprehending English texts when children studied texts by themselves. The children *did* understand the broader story or content, as students' correct responses in Hindi indicated in classes, but observation after observation revealed that the children had great difficulty decoding and understanding texts. The focal children, without exception, said they could not understand most of the English in their textbooks across subjects. These difficulties, further, led to increased reliance on memorization for tests and exams. This also meant that students were less directly engaged with the language, because they could only access English *in translation*, which the teacher controlled. Overall, these practices thus posed barriers to children's acquisition of English.

Communicative skills

The lecture-style, teacher-centric pedagogy resulted in minimal opportunities for students to use English communicatively. After lesson readings, teachers always wrote out answers to 'comprehension' questions, which students were actually supposed to answer. These were WH- questions, such as 'Why did the little boy vanish in the sea?' 'What happened during a great famine in Germany?' Any textbook questions that required interaction, group work, or communication were skipped over. In fact, no communicative tasks were assigned during the entire period of my observations. The *Baby Birds* series, for example, had five sections of exercises at the end of the lesson: *Comprehension skills*, *Vocabulary skills*, *Language skills*, *Listening and speaking skills*, and *Writing skills*. The teachers never assigned any exercises with a communicative component. Part of the problem, one has to note, lay with the exercises themselves. For example, the *Interactive Skills* section in the Class III *Baby Birds* English textbook contained the following exercise, which, as usual, the teacher skipped over:

A)Talk about the good habits. Talk in pairs:	
Joy	I plucked a flower from the garden.
Tina	Don't pluck flowers.
Manu	I speak to her loudly.
Rina	Always speak softly.
Rony	Let us run on this soft grass.
Nina	Don't run only walk on the grass.
Ali	Let us fly a kite on the terrace.
Raja	My room is all messed up.
Tara	Keep your room tidy.

Beyond this pointing to a larger pattern of ignoring communicative tasks, this exercise, as we see, offered only stilted and decontextualized speaking practice, as was characteristic of most exercises provided in the textbooks. (There is also a strong moral component in this exercise, a point that could be developed in a subsequent study.) The *kinds* of interactive exercises offered by the textbooks, therefore, also need to be recognized as constraints.

The explicit pedagogical approach utilized by the textbooks, ironically, privileged the development of communicative skills in the English acquisition process. The *Baby Birds* preface, e.g. described its approach as informed by current pedagogic trends, 'futuristic' (i.e., forward-thinking), 'learner-oriented', and further stressed the importance of using English communicatively. The final line of the preface admitted, however, that 'teachers' role is, to say least [*sic*], very crucial, in fact, more important than the reading material'.

The *Spring: Textbook of English* series also stressed the importance of communication, and claimed that the text was organized so that ‘children will respond to the teachers’. It further emphasized its communicative, ‘child-centred and activity-based’ approach to language learning. Therefore, at least as far as the textbooks were concerned, the development of communicative skills in English was a key goal for both the series. Both had communicative activities at the end of each lesson, providing opportunities for learners to use English communicatively. The textbooks’ goals, however, did not translate into practice in the classroom, as we have seen; communicative tasks were set aside, and the teacher – as the *Baby Birds* series predicted – played the defining role in students’ English learning experience.

How did this disconnect influence the negotiation of the instructional medium? What did it mean for learning? Clearly, the communicative intent of the textbooks was at odds with classroom literacy practices. This is not entirely surprising, since SCB teachers had acquired English through rote-memorization techniques and grammar-translation⁶ approaches. Without proper training, there can be little expectation that teachers with no prior communicative language teaching (CLT) background will adopt and employ CLT techniques. Canagarajah (1999, 2002) has criticized the decontextualized circulation of CLT approaches in such contexts because (1) they are disembedded from the contexts of their circulation and (2) the importation of these methods occurs with little dialog between those who created these methods and those who employ them (Block, 2010). Kramsch (2008) has also cautioned that ‘cultural and moral conflicts, historical incompatibilities, identity politics, and the struggle for symbolic recognition’ (p. 9) may be neglected in the importation of CLT techniques. Now, however, the proliferation of English-medium schools in India has led to a growth in the popularity of textbooks subscribing to CLT approaches, which are seen as more ‘modern’, as Raj sir described it. These books may be ‘[b]ased on current trends in English teaching’ as *Baby Birds* puts it, but these approaches cannot prove effective in classroom practice if teachers have not been trained in their use. The CLT methods used in the SCB textbooks contained exercises which were modeled on approaches that had been created elsewhere, under different conditions, and for a different population of students and teachers. At SCB this meant that communicative exercises were sidelined, and teachers continued teaching the way they themselves had been taught English. This disconnect meant that students were not only cut off from communicative practice, but they were also trapped in a confusing situation where their textbooks stood at odds with classroom practices.

