

Special article:

The Challenge of English Reading Skills Development

Reading and its companion skill, writing - the twin components of literacy - are essential parts of our lives because they are the gateway to learning and productivity in today's information age. Reading and writing open the door to academic advancement and job success and, as a primary vehicle for cultural literacy, shape our leisure time as well. High/Scope embraces the lifelong value of reading and writing for learning, exploration, personal expression, and pleasure. Longitudinal research shows that when children learn to read and write in an educational environment that builds on their personal interests and motivations, they can succeed in school, lead rewarding lives, and become contributing members of society.

While we think of the next billion dollars that IT-enabled services could rake in for India, the state of English teaching and learning in India merits urgent attention. Human resource skilled in English is India's vital competitive resource and comparative advantage. The state of English teaching and learning in India, to put in one word is 'pathetic.' If our graduates cannot compose couple of sentences of their own in English, there is something seriously wrong either with teaching or learning of English that needs urgent attention. Realising that knowledge of English holds the key to growth and even equality of opportunity in today's knowledge economy, countries like China have taken up the teaching of English on a war footing. India must maintain and harness its competitive advantage of human resource skilled in English. Hundreds of skilled people are losing vital career opportunities for want of required excellence in the English language. (The occasional shortage skilled human resource in India is not because there are no people with functional expertise. Many have functional expertise but lack fluency and accuracy to express it. What you cannot state clearly, you do not know.)

In India, the medium of instruction in the majority of rural and urban schools is the regional language. English is now introduced as a second or third language at the primary level in almost all these schools. However, even after 5-6 years of its compulsory study, many high school students are unable to speak, read or write simple English phrases and sentences. Consequently, access to higher education and employment, and almost the entire spectrum of scientific and technical knowledge, which requires basic English is restricted. For most of these urban and rural students, who predominantly come from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, access in the future to the world of computers and the Internet will also be limited.

Given its critical functional importance in the contemporary world, there is a great demand for English in urban and rural India. (Even poor households strive hard to send their children in English medium schools. That is why schools run by local self government bodies are falling empty.

There are Zhila Parishad Schools where there are four students and six teachers!)

Students in school are keen to learn English as a second language, but their aspirations are crushed by an unresponsive educational system. The causes for their low acquisition of English are many, including the quality of textbooks and paucity of supplementary instructional and reading materials.

But the principal cause for their learning deficiencies is the extremely poor standards of the teaching of English as a second language in many rural and urban schools. As the teachers who teach English have a very limited knowledge of the language itself, little English is spoken in the classroom. Only the prescribed English textbook is transacted in the classroom, and much of that is explained in the regional language, which is also the medium of instruction for all other subjects. Moreover, the pre-service training of teachers has not equipped them to teach English as a second language. Opportunities at present for improving English teaching are fairly limited, as in-service training and other avenues of professional development are extremely inadequate. (When students from regional languages join junior colleges (HSC) they have to study subjects like science and commerce in English. These students study English as their Third Language and now they have to study all subjects in English with the students who have been studying English as their First language since their first standard! These regional language students develop very destructive, soul crushing inferiority complex and in most of the cases helplessly lag behind.)

It is important and a great challenge to impart basic functional skills in English to students studying in schools where the medium of instruction is one of the many Indian regional languages. Without basic English skills these students are handicapped in terms of opportunities for higher education and employment, and access to various bodies of knowledge and to new technologies. The challenge is serious because teachers are not properly trained and equipped with knowledge to train students. This necessitates independent initiative.

It is the English knowing people of India, constituting less than 5 to 20% of the population, who have mainly profited from the communications, education and entertainment opportunities provided by the Internet. They will also be the main beneficiaries of the large number of Web-related businesses and jobs that will soon be generated.

The more Indian languages one knows, the more effective one is likely to be in most walks of life in India. One of these languages should be English. For without functional communication skills in English, many avenues of employment are closed. This is obviously the case in most managerial positions and the professions. English is also often required for a range of lower level occupations. It is needed wherever computers are being used in India - shops, government organisations and industrial assembly lines.

The case for work-related English is not so obvious in contemporary rural India. But like their urban counterparts, rural people are increasingly using consumer products and drugs, whose labels and instructions are invariably in English. But as our villages get more and more integrated with the outside world, knowing English will become an important asset. The computerisation of rural India and the increasing commercialisation of agriculture, with a thrust towards export, will bring with it a growing need for English communication skills. In this context, the most vital skill is the skills of reading and understanding English.

