

Simplified Speech #090 – School uniforms

Episode description

Uniforms in school is a hot topic for students. Some students love that they don't have to choose their clothes in the morning. Others hate the lack of freedom. In this Simplified Speech episode, hosts Andrew and Suzanne share their opinions on and experiences with school uniforms.

Fun fact

The prevalence of school uniforms varies drastically from country to country. In the United States, most schools do not require a uniform. Compare that to schools in Seoul, South Korea, where 98% of all middle and high schools require their students to wear uniforms!

Expressions included in the study guide

- Private/public school
- Driving force
- Status symbol
- To speak for everyone
- Dress code
- Insider



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Hello, everyone, my name is Andrew.

Suzanne: Hi guys, I'm Suzanne.

Andrew: And you are listening to Culips.

Andrew: Hello there. This is a Simplified Speech episode, which is the Culips series featuring totally natural English conversations that are slowed down just a little bit. Today, I am joined by my cohost Suzanne. Suzanne, hello.

Suzanne: Hey, Andrew, how are you?

Andrew: I'm doing great. Today, our topic of conversation is school uniforms. And we'll talk about our opinions about school uniforms. And we'll talk about the culture of wearing school uniforms in North America.

Andrew: But before we get into this topic of conversation, I wanna let everyone know that there's a study guide available for this episode and you can get it from our website, Culips.com, if you would like to study along with the guide while you listen to us today.

Andrew: All right, Suzanne, let's get into it. Where should we start?

Suzanne: Well, I wanted to ask you, Andrew, have you ever worn a school uniform before?

Andrew: I have never worn a school uniform before. No, never, never, never.

Suzanne: Wow.

Andrew: Yeah, all of my schooling was done in **public schools**. And in Canada, students that attend **public school**—and we should be clear about the definition of **public school**.

Suzanne: Yeah, it's true.

Andrew: I was chatting with one of my colleagues from the UK the other day and we are talking about what **public school** is. And in the UK and in British English, it has a totally different meaning than in North American English.

Suzanne: What's the meaning in the UK?

Andrew: A **public school** in the UK is what we call a **private school** in North America. It's completely the opposite. Yeah.

Suzanne: That's so strange. OK.

Andrew: Isn't it really strange? So a **public school** in North America is the school that is provided by the government. It's what most children attend. There's no tuition fee. It's supported by taxpayers, right? In the UK, a **public school** is a private institution. It's not supported by the government, and you have to pay tuition to attend. So it's totally different in both situations.

Suzanne: That's so strange, yeah. And a **private school**, yeah, tends to have, I guess, a protocol or a uniform that they instill in the students and that there's a sort of a standard way that you need to dress.

Andrew: Exactly. So growing up in Canada, some of my friends went to a **private, religious school**. It was a Christian school. And that school didn't have a uniform either. But some of my other friends went to a Catholic school. And that was also a **private school** and they did have a uniform. So, I think, mostly in Canada, it's, yeah, it's **private schools**, which are often religious schools, right? Parents want their children to be raised in an environment that reflects their religious beliefs. So there's Christian schools, Catholic schools, Jewish schools, probably some other schools for different religious groups, as well. And then there's just **private schools** that are focused on having high academic standards, as well.

Suzanne: Like prep schools, right?

Andrew: Prep schools, yeah. A lot of those places wear uniforms as well.

Suzanne: Yeah, and sometimes the prep schools can be or have a religious name like St. Edward's, or, you know, like, they'll have like some kind of name that is religious, but that's not their, sort of, you know, **driving force**. They're more about academics and academic excellence.

Andrew: Let's talk about you. Did you have to wear a school uniform when you were a student?

Suzanne: I did. I totally did. I went to pre-kindergarten, right? I guess it's more like a choice, you don't have to go to pre-K. But my parents put me in pre-K and—

Andrew: That's when you're, like, 4 years old?

Suzanne: I don't even know. I'm not even sure. I guess. I went to, like, a Montessori school.