Content mismatch

Another finding of this investigation was that the disconnect between the content of various textbooks and students’ everyday lives posed a barrier in the acquisition of language. The content of texts used in English as well as E.V.S. (Environmental Studies, a subject that was integrated into the teaching of English) sharply contrasted with the reality of the children’s lives, but connected to what are popularly assumed to be the broader aspirations of poorer children and their parents. The lesson ‘My School’, in the English grammar reader for Class V sheds more light on this. The lesson began by describing ‘My School’ as ‘a famous school of the city’. It was a ‘very big building’, with classrooms that were ‘clean and airy’. It contained ‘a large playground’ and ‘a beautiful garden’. The staff comprised 50 teachers, who were ‘well qualified’. In fact, it was ‘an ideal school’. The contrast with SCB was remarkable. SCB was not famous; it catered to schooling demands from the local village. Space was a major constraint, as noted earlier. Few classrooms had windows, and they could not be described as ‘airy’. The school itself was located in an area that

was home to multiple open drains overflowing with sewage, unattended garbage, building materials spilling over from under-construction buildings, and puddles of mud that became breeding ground for swarms of mosquitoes throughout the summer. The school had neither a playground nor a garden, and a very limited staff.

A similar image was offered in the lesson 'The School' in a Class I E.V.S. textbook. It described the school of Sujata, a young Indian girl. This primary school was again big, with 'many classrooms'. Alongside descriptions of learning reading and writing at the school, it told of Sujata learning computers, music, and playing 'many sports' at school, including swimming. One also learned of a librarian to lend books, a gatekeeper to provide security, a peon to ring the bell, and a maid to 'look after the little children at the school'. The type of school presented, again, was at odds with the experience of the children attending this school. Most of the opportunities outlined therein were unavailable to SCB students. There was no library (and thus no librarian), no gatekeeper, and no maid to look after the little children. This last point was especially at odds with the children's experience: several mothers of the focal children were maids. They were not, to be clear, from a socio-economic status where maids would take care of them in school.

It is important to pause and consider the language difficulty, in conjunction with other issues, arising from the gulf between textbook content and the children's everyday lives. On 12 March 2011, I observed two focal children reading the text, 'The School'. They both struggled over unfamiliar words such as library, peon, and swimming pool, and when quizzed, it was revealed that they had no idea what the words conveyed. The closest either of them came to understanding the word 'library' was in describing a bookstore. A real problem with the worlds invoked by their textbooks was thus their irrelevance to children's lives, which resulted in exacerbating the language difficulties the children were already experiencing due to other factors. Another problematic issue was the presentation of a privileged Indian life as normative experience. This aspect needs further interrogation, as it is tied to the aspirations of socio-economically disadvantaged children and their parents.

Memorization

Memorization was a key aspect of learning, observations at both the *anathashram* and the school revealed. In addition to spending a minimum of two periods memorizing texts each day in school, students also spent a large chunk of their time memorizing during evening studies at the *anathashram*. For English, one of the main texts students were asked to memorize were the compositions. The textbooks and grammar books contained model compositions such as short essays or (formal and informal) letters. The teacher typically wrote out a model composition on the board or students were told which essays to commit to memory from their grammar readers. Students were expected to memorize – 'by heart' as the teachers called it – the letters and essays, and reproduce them as faithfully as possible during tests and exams. For example, a model composition for the topic prompt 'The Cow' for Class VI provided in the grammar reader was:

1. The cow is an useful animal. 2. We call her Gau Mata. 3. She has four legs, two ears, two eyes and two horns. 4. She eats grass and straw. 5. She gives us milk. 6. She gives calf. 7. The calves plough the field. 8. They are also used in cart. 9. Hindu worships the cow. 10. Cow are found in black, white and brown colours.

