

## **Gender Inequality and Construction of Identity in ELT Scenario**

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### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on male and female learners' notion of symbolic capital for construction of identity in Pakistani society where gender inequality leads to low investment on daughters' education. This research answers following questions: 1. Does gender discrimination exist in different social classes? 2. How does low investment on daughters' physical capital affect male and female English language learners' struggle for construction of identity? We used triangulation method to collect the data. One government and one private college (male and female each) were selected in two districts of Punjab. Thirty-two male and female low and high scorers studying at intermediate level and their parents were interviewed. We observed their homes. The results of college exams of class were analysed through SPSS<sup>1</sup>. The findings suggest that in spite of low investment on daughters' physical capital, the female students showed their commitment to build their identity.

**Keywords:** Gender; Discrimination; Parents; English language learning; Social class

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### **Introduction**

Gender is seen as a socially constructed system by the researchers. This paper argues the sustainability of social stigma that can generate discrimination in social capital investment. The issue of gender inequality and the concept of symbolic capital generate complexity of relationship between gender, language, power and identity. Language not only helps in communication but also helps in construction and deconstruction of identity in society. Similarly, there is a strong relation between language and power. Norton Pierce (1995) states that the conception of investment signals the relationship of the female to the target language and their eagerness to learn that language. Instead of instrumental motivation, we advocate the notion of symbolic capital and its role in construction of identity.

This research is a comparative study of male and female students of intermediate classes studying at the government and the private colleges in Multan and Lahore districts in Pakistan. The two types of colleges suggest the

social class diversity and the parents' choice of colleges for the children. The discrimination in investment of the parents on their male and female children's education reflects gender inequality in society. This research demonstrates the comparative view of physical and symbolic capital. To acquire symbolic resources such as language and education, the female students' better performance in exams shows their desire to acquire symbolic resources such as language and education and for construction of their identity.

1. SPSS: Statistical Package of Social Sciences
2. This paper is partially taken from PhD research carried out at Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan.

### **The Nature and Significance of the Study**

The study investigates gender inequality affecting attitudes of the learners towards English language learning. It also relates the increasing value of investment on language learning under the influence of global role of the language. The male and female students' struggle for their identity in the global world is also concern of this research. Moreover, this research is a comparison between the government and the private institutions in the two districts of the Punjab; Lahore and Multan.

### **Literature Review**

The term "identity" refers to self-awareness (Leary & Tangney, 2003). The concept of social identity was developed by Tajfel (1972) who defines this concept as a realization of an individual being a member of a certain social group. According to social identity theory, people categorize themselves according to various social stratifications (Tajfel and Turner: 1985). There exists variation in social behavior from interpersonal group to intergroup behavior. Intrinsic motivation drives individuals to achieve positive distinctiveness and to associate themselves with a particular group. This association with a particular group offers them identity and self-esteem. Sociolinguistics concerns itself with question of language and identity (Harris, 2006). Simon (2004) argues that social identity arises with the focus on self-aspect that can be a belief, a symbol or physical or psychological trait. The changes in the social context threaten identity of the individual when these changes threaten individual's self-esteem, self-efficacy and distinctiveness from others (Breakwell, 1992; Brewer, 1991). Identity is thus context specific. The construction of identity on the basis of language is a complex process which involves attitudes of the society towards a language.

The negative evaluation of one's identity leads to the use of language that symbolizes positive identity. The association with a particular group depends on the power and prestige the members of groups are enjoying. Social construction of reality is based on the choice of language accepted by the society.

We will relate identity with a new concept of investment constructed by Norton (2000, 2010) that refers to learners' desire to use the language constructed by the society. This is an investment in learners' own social identity. According to Pavlenko (2000), L2 users' linguistic, social and cultural identities construct their agencies and investments in language learning. Poststructuralists view language practice as a social capital. Bourdieu has argued that the "dominant language" is the language of "dominant classes". The relation between language and power is significant. English has acquired the status of high prestige language. English language has acquired high status in Pakistani society. According to Rahman (2003), English has been strongly established in the domains of power in Pakistan since 1947. English language is indispensable for those who want to enter the network of power. Globalisation has also increased the value of English language learning. Bourdieu describes power in terms "Symbolic Capital". This power is perceived as legitimate demand for recognition (Swartz, 1997).