Andrew: And that is another type of **private school** that has a really unique curriculum, right? That's based on small class sizes and lots of interaction with the teachers and more independent learning.

Suzanne: I loved it. I'll have to say this, and I didn't expect to get into this, but I still remember things that I learned in Montessori school at, like, at the age of 3 or 4 years old. I mean, I still have lessons. I learned so much in just, like, a couple years there. Just the way that it's presented. It was very much, like, problem-solving and exploration. I remember having to take apart a truck and then find a way to put it back together and make it go. There wasn't really one way to do it. You just had to sort of figure it out. And I really loved this kind of way of learning and using my hands and being creative, it was very creative. However, we did not need to wear a uniform. It wasn't until I went to first grade at The Good Shepherd School.

Andrew: The Good Shepherd School. OK.

Suzanne: Yeah. It was a Catholic school in Brooklyn. We lived right across the street from the school and the church, the Catholic church, and the nuns and the convent. And those nuns were my teachers. And we had to wear a uniform, full-on uniform. But I was really excited to, like, wear the big girl uniform, you know, when I got to be in first grade. And I wore that till fifth grade.

Suzanne: And I actually enjoyed it because I didn't have to think about what I wanted to wear. There was no, like, oh, you're the popular kids and you're not because you have cool clothes. And, you know, everyone was just kind of the same because we all just wore the same uniform. And nobody was distracted by anything, clothing-wise. And we still found ways to make it more personal. Like what colour tights we would wear underneath. Or like if we would put our tie together or unbutton it or wrap it around the side of our jumper. So we kind of still had, like, our own personal flair. Sometimes we put pins on it, you know. This was also in the '80s. So let's just understand that when we had, like, hot pink, like, hair ties, that was, like, the extent of our excitement. But I didn't mind it, I actually kind of liked it.

Andrew: So you had to wear a uniform, but there was quite a lot of flexibility in how you could customize the uniform?

Suzanne: Within the regulations. So, like, you could put a pin, but you couldn't, like, cover your uniform with pins. Like you could have, like, five, at the most.

Andrew: OK. That's quite a few pins.

Suzanne: You could have short sleeves. Yeah, but they were a little, you know? You could have short sleeves, and you could also unbutton your top button.

Andrew: OK, you could open your collar.

Suzanne: Right, and take off your snap tie if it was too hot. You could tie it around the side of your jumper. So this way you weren't, you know, because we didn't have like air conditioning. It was an old building.

Andrew: What was the uniform? What did it consist of? Was it like the classic Catholic schoolgirl uniform?

Suzanne: Yes, totally. So you had, like, a pleated skirt and it was attached to these two panels that would, you'd kind of put like this over and it came to, like, a V.

Andrew: The straps that you put over your shoulders.

Suzanne: Yeah, they're thick straps, you're, like, it's, like, more like a V. So it really looks like a jumper. And you have, like, the insignia or the symbol of the school on your chest.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: As well, and usually, like, a white collared shirt underneath. The boys had a tie, you know, slacks and a tie. And we also had a gym uniform. So if you had gym that day, you got to wear your gym, their gym clothes, I think, like, twice a week, so that was fun. We got, like, sweatpants and stuff.

Andrew: What did you call your gym uniform? Because in Canada, we call it a gym strip. Do you call it a gym strip, as well?

Suzanne: No. That's where we go—I think gym suit.

Andrew: Gym suit.

Suzanne: Suit, gym suit. Yeah.

Andrew: Yeah, for whatever reason, we call it a gym strip, which just means, like, the clothes that you wear when you're doing your PE class. So the teacher was, like, go get changed into your gym strip.

Suzanne: That's so funny.

Andrew: I thought that might be a regional thing, though. So that's why I asked.

Suzanne: Just to say, it was very interesting when I moved to Texas and I went to a **public school**. And my **public school** was really nice. There were, like, skylights and carpets and everyone had a locker and it was like the TV shows that you see of American high schools with, like, cheerleaders and lunchrooms that are like super nice and, you know, all of that kind of stuff. But it was a **public school**, and suddenly I had to wear regular clothes every single day and I was going crazy, Andrew.