The same topic prompt, 'The Cow', for Class VII, the next in the grammar series sequence, came with only a slightly modified version:

Ram has a cow. She is domestic and gentle. She is brown. She has four legs, two eyes, and two ears. She has two horns. Her tail is very long. She has her calf. She loves her calf very much. She eats green grass and straw. She is very fond of gram and wheat. We worship and call her Gau Mata.

For class VIII, the same topic was provided with the following model in the next level in the grammar series:

The cow is a useful animal. They are white, black, brown or spotted. She eats grass, straw, oil cake or anything that is given. She gives us milk. Milk is good for all. She gives us calves. They plough fields. Her dung is good for farming and cooking food. The Hindus worship her.

An analysis of 30 models across first and eighth grades revealed that they: (1) did not vary much in content or level from one year to the next or even across several grades, (2) contained many spelling and grammatical errors, and (3) often contained material that was uninteresting or irrelevant to children's lives (as indicated by follow-up interviews). While it is beyond the scope of this study to delve into this here, the religious underpinning of the 'Cow' composition models, which presume a Hindu religious affiliation for children reading these putatively secular textbook models, should be noted.

Because of the emphasis on memorization of models, there was little or no incentive for creative expression in English. It ended up being students' memory and recall that was tested. The emphasis was on *ja:d karna:*, 'memorizing', a verb the focal children often used in describing what they were expected to do with their textbooks. The passive learning style the children imbibed is best demonstrated by nine-year-old Gopal's comment when I asked him the difference between learning Hindi and learning English. In English, he told me, 'I do as I am told' (fieldnotes, 3 August 2011). He was, further questioning revealed, pointing to his engagement with English as *something to memorize*.

The emphasis on memorization of English texts, across different subject areas, alienated students still more from the language. The approach fit into a 'banking' model of education where students were treated as receptors with limited agency in learning (Freire, 2004). This highlights the passivity with which the focal children imbibed English: instead of it being an engaging, reflective, interactive, and shared learning process, *they did as they were told*. Gopal's silence on Hindi, further, indicated that he found some agency in learning it, an aspect which requires further study. The approach taken at SCB meant that students were more focused on memorizing rather than comprehension. The limited English they acquired as a result meant that they also acquired less content, because the language was not fully accessible. This issue, predictably, became further exacerbated as students progressed to higher levels, where the English became increasingly inaccessible.

'Question-answers'

Sustained observations at SCB revealed that in general, teachers provided answers to the questions posed in textbooks, which the children then memorized for tests. The cognitive load on the children, thus, was low. Let us take a closer look at this. During observations on 7 February 2011, after *Bade* sir, finished teaching a math lesson to Class V, he assigned Class V math homework, and then turned his attentions to Class IV. He had previously conducted the 'lesson reading' for the chapter, '*Bachendri Pal*', about the first Indian woman to scale Mount Everest, from the *Baby Birds* English textbook. He gestured toward the question: '(B). Write the root words for the following words', which was followed by a

numbered list of eight words that appeared in the lesson. *Bade* sir went to the blackboard and wrote out the answers: (1) mountain, (2) teach, (3) learn, (4) high, (5) continue, (6) climb, (7) success, and (8) complete. He then wrote out the answers to the remaining WH-questions given in the book, until the bell rang and the children rushed out for lunch. On yet another day of observations, Class VII students were instructed to copy the comprehension questions into their notebooks, leaving three blank lines between questions. While the children copied the questions, *Bade* sir wrote the answers on the board. The students, after copying the questions, copied the answers. Below, I reproduce the section from the fieldnotes (1 February 2011) regarding what happened next (all words in Italics have been translated from the Hindi by the author):

After approximately fifteen minutes, *Bade* sir walked down the aisle, and with his body angled toward the Class VII students, asked: “*Are these seven questions complete?*” Once he was satisfied that the students had copied the work, he said, “*Come, let’s go ahead.*” He read out a question. “*There are three options given here, the right option has to be marked out [ticked]. First is, ‘Why does he went to see the king?’ ... ‘Perhaps it was to complain against someone’ ... Third one is right, mark the third one. Third one, second, in third [question] second... ‘Who said?’ You have to write who said these sentences in front of them. First sentence ‘Who said?’ Okay? I am writing [answers] on the board.*” He proceeded to turn his back to the children, and started writing out the answers.