These trends are part of the ongoing liberalisation and globalisation of the Indian economy. In discussions on these emerging patterns, the average 10% of Indians who know English are invariably viewed as providing India with a comparative advantage. On the contrary, a functional knowledge of English will be important for many more Indians to know, especially the young, to meet the economic challenges of the next century. English is absolutely necessary to function in the global economy and, unlike India, many governments and industries abroad therefore are actively promoting a widespread use of functional English. But luckily this reluctance on the part of our government to promote English is not one that is shared by many of our citizens. Obviously English has become passport to high level, rewarding careers; a key that opens many global doors. As the language of international science, technology and trade, knowledge of English has emerged as a potent tool for rapid socio-economic empowerment. Lack of English will result in socio-economic inequality as it causes inequality of opportunity. English has become the mother tongue of the future. Equal access to English is going to be the crucial question in developmental strategies.

Everybody seems to want to learn English, from street children in Mumbai to tribals in Bihar. People now understand that learning English is important for survival and growth. And that it is one's important personal competitive advantage. (Any professional going for interviews for higher positions will vouchsafe for this.) Not surprising, given the importance of English in most walks of life. Aspirations for material possessions are now uniformly high in all strata of Indian society. Consequently, a whole range of private English medium schools have sprouted up all over urban and rural India. Many poor, but ambitious parents, living in urban slums and villages pay substantial fees to send their children to these schools, often nothing but substandard commercial teaching shops. Both knowledge and money allow the middle and upper classes to be more discriminating in their choice of schools. English medium boarding schools catering to the rural and urban middle classes and rich are flourishing.

The perceived need for English to improve one's social and economic position has also affected undergraduate and postgraduate education. The most prestigious courses in the humanities and sciences are still conducted in English. In professional education, English is almost exclusively the language of instruction. Selection procedures are heavily biased in favour of students knowing English.

So, should we be switching over the medium of instruction from regional languages to English in our schools, a recent option being considered by the J & K Government for government primary schools in the state? Or do we keep all the benefits of school education in the mother tongue, and ensure that most students acquire functional English communication skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing?

Surely the latter. Most regional medium schools in India teach English as a subject from the middle school stage onwards for five to six years. Good teaching in these years should ensure that most students at the end of Std. X should be competent in English.

But after 500-600 hours of instruction in English, many regional medium high school students are unable to speak, read or write even the most basic sentences in English. In Maharashtra, half of them fail in English at the SSC examinations, and thus in the examinations as a whole. English is also viewed as one of the most difficult subjects to pass in other states. Of the fortunate few who pass and join English medium colleges, many are haunted by their lack of English communication skills and diffident about improving them. Their college examination performance falls far below their innate potential, as their minimal English is rarely improved significantly by undergraduate English language courses.

So, what can be done? A major contribution can be made if we improve the teaching of English in most of our regional medium schools, constituting the vast majority of urban and rural schools in the country. We need to begin at the middle school stage. Regional medium students in Stds. V or VI in their pre-teens are eager to learn English, and have the facility to acquire a reasonable proficiency quickly. But after about 3 years of about 300 hours of instruction, many get dispirited as they are barely able to speak, read or write a few simple English sentences.

But what can we expect of our students if most of their teachers themselves do not know or speak English, nor are trained to teach it as a second language. Nothing beyond the sole inadequate English textbook is provided, and that too for the most part is taught in the regional language. This is an enormous problem to be tackled, and one that cannot be wished away. We need to take a fresh look at the recruitment and training of English teachers in our regional medium schools. Much more needs to be done to improve the teaching of English in our government regional medium schools.

This should be one of the main priorities of a larger policy to disseminate and democratise the use of English in India. Lack of action can only reinforce the economic and social divide between the haves, who know English, and the have-nots who don't. The opportunities for economic advancement for the latter will be even more limited in the future. (To refer to the past, the British rulers in India did not give English education to masses and especially to the Muslims. This caused the feeling of inferiority and inability and alienation and ultimately fear.). Lack of knowledge of English, the language of knowledge will result in 'Knowledge-inequality' which will be more harmful than the economic inequality and disparity.

Mother tongue education is facing a grave threat to its very survival. The urban middle class, and more and more of the ambitious poor, have deserted our regional medium municipal corporation schools for private English medium schools. A similar process of educational segregation is becoming visible in rural India. These unhealthy developments will continue, unless our mainstream government schools significantly improve the teaching and learning of all subjects, and English in particular. What would be counterproductive, as some states have done, is to begin teaching English earlier at the primary rather than the middle school stage.

We need to learn from countries like China and Japan that we can support mother tongue education, and also promote English vigorously in our schools. Any initiative to improve English in our government regional medium schools would be welcomed by most sections of Indian society. It would receive overwhelming support from slum dwellers, rural agricultural labourers and tribals who send their children to these our mainstream schools.