Andrew: Why? Why were you going crazy? What was that transition like?

Suzanne: Well, it was very stressful. First of all, because it was new, in a whole new school, where all of these people went to school since first grade all together, and now they're in sixth grade. And me, I'm the new girl from New York City and I'm supposed to have fashion and cool clothes, but I wore a uniform my whole life. So I didn't know what to do, I wasn't into fashion. I didn't get it really. And suddenly, I had to wear new clothes, different clothes every day. And I'm not good at making decisions. So I had a lot of trouble. I was late for school quite a bit, and it was really stressful. And I probably looked kind of weird sometimes going to school, but I was always stressful and very self conscious about my body and how I looked because I wasn't sure, suddenly, how to dress. Yeah, it was it was pretty stressful.

Andrew: Yeah, well, I remember fashion and clothes being a big deal. Even when I was young, like 7, 8 years old, I remember that I wanted my parents to buy me Guess jeans—that was, like, the popular brand at my elementary school, Guess. Guess jeans and Starter, Starter was a company that made, like, sports jackets. So this jacket, there was, like, these were really popular in the early '90s, too. There are different sports teams like Chicago Bulls, the NBA team, were really popular. So a Chicago Bulls starter jacket. And, like, Nike, Nike basketball shoes.

Andrew: So definitely these were **status symbols**, even among young children. And so there was competition. And you know, my family was never very rich or anything, so trying to keep up with the rich kids is really tough, because they're getting new clothes all the time. So even at a really young age, in a **public school** where there is no school uniform, you're aware of different class issues right from the start. And you're aware that there's this hierarchy of fashion and that people are praised or respected for having good fashion or teased or bullied if they can't keep up or if they're not interested.

Andrew: For that reason, I think the uniform is probably a good idea. But I don't know, it's hard. I never had to live the uniform lifestyle. And some people say that the uniform is really restrictive and doesn't let students express their personal style.

Suzanne: I don't know. I didn't feel that way. I didn't feel that way because I could wear like fun earrings and, like, fun hair stuff. I don't know, I didn't feel restricted. Now, I'm not everyone. I can't **speak for everyone**. For me, I really enjoyed not having that decision to make at the age of, like, 9, you know? Like, I kind of just liked waking up, getting, you know, showering or whatever it was, just putting on the same clothes and going to school and eating my lunch and not having to wake up, like, an hour early just to figure out what to wear. I didn't like it when I went to **public school**. I really was, like, this stinks. This is stressful.

Andrew: Well, it sounds like to me, your school in Brooklyn there, or in New York, it was kind of like the perfect situation where you have to wear a uniform, but there's some flexibility. 'Cause I know here in Korea, and things may have changed these days, I'm not exactly sure how strict the standards are, I think every school dictates how strict the rules are. But students in junior high school and high school need to wear uniforms in South Korea where I live now—if you guys didn't know that, I live here in Korea. Elementary school students have freedom. But middle school students, high school students need to wear uniforms.

Andrew: And I was recently talking with my girlfriend about this and she was telling me about her high school days. She's a year younger than I am. So we're about the same age. So she was a high school student in, you know, the late '90s, early 2000s-ish area. And her school was so strict with the uniforms, like, it was insane. They dictated your hair colour and your hair length. Like, you had to have a bob and it had to be your bangs had to be cut at exactly the right spot. Yeah, there was some standards with the skirt length, like they had to wear a skirt and it had to be below your knee at exactly the right spot and if it was above your knee little bit or too low, you would get in trouble. There was some rule with the socks, you could only wear white socks and they had to be folded twice, in a certain way. The shoes had to be only white shoes, and it was only one brand that they were allowed to buy.