The rest of the period involved his writing out the answers on the board, and the children copying them into their notebook. This sequence was repeated each time at the end of lessons during the observations.

In the process the students, my analysis revealed, developed an expectation that *questions were to be answered by teachers*. They learned to leave blank lines in their notebook to copy answers that the teachers would write on the board. The focus on memorizing ‘question–answers’ (as these were called) also meant that learning was focused more on preparing for tests than on acquiring knowledge. Twelve-year-old Suhas explained: ‘Ma’am [his teacher] gets it done in the copy, [tells us] which answer ... will come [in the exams], she tells us. Ma’am puts a mark [on the questions] that this will come’ (Fieldnotes, 2 November 2011). Upon hearing this, I asked him if answers to ‘ticked’ questions were all he memorized. He nodded, yes. To take another example, on 3 August 2011, I found Prateek doing a question that required him to match synonyms across two columns. Instead of finding relationships across the different columns, he kept trying to find relationships down the columns. When he asked me for help, I asked him, which of the 14 words listed did he know? He pointed to the word ‘clean’ as the only one he knew. When I asked him to go back to the lesson and look at the words in their context, he resisted, saying, ‘[the lesson] has been done, not taught ... only the question answers have been done’. That is, the teacher had skipped over the lesson entirely but given out the answers to the questions in the lesson for the upcoming exams. The teachers for their part expressed frustration at the government’s decision, enforced through the 2009 *Right to Education Act* (Chapter IV, Section 16), to forbid schools from failing or expelling students until Class VIII. This put pressure on teachers to ‘feed’ answers to students, they claimed, to ensure that students would pass.

The teachers’ providing of answers to questions was problematic at several levels. For one, because students focused on memorizing answers provided by the teachers for tests, what they were tested on was largely recall and memory skills. Children developed an expectation that the answers were something to be provided by the teachers; students themselves were not encouraged to think of answers themselves. This was not only limited to

English learning but extended beyond, to teaching and learning practices in other subject areas as well. Students thus had little or no incentive to even try to understand questions posed in textbooks. The stress on testing thus meant that critical engagement with English – the language in which questions were posed – was minimal, with students being expected to memorize and regurgitate answers. The context led to frustrations on the part of both students and teachers, and clearly hindered learning.

Discussion and conclusion

This study has explored literacy practices of young learners at an *anathashram* and a village school, with an eye to understanding how the medium of instruction, identified by the school as English, unfolded in practice. I was specifically interested in exploring the different literacy practices that influenced the negotiation of the instructional medium, and their implications for learning. Furthermore, I set out to understand the consequences of the choices made in instructional medium in the classroom context, as well as to explore its larger implications for educational policymaking. The analysis of the data collected revealed the following aspects that affected the negotiation of the instructional medium: the multi-grade teaching format; reliance on translation in language teaching; an emphasis on memorization; low emphasis on communication skills in classrooms; content mismatch; and teachers' providing of answers to questions. What the analysis revealed was that while the school self-identified itself as English-medium, the teaching was done primarily in Hindi. All textbook content, however, was mediated in English.

Schools that present themselves as 'English-medium' but are not in practice, this study finds, set in place greater obstacles for poorer children due to the use of English textbooks. Not only does this mean that the students must rely heavily on translations by teachers, but it also limits their ability to get help from others around them (since their access to English outside of classrooms is extremely limited). While this hinders students' development of critical thinking skills within the classroom, it has still larger implications for educational equity. Poor children in India, who represent the biggest market for such schools, thus acquire poor English skills. As Annamalai (2005) pointed out, this situation 'does not help them or the country' (p. 27). Instead of being able to engage with educational content in their own languages, they become trapped in a perpetual cycle of textual translation and rote-memorization techniques, *learning for the test*. While translation and rote-memorization practices are not inherently unsound language learning practices, the ways in which they unfolded in practice at SCB and the *anathashram* did result in extensive difficulties for students. Finally, because the language of higher education in India is primarily English, inadequate English skills acquired in such contexts can have grave consequences for students later on. Either access to colleges or universities will be denied to them or, should they manage to get access to higher education, they will find their path more difficult. The case of Anil is a cautionary tale. On 3 March 2012, Anil, a first-year tribal student at the prestigious All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) committed suicide. According to national media reports, this was due to stress caused by his inability to follow lectures in English. The son of a poor farmer, Anil had studied in Hindi-medium schools until entering AIIMS, where the language barrier proved insurmountable. While Anil's tragic end is an extreme case, the difficulties he experienced due to the English–vernacular divide are by no means atypical. Medium of instruction, thus, remains a salient concern in the Indian educational content, and becomes sometimes a question of survival.