Primary education holds the key. It is in the primary education that the foundations for learning languages are laid. One vital area is reading skills development. The best measure of success and quality of primary education is to test the reading skills of students. This article focuses on the fundamental, vital life skill- the skill of proficient reading.

There is more to primary education than the acquisition of functional literacy and numeracy skills. But even these skills are not acquired by the vast majority of Indian children who complete four or five years of primary education in our Government schools. Millions of them do not even master the skills expected by the end of Std. II. Many are worse off, unable to read or write at all.

Without proficient reading skills, your children cannot make good progress in their studies. Mind you, just because your children are now in high school does not mean that they are good readers already. Just because they are good readers does not mean that they can understand what they read. Even adults have difficulties in reading and they have to face many problems in their study and work. (One very critical reason for files moving at snails pace is the poor reading skills of officer workers and their failure to process documents rapidly for want of proficient reading skills. Reading is more than reading text. One must be able to process text efficiently for understanding and thinking with it.)

Reading is related to children's overall development. When we speak of 'the development of children' we are talking about a whole range of developments that sometimes take place together, sometimes have surges and periods of rest, and sometimes seems to be in competition for prominence. The basic kinds of development may be listed as:

- ◆ physical
- ◆ intellectual
- ◆ language
- ◆ emotional
- ◆ personality
- ◆ social
- ◆ moral
- ◆ spiritual

Reading is a major influence that supports the development of children. The process of learning to read and reading with competence are concerned essentially with developing intellectual skills and abilities. Exposure to a large collection of informative books enables children to discover their own interests and passions. Reading gives them deep understanding of their self-identity and understanding to solve many conflicts. Reading lays the foundation for individuality. That is why reading is more than mere reading the text. Children must be able to read the lines, between the lines and beyond the lines.

Reading is Fundamental

Reading is a vital life skill. Reading is gateway to learning. It is the first chapter in education No other skills taught in school and learned by school children is more important than reading If children do not learn to read efficiently, the path is blocked to every subject they encounter in their school years. A child's self esteem is lowered which is very harmful for development and the growth of his individuality. Now we have breakthrough knowledge of how children learn to read and why so many fail. Poor reading skills affect study skills. Children with poor reading skills face downward learning spiral. Mind you, when your children enter into higher standards they will have to deal with very complex and challenging text. An individual's ability to process print includes basic reading skills and specialised reading skills are necessary for complex and challenging text like scientific text.

Improving reading skills for improving study skills

Due to poor reading skills study skills remain poor and as a result we have the stark fact that over 65% of India's children do not go beyond class VIII, and out of those who proceed beyond this stage, some 80% are declared 'failed' in the two public exams taken after class X and XII. Most of these students are downtrodden backgrounds. While almost every second child in India does not go to school with 40% population below poverty line, it is necessary to improve reading skills to improve study skills of those who go to school. India soon will have the awkward distinction of being the most illiterate nation in the world.

Reading to Learn

Students who do not "learn to read" during the first three years of school experience enormous difficulty when they are subsequently asked to "read to learn." If efficient reading skills are not developed by this time, the English language, history, mathematics, current events, and the rich tapestries of literature and science become inaccessible. The students remain deprived of them. In addition, a strong body of evidence shows that most students who fall behind in reading skills never catch up with their peers to become fluent readers. They fall further and further behind in school, become frustrated, and drop out at much higher rates than their classmates. They find it difficult to obtain rewarding employment and are effectively prevented from drawing on the power of education to improve and enrich their lives. Sadly very few seem to understand. Some educationist rank reading as more critical than mathematics. In other words, there is

general agreement among researchers and the public that all children must learn to read early in their academic careers.

The Challenges of Illiteracy

Students' reading problems are really widespread. Many students have learning disability and they require special help. Sadly there is no systematic authentic study of reading skills done in India.

In contrast to popular belief, reading failure is not concentrated among particular types of schools or among specific groups of students. Even good English medium school students have difficulties in reading. In short, the failure of a substantial number of students to learn to read during the critical first three years of school is a national problem—one that confronts every community and every school in the country.

A Common Stumbling Block: Phonemic Awareness

Whatever the reason children fail to read by the end of the third grade, most non-readers share a common problem. They have not developed the capacity to recognize what reading experts call phonemes. Phonemes are the smallest units of speech—the basic building blocks of speaking and writing. The word "cat," for example, contains three phonemes—the /k/, /a/, and /t/ sounds. Phonemes are often identical to individual letters, but not always. The word "ox," for example, has two letters but three phonemes—the /o/, /k/, and /s/ sounds.