Andrew: So I think, in this sense, if you came from one of these schools, you might say, like, this actually does limit my personal freedom to express myself, especially when you're an older student. Like, you know, if you're in your final year of high school, you're 17, 18 years old, this is a time when you want to get to know yourself and to experiment with style. But if, you know, if you can't even grow your hair past your ears, then it is a kind of a limit on your personal freedom that extends outside of school, as well.

Suzanne: That is really strict. Yeah. And I do need to say that I didn't experience that in junior high and high school, right? Like, I think if I was able to wear whatever I wanted, at a younger age and then in high school had to wear a uniform, I'd probably hate it, because high school I definitely expressed myself in '90s fashion. I had all kinds of '90s fashion going on. So I definitely have a different perspective on that.

Suzanne: And, exactly, it was not as strict. I mean, we could wear our hair however we wanted, hairspray bangs all over the place, you know? We were even able to roll our socks down if we wanted to, like scrunch them down and wear, like, tan tights, so it made it look like we had cool '80s, like, leg warmer style. So, you know, we definitely had more freedom, I would say, so.

Andrew: I've got one last question for you, Suzanne, and then we'll wrap things up here. In **public school**, so like when you are a high school student and you're going to just a regular **public school** and there were no uniforms or you could wear whatever you want, were there any rules about what you could wear? Because in my high school, even though we had no uniform, there was still a **dress code**.

Suzanne: Yeah, we had a **dress code**, for sure.

Andrew: What kind of things were on your **dress code**?

Suzanne: So on my **dress code**, we couldn't wear shorts that were too short. I think it had to be like three or four fingers above the knee. Basically, no, like Daisy Dukes. We were not allowed to have that.

Andrew: Short shorts, no short shorts. But maybe in gym class it's OK. I don't know.

Suzanne: We couldn't wear, like, any kind of midriff-showing clothes, or any kind of, like, super low-cut kind of things.

Andrew: Like tank tops or something?

Suzanne: We could wear tank tops, but nothing that's, like, kind of showing cleavage or something. You know, we couldn't wear, like, bathing suits' tops. But some people tried, you know?

Andrew: Your **dress code**—and I should clarify here: a **dress code** is just a set of rules around what you are allowed to wear at school, or it could be a **dress code** for a fancy restaurant or, like, a club, like maybe a country club or a golf club. There's a **dress code**. And so my school's **dress code** was pretty much the same as yours. You know, for some reason, it's usually around what women can wear and female students can wear. Yeah, which is an interesting observation, isn't it?

Suzanne: Isn't it? It's funny.

Andrew: Yeah, but as a guy, there wasn't really any limits to what I could wear, but it was mostly with the female students about, yes, skirt length and short length, and how much cleavage can be shown, and that was pretty much it. There was no restrictions on, you know, hair colour, so a lot of students had funky hairstyles. Spiked hair, dyed hair, Mohawks, anything went for hair. So that was pretty fun.

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: Well, that was fun. That was a really interesting conversation. And it was great to hear your experience. You're a real **insider**, having lived the uniform life.

Suzanne: The Catholic schoolgirl. Yes.

Andrew: And thank you to all of our listeners for tuning in today, as well. We hope you learned a lot and had a good time listening to our conversation. Guys, if you'd like to keep up to date with Culips, you can do that by following us on social media. We are on Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. There we go. That's all four of them.

Andrew: And, Suzanne, it would be great if some of our listeners wrote to us and told us about their experiences, because, you know, I'm sure every country has a different way of addressing this issue. And there are probably different school uniform standards in each country. So, listeners, send us an email, share your opinion and your story with us about the school uniform issue. You can do that by sending us an email to?

Suzanne: Contact@Culips.com.

Andrew: Bingo, there we go. Everyone, we will be back soon with another brand-new Culips episode and we will talk to you then. Bye.

Suzanne: Yes, bye.