Cultural stereotypes are engrained in both men and women. Gender roles are constructed in society. Hyde (2005) observed that children suffer the consequences of gender stereotypes. She further claims that these gender differences can hurt women's self-esteem. Until the 1980s the scholars have been discussing the sex-based language varieties. Tannen (1994) also talks about gendered language for it involves male and female culture. But Crawford (1995) and Freed (1992) criticize her approach towards the issue of gender for neglecting the issue of power. The shift in research from social constructionism towards post modernism consequently focuses on gender as a discursive and social construction (e.g., Bergvall et al. 1996; Cameron, 2005). Various studies point towards the difference in gendered approach to linguistic market. Trudgill (1972) argues that women necessarily use symbolic means to strengthen their position through professional achievement. Eckert (1998) views that Bourdieu and Boltanski's (1975) notion of symbolic capital looks to the significance of symbolic capital for successful functioning in different parts of society. Eckert's (1998) study concludes that women collect symbolic capital and men dominate material capital.

In her studies on language and identity, Norton (2010) concentrates on “identity and investment”. In her support to Bourdieu’s idea of replacing “motivation” with “identity”, she hypothesizes that learners’ investment in the target language is linked with the learners’ desire to learn the language and their changing identity. Norton (2000) in her “construct of investment” argues that language learning process will be facilitated if the language learner views the presumed identity in the new language as of greater value/power. According to Norton & Toohey (2002), the language acquisition can be enhanced when the learners make an effort to attain more powerful identities. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) assert that “identities are forged in action rather than fixed in categories” (p. 376). Morita’s (2004) research on language and identity also shows that L2 learners’ involvement is linked with their identity, competence, power, access and agency. Similarly, Toohey (2005) also finds that the success in L2 learning is a matter of “identity construction”. Norton (2013) argues that the learners’ investment in the target language helps them to acquire symbolic and material resources. This increases the value of their cultural capital, social power and identity. The construct of investment is related with what Bourdieu calls cultural capital. Investment is a sociological construct. Concepts such as power and knowledge exhibit the presence of power relations in language learning. This emerging concept of power in relation to language learning brings into light the need for critical pedagogies in language education (Norton & Toohey, 2004). Norton (2000) reconceptualises L2 learning by defining it as “the right to speak”. The poststructuralists advocate that L2 learning can become a platform for advocating social justice through critical pedagogy (Norton Pierce, 1995; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004b). Similarly, Davis et al. (2005) are of the view that the marginalized can be empowered through and in L2 learning.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions are addressed in this study:

1. Does gender discrimination exist in different social classes in Multan and Lahore?
2. How does low investment on daughters’ physical capital affect male and female English language learners’ attitude towards English language learning?
3. How do the male and female students’ struggle for construction of identity

### **Research Setting, Methods and Analysis**

This is a comparative study of the government and private colleges in Multan and Lahore districts of the Punjab. The descriptive and empirical research helped me to study the phenomena. The study is a comparison at many levels such as government vs. private, male vs. female and Lahore vs. Multan. This is a comparison of the learners' struggle for learning who belonged to low and high social classes studying at the government and private colleges. The comparison of the male and female learners showed the gender representation in the study. Both Lahore and Multan are the two big cities of the Punjab. Lahore is considered more progressive and cosmopolitan city as compared to Multan. The objective behind the comparison was to see the differences and similarities in the cultural practices and language learning attitudes of the male and female learners and their parents in both cities.