Researchers have demonstrated that accomplished readers are adept at recognizing phonemes and putting them together to construct words and phrases. They do this quickly, accurately, and automatically. The absence of this critical linguistic skill makes it difficult for children to decode and read single words, much less sentences, paragraphs, and whole stories. Teaching phonemic awareness and discrimination among phonemes is imperative for all students.

Solutions in the Classroom

Teaching beginners to read must be highly purposeful and strategic. Effective techniques have been developed for helping students, including those with learning disabilities, to develop phonological awareness, word recognition, and other advanced skills required for reading.

Phonological awareness activities build on and enhance children's experiences with written (e.g., print awareness) and spoken language (e.g., playing with words). A beginning reader with successful phonological awareness and knowledge of letters ostensibly learns how words are represented in print.

Intervention for learners who have difficulty with phonological awareness must be early, strategic, systematic, and carefully designed. It must be based on a curriculum that recognizes and balances the importance of both phonics instruction and the appreciation of meaning. Many early readers will require greater teacher assistance and support. Teachers should provide students with lots of instructional support in the beginning stages of reading instruction, and gradually reduce the support as students learn more about reading skills. The ultimate goal is for students to read on their own without the help of a teacher.

A Balanced Approach

Unfortunately, it is not always easy for teachers to recognize students with reading difficulties. Few dispute the value of giving children opportunities to write, surrounding children with good literature, and generally creating a rich literate environment for students. But for many children this is not enough. Such children will have continued difficulty with reading unless they master the decoding skills associated with phonics instruction.

Research makes clear that children do not learn to read the way they learn to talk. Speech is a natural human capacity, and learning to talk requires little more than exposure and opportunity. In contrast, written language is an artifact, a human invention, and reading is not a skill that can be acquired through immersion alone. Beginning readers benefit from instruction that helps them understand that the words they speak and hear can be represented by written symbols—and that letters and the sounds associated with them, when combined and recombined, form words—just as they benefit from experiences that make reading fun.

Reading and writing: The Key to Success

Thus, learning to read and write is a process beginning in infancy and continuing into the elementary school years and also later years. Children learn to read and write by building on the complementary skills of speaking and listening. These interrelated skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing are captured in literacy development is social as well as cognitive. We write because we have something to say to others; we read to discover what others have to say to us. Learning to read and write should build on children's desire for interpersonal relationships as well as on their intellectual drive to communicate.

Children desire to share with others what is meaningful to them through reading and writing. Preschoolers not only learn about the tools of communicating in print (such as letters, sounds, and phonemes) but also become enthusiastic about reading for information and pleasure.

Children learn best by pursuing their own interests and following their natural curiosity about the world. We call this type of education "child-initiated" learning. Right approach in teaching reading and writing promotes the acquisition of these key academic skills. Reading and writing help children develop a sense of self, community, history, and future possibility. Reading and writing are also important in their own right as vehicles for discovery, expression, problem solving, and enjoyment. We must help children acquire reading and writing skills so they could exercise and enjoy these skills throughout their lifetime.

As already discussed, reading is the gateway to learning. Facility to understand and use written language has always been a prerequisite to the efficient acquisition of knowledge, and it is becoming increasingly important in today's information society. In the past, it may have been possible for persons who were illiterate to obtain a good job, support a family, and live a comfortable life, but those days are gone. Children who do not learn to read today can expect to live on the margins of society in every way.

Teaching children to read involves more than helping them to recognize the combinations of sounds and letters that make up individual words. Helping them to understand the meaning of words, alone and in combination, is a no less critical part of the process.

Indian schools thus face a new and monumental challenge. For the first time, educators are being asked to bring all students to a level of performance that was demanded of only a relatively few students in the past. Educational and political leaders must understand this challenge, and a major effort must be undertaken to raise the standard of teaching and learning English in our schools. Improved reading instruction with right teacher training is crucial to this process.

Attaining such goals also means that ways must be found to address the learning needs of those students who, for whatever reasons, face difficulties in learning to read. Doing so is not only a matter of equity; it is also a practical necessity if the overall objectives of improving Indian education as a whole are to be met. All students must start reading as soon as they are developmentally ready to do so, and they must build on basic reading skills as they move into higher grades

Toward a Nation of Readers

We are living at a pivotal time in the history of Indian education. More than ever before, schools are being asked to deliver a higher level of education and to do so for all students. Meeting this challenge requires that the process of "learning to read" be securely underway for virtually all students by the end of the third grade. Recent gains in our knowledge of the reading process have given us the tools to help the majority of students, including those with learning disabilities, to learn to read at the level required to function as effective individuals, workers, parents, and citizens in today's world. The challenge is to put this new knowledge in the hands of teachers, parents, and school administrators so that millions of our school students become efficient knowledge worker.

- Prakash Almeida

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