Detailed Explanations

Private/public school

Noun

In this episode, hosts Andrew and Suzanne talk about their experiences in **public** and **private schools**. They explain that the terms **public school** and **private school** have different meanings in North America than in the United Kingdom. In North America, a **public school** is fully funded by the government through taxes and there is no tuition to pay. A **private school** has tuition fees and is only partially funded by the government. In the United Kingdom, a **public school** has tuition fees and is not funded by the government. Their government-funded schools are called state schools.

Here are a couple more examples with **private/public school**:

Mark: Did you go to a **private school** when you were a student?

Leela: No, I didn't. I would have loved to, but my parents couldn't afford it. How about you?

Mark: I only went to **private school** for 1 year, when I was in middle school.

Leela: Why only 1 year?

Mark: Same reason as you. My parents couldn't afford more than that.

Juan: You went to a **public school**, right?

Harper: Yeah.

Juan: Would you have rather gone to a **private** one?

Harper: I've thought about that. But all my friends went to **privates schools**, and they always seemed stressed about their homework and tests. I think I had much more fun.

Driving force

Idiom

In this episode, Suzanne talks about the **driving force** of a school. A **driving force** is what causes you to do something. The **driving force** of a religious school could be giving students a religious education. The **driving force** of a trade school could be teaching students a particular trade. A **driving force** causes you to work toward an end goal. You can have your own **driving force**. For example, you can say that being a better person is what drives you to get up in the morning. That's your personal **driving force**.

Here are a couple more examples with **driving force**:

Adrienne: What have you been doing lately? You always seem pretty busy.

Donnell: I am. I've been studying Arabic a lot these days.

Adrienne: Arabic? Are you planning a trip?

Donnell: Actually, my main **driving force** is job hunting. The jobs I want have an Arabic language proficiency requirement.

Adrienne: I get it. That's a really great goal to strive for.

Trey: Do you know any good salespeople? I'm looking to hire staff for my new business.

Macy: You're opening another business? You already have two!

Trey: Macy, making money is the **driving force** of our capitalist society.

Macy: Aren't you being a little greedy?

Trey: The way I see it, I'm creating jobs and opportunities for other people to work. What's wrong with that?

Status symbol

Idiom

In this episode, Andrew says that wearing certain shoes and certain clothes were **status symbols** when he was in school. A **status symbol** is an object that indicates to other people what kind of social or professional status you have. For example, you need a lot of money to buy a Ferrari. Owning a **status symbol** like a Ferrari shows other people that you are probably rich.

People use the expression **status symbol** when talking about higher status, as opposed to lower status. You wouldn't say that wearing cheaper clothing and driving a rusted old car are **status symbols** of being less rich.

Here are a couple more examples with **status symbol**:

Forrest: I wish I were rich, like really rich.

Caroline: Me too. What would you buy if you were really rich?

Forrest: I think I would buy a yacht.

Caroline: Good call.

Forrest: A yacht is the ultimate **status symbol**. A lot of people can drive fancy cars, but buying a boat is tops.

Caroline: Call me when you get it!

Terry: I was talking to a friend the other day. He told me that he didn't grow up rich. But he also said he grew up with a nanny taking care of him.

Jamie: Wow. That's a pretty obvious **status symbol**.

Terry: That's what I told him. But he said that where he comes from, everybody has a nanny.

Jamie: What? Next time you see him, ask him if his nanny had a nanny, too. I doubt it.

Terry: Yeah. He just doesn't realize how privileged he was.

To speak for everyone

Idiom

At one point in this episode, Suzanne offers her opinion on whether she found school uniforms restrictive. After saying she didn't find them restrictive, she adds, "I can't **speak for everyone**." This expression is a common way to announce that what you just said is only your opinion and that someone else might have a different idea.

This expression can also be said in its positive form. For example, it is common to say I think I **speak for everyone** when you are pretty sure you are offering the opinion most people in your group share.

Here are a couple more examples with **to speak for everyone**:

Fay: Why are there 50 cheeseburgers in the break room?

Alan: I ordered them for the office party this afternoon.

Fay: Why would you do that?

Alan: Sheila said that everyone would love it.

Fay: She doesn't **speak for everyone**. Next time, I think you should consult us first.