How do we look forward to more responsive and responsible language policy and planning? The following recommendations may be a starting point:

- *Language Policy*: National policy-makers must identify, acknowledge, and incorporate local contexts of multiple language use in classroom instruction. The question of instructional medium in particular is a major policy issue, requiring urgent attention and further research across different contexts.
- *English-medium schools*: Schools such as SCB that self-identify itself as English-medium but may not be in practice merit closer attention. There need to be better regulatory structures in place to categorize 'English-medium' schools in ways that hold them accountable to educational stakeholders, especially for parents who may not know English.
- *Teaching to the Test*: The government policy that no student may be held back till Class VIII results in a situation where there is pressure for teachers to teach to the test. The mediation of content through English, a language in which neither teachers nor students have confidence, compounds the problem: teachers then push children to commit texts to memory so that they can pass exams. An evaluation of this policy is necessary to ensure teachers do not succumb to pressures by teaching to the test.
- *CLT pedagogy*: The mismatch between English textbooks that use CLT and the teachers' own grammar-translation pedagogy within India needs continuing attention from scholars, policy-makers, and publishers. The adoption of hybridized approaches could be one solution to this problem (see, e.g. Chang, 2011; Kong, 2011).
- *Teacher Training*: At the broader institutional levels, teacher training should be geared toward addressing local conditions of practice. Measures could include curricula that provide support for developing effective multi-grade, multilingual pedagogic strategies.
- *Vernacular support*: There should be greater opportunities and support for vernacular-medium instruction at all levels, particularly in higher education. Without that, the Indian educational landscape will remain an unequal one.

As the number of children attending schools labeled English-medium continues to grow in India, there is a need for additional qualitative studies to illuminate the language and literacy practices at such schools. These issues must be dealt with at the micro- as well as macro level, by exploring local literacy practices and connecting them to broader policy concerns. A holistic approach bridging the two can help us better understand the problems and concerns plaguing Indian education. A language policy and planning approach that is more attuned to on-the-ground realities in Indian schools would lead to a more equitable educational context.

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Notes

1. A second language is a language that is not a mother tongue and acquired in a context where that (second) language is predominant, whereas the term foreign language refers to a language acquired in instructional or study abroad contexts in furtherance of educational or career goals (Kramsch, 2008).
2. Names of the school, village, and focal subjects have been changed to protect subjects' identities.
3. For administrative purposes, schools in India are classified in three ways: *government* (Central), *private-aided*, and *private unaided* (Tooley & Dixon, 2007). State and local authorities generally

fund government schools, whereas private-aided schools receive some funding from the government. Private unaided schools are funded by independent private sources. Further, private unaided schools may either be classified as 'recognized' or 'unrecognized', depending on whether they meet specific state-set standards. The school in this study is a private, unaided, recognized school. To give a sense of the scales involved, the India Human Development Survey (2005) found that nationwide, 58% of urban children and 24% of rural children are enrolled in the broader category of private schools, among children in the 6–14 years bracket.

4. In the Indian educational system, grades are typically denoted as 'Class' followed by the Roman numeral relating the grade. I follow that system in this article.
5. The focal children had two notebooks for every subject. One was a 'rough copy' which students used to take down notes and answers in class, and the other was a 'fair copy', a 'cleaned up' version which contained homework.
6. Grammar-translation methods rely heavily on teaching grammar and practicing translation as its main teaching and learning activities. The major focus of this method tend[s] to be reading and writing, with relatively little attention paid to speaking and listening ... Consideration of what students might do to promote their own learning ha[s] little or no place in grammar-translation theory, which tend[s] to assume that, if students simply follow the method, learning would result as a matter of course (Griffiths & Parr, 2001, p. 247).

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