With permission of the Principals, Heads of the Departments, English teachers and with the consent of the students, we selected colleges for data collection. One male and one female government and private colleges each were selected in Multan and Lahore districts. Intermediate class consisted of two years' education i.e. first and second year. The students of intermediate classes (first and second year) of humanities group were selected as participants. The intermediate level is the beginning of college education in Pakistan. Those who study humanities are considered low motivated as compared to those who study sciences. The purpose behind selection of humanities group was to study attitudes of the students and their struggle for identity in the global world. Thus the colleges offering humanities subjects were selected. The number of students was forty in each class at both types of colleges in both districts. The students were already divided in sections including high and low scorers in secondary examination. The sampling in the section was already done randomly.

We used triangulation method to study the phenomenon. We used the following research tools:

1. Semi-structured observation of eight male and eight female students' homes (low and high scorers)
2. Face to face semi-structured interviews of parents (sixteen: of low and high scorers)
3. Face to face semi-structured interviews of the students (eight low and eight high scorers)
4. Analysis of result of college tests in the subject of English on SPSS  
By semi-structured, we mean that we not only prepared checklist but

also noted the learning activities during class and home observation. The qualitative data was analysed through interpretation and cross references.

### **Findings**

The analysis of the interview data suggests that the students studying at the government colleges belonged to the low social class and the students studying at the private colleges belonged to the high social class in both districts. The analysis of home observation suggests that the female students from high social class were studying humanities subjects whereas their brothers were studying science subjects. The female students from low social class were studying humanities subjects at the government colleges whereas their brothers were studying science subjects at the private colleges. The high and low male scorers from high and low social class were studying humanities subjects either because they were low motivated or they could not get admission in science subjects.

Here we will share experiences from home observation and interviews with the parents and the students. The male students from lower social class were provided with the resources for learning English language. The provision of room or place to study at home was one of the resources. Some of the parents also sent their male child to educational academies to get extra tuition for certain period of time to improve their English language skills. The tuition fee and the cost of travel from home to the tuition center were no issues for the parents because the investment on the male child's education particularly on learning English language skills was part of social capital. The family investment should affect the students' achievement in school (Coleman, 1990).

Here we will share some excerpts from interviews with parents.

“The parents of high social class spend more money on providing educational resources to their children...” [*Interview in Urdu with a mother (of low scorer male student from private college in Multan) from high social class*]

“Access to resources makes the difference in quality in education” [*Interview in English with a literate father (of a high scorer female student from the private college in Lahore) from high social class*]

“Joining academy was necessity for my son so I sent him to academy for tuition in the subject of English” [*Interview in Urdu with a father*]

*(of low scorer male student studying at the government college for men in Lahore) from low social class]*

“My son is brilliant and to make his future bright I am spending money on his education... I wish he could get good job in future” [Interview in Urdu with a literate father of a low scorer male studying at the government college for men in Multan]

“Boys should get higher education to get jobs in future. Girls should get education enough to teach their children” [Interview in Urdu with an illiterate mother of a high scorer male student studying at the government college for men in Multan]

The majority of the female students were not sent to attend educational academy because either the academies were away from the homes or the parents could not pay tuition fee. The mothers were of the view that education was important for the daughters for better prospects of their marriages.

Following are some excerpts from interviews of the students and the parents taken at their homes. The parents expressed the view that they did not discriminate between the sons and the daughters for their education.

“My father forced me to study humanities subjects... I wished to study at Kinnared college but papa (father) says that my cousins are studying in this college and it is quite near to my house...I feel less motivated now...” [Interview in Urdu with a female high scorer from high social class studying at the government college in Lahore]

Whereas, her father claimed to be supportive of his daughter.

“I am supportive to my daughter as I am to my sons....she is free in her choice of subjects...” [Interview in Urdu with a father of the female high scorer from high social class studying at the government college in Lahore]

“My son chooses subjects and the college according to his own choice...” [Interview in Urdu with a father with little schooling (of low scorer male student studying at the government college for men in Multan) from low social class]

“I share room with my family so can’t study at night” [Interview in Urdu with a female low scorer from low social class studying at the government college for men in Multan]

The male and the female students expressed their desire to learn English language which has become marker of educated social class. This concept of new identity leads them to learn English language. Here we will write the translated version of some excerpts from interviews of the male and female students.