Sandeep: What's going on? You seem down.

Wilfred: I don't think I'm good for this position. I'm not happy with the work I'm producing.

Sandeep: Are you kidding? I think I **speak for everyone** around the office when I say you are doing an amazing job. We're lucky to have you here.

Wilfred: Really? That's so nice of you to say. Thanks.

Dress code

Noun

Near the end of this episode, Andrew and Suzanne talk about the **dress codes** they had at their schools. A **dress code** is a set of rules that dictate what students can and can't wear at school. You can also have a **dress code** for restaurants, clubs, or special events.

Both schools with uniforms and without uniforms have **dress codes**. When talking about her public school's **dress code**, Suzanne talks about the rules regarding how long their shorts could be and a ban on clothing that revealed a lot of skin. Andrew talks about the double standard in his school. Most of the rules in his school's **dress code** targeted female students. The male students had much more freedom.

Here are a couple more examples with **dress code**:

Stan: Did you have to wear a uniform when you were in high school?

Valentina: I went to a private school, so, yeah, it was super strict.

Stan: Like how?

Valentina: Everything was regulated, from the length of the skirts to the colour of your shoes.

Stan: That sounds normal for a private school.

Valentina: Even the teachers had a strict **dress code**. The men had to wear a shirt and tie. The women wore blouses and long skirts.

Isaak: Thanks for inviting me to the gala on Saturday.

Vernon: It's my pleasure. I'm sure you'll love it.

Isaak: I have a question, though. Is there a **dress code** for the event?

Vernon: Oh, yes. I forgot to tell you. It's formal wear. You should dress up in your best suit. It's a pretty fancy crowd.

Insider Noun

At the end of this episode, Andrew says that Suzanne is a real **insider** on the topic of school uniforms. An **insider** is someone who has experience with something and therefore has intimate knowledge of the topic. Suzanne is an **insider** on school uniforms because she had to wear one to attend school for many years. People usually use the word **insider** for specific topics. You wouldn't say that you are an **insider** on eating food, because everyone does that. However, you can say you are an **insider** on Argentinian food.

Here are a couple more examples with **insider**:

Sheldon: Are you all ready for your camping trip?

Wendy: Kind of. I feel like I might be missing something.

Sheldon: You should talk to my friend Kathy. She's a real **insider** when it comes to camping in the woods.

Wendy: Actually, that would be great. What's her number?

Zach: I heard you did some fencing when you were in college.

Wanda: A bit.

Zach: Cool. Then you're just the **insider** I need to talk to.

Wanda: Wait, wait. You might want to find someone else. I only did some basic training exercises. I definitely wouldn't consider myself an **insider**.

Zach: I see. Do you know anyone I can talk to?

Wanda: I might still have the contact info of the coach at the school. Give me a sec.

Quiz

1. In North America, what is a public school?

- a) a school where you pay a large fee
- b) a school for people who want to work with the public
- c) a school funded by the government
- d) a school partially funded by the government

2. Which of the following is NOT considered a status symbol?

- a) a first-class ticket to Aruba
- b) a double cheeseburger with extra tomatoes
- c) a pair of designer jeans
- d) a membership at an exclusive club

3. What is a driving force?

- a) something that forces you to tell the truth
- b) something you do when driving a car
- c) something you do at a driving range
- d) something that causes you do something

4. What is an insider?

- a) someone who can sneak inside organizations
- b) someone who has good knowledge on a topic
- c) someone who likes to read
- d) someone who doesn't like to go outdoors

5. True or false? A public school in the United Kingdom is the equivalent of a private school in Canada.

- a) true
- b) false

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. If you could relive your life, would you choose to attend a private school or a public school? Why?
2. What is your opinion on having uniforms in school?
3. What is your driving force in life?
4. What item do you own that is your greatest status symbol?
5. Do you consider yourself an insider on anything? What is it?

Quiz Answers

1. c 2. b 3. d 4. b 5. a

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