“Learning of English language is indispensable for getting job”  
[*Interview in Urdu with a high scorer male student studying at the government college in Multan*]

“My cousins speak English language confidently. It’s a marker of identity in a society” [Interview in Urdu with a female high scorer studying at the government college for women in Lahore]

Now we will share the numbers of male and female students from Multan and Lahore and percentages of their marks in send ups.

<b>Government and Private</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>
Male and Female Colleges in both Districts	(Multan & Lahore) 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	(Multan & Lahore) 1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> year
Frequency of students	275	265
Average Marks in send ups	52.97	49.53

**Table 1:** Number of students and average marks in send ups

The data analysed through SPSS in above given table shows that average marks of female students in English are higher as compared to those of the female male students in both Districts. The parents’ low investment on the education of the female students and their better performance in exams shows the tendency of the female students to collect symbolic capital. Whereas the parents’ investment on their sons suggests the use of physical capital for the prospect of getting it back in future. Though both the male and female students desired to collect symbolic capital but the parents’ unequal distribution of physical capital on their sons and daughters reflect the gender inequality in the society. The female students’ silence on this unequal distribution is the result of the social norms set by the male dominated society. The better performance of the female students can be result of resistance to inequitable social norms or desire to be identified as an educated person. The conception of social identity as a site of struggle helps to struggle for learning English. This is also mediated by resistance to unscrupulous social practice.



## **Conclusion**

Gender inequalities are socially constructed. This study reinforces the gender disparities being practiced in Pakistani society. The low investment on daughters' human capital discriminated them from their brothers. This relates to what Talbot (2010) views that gender identities are shaped by capitalist social conditions and formulated in capitalist social relations". Gender disparities affected the English language learning attitudes of the male and female learners. The better performance of the female students in their intermediate exams shows their reaction to the social norms where male children are provided with more resources for learning. This also shows strong determination of the female students to maintain their identity as an educated member of the society.

The fathers' power of decisions regarding choice of subjects and colleges for the daughters demonstrates the dependency of women on men. Women's identity is shaped by the men who have the authority and power of decision about fate of the women. This strengthens the dominant position of men in the society. The better performance of the female students in intermediate exams as compared to the male students, on the other hand, reflects the desire of women to establish their position through learning the language of power. This also shows their concern to gain a new identity in society through education particularly through learning of English language.

Though both the male and female students desired to collect "symbolic capital" but the parents' unequal distribution of physical capital on their sons and daughters reflects the gender inequality in the society. The female students' silence on this unequal distribution was the result of the social norms set by the male dominated society. The conception of social identity as a site of struggle helped them to struggle for learning English. This was also mediated by resistance to unscrupulous social practice. Though the word 'unscrupulous' would be inappropriate if we look at the challenges the parents were facing in the society as discussed in the findings. The desire of the female participants for construction of identity by collecting symbolic capital requires physical resources provided by the parents. But their parents' concept of life and its challenges contrasts with the needs of the new generation and its challenges in life. The difference lies in the approach of the parents and the children towards social norms and practices in the society.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that this research reflects two worlds where the meanings of identity varied depending on the approach towards

life, sense of responsibilities, and the nature of challenges of the society for the parents and the children. The value of English language learning, however, cannot be ignored in the society where the parents associate respect with the social norms and the children are trained to follow the existing social norms.

### **Recommendations**

English language learning has acquired symbolic power in Pakistani society. Thus critical pedagogy can be applied in classrooms to develop critical sense among the students for social justice and equality among the society. The sense of social justice and equality can increase their self-confidence and can transform their identity in the social world. Teacher training in-service courses can enhance teaching skills of the teachers for developing critical abilities of the learners in classes. Regular meetings can be held at colleges between the parents and the teachers in which the parents can be guided and trained how to provide moral support to their children at home specially to the female children. The assessment of the students' language learning includes reading and writing skills. The listening and speaking skills of the students should also be assessed to see their competence in these skills.

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