

***Bridging the Reading Gap:
Investigating Pedagogical Approaches in Language Classrooms***

Liao Feng Jiao, Panjab University, India
Kuldeep Kaur, Panjab University, India

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Abstract

Chandigarh Administration's 2020 report highlights a troubling dropout rate of over 10% of students aged between 14 to 18 in Burail. Furthermore, ASER's 2023 report highlights that nearly 25% of students aged between 14-18 struggle to read text fluently. This issue is particularly prevalent among students from low-income families who face various challenges in obtaining a quality education (Sarojadevi & Subramanian, 2018). The present study aims to examine the instructional strategies in English language classrooms and their impact on the development of reading skills among students studying in Burail school. This school presents a special case with many students who are first generation learners dealing with challenging home environments due to parental substance abuse, domestic issues, diverse backgrounds, languages and other socio-economic difficulties. The study adopts a case study approach, using a detailed qualitative analysis through interviews with teachers and students, observations in the classroom, reviews of educational materials and students' work. The study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how students' reading skills are being shaped within their complex personal and social environments, along with the pedagogical approaches used in the language classroom. The case study identifies the needs of learners and accordingly seeks to identify effective teaching methods that can enhance their reading skills. The findings in this study offer insights into teaching strategies that could support and empower students facing similar challenges, thereby improving their academic and linguistic competencies for educational and personal development.

Keywords: Reading Gap, Instructional Strategies, First Generation Learners

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Introduction

While the National Education Policy of India has helped increase enrolment rates to 90.1% in Chandigarh as per UDISE+ 2021-22 report and from 23.6% to 78.81% nationwide from 1971 to 2022, as per UNESCO via World Bank. The updated National Education Policy 2020 expands compulsory schooling requirements from 6-14 to 3-18 years old, in accordance with Article 21A of the Indian constitution, which requires free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14. The goal of the NEP is to reach a Gross Enrolment Ratio of 100% in pre-school to secondary levels by 2030 and to also see a 50% boost in higher education by 2035. However, challenges persist in enhancing educational standards and tackling concerns such as dropouts, disinterest, and limited higher education prospects. Just looking at enrolment numbers might not be enough, since educational outcomes and quality also play important roles in determining student success. The 2020 report from the Chandigarh Administration reveals that students aged between 14 to 18 are leaving school at a rate of more than 10% and ASER's 2023 also reports that more than 25% of students find it hard to read. Reading is an essential ability for a student's academic performance and personal growth. This problem is found in students coming from low-income families, who face various obstacles in getting a good education (Ferguson et al., 2007; Hair et. al, 2015; Sarojadevi & Subramanian, 2018; Xiao et. al, 2022).

Background

Burail, situated in Chandigarh, India, is known for its mostly low-income residents, making it one of the urban slum. The typical urban slum household earns around INR 8,000 (USD 110) average monthly, with many residents working in informal jobs like daily wage labour, domestic work, selling goods and services on a small scale and mothers work as maids (Prakasam, 2013). As per the Slum Census of 2011, around 25% of the city's residents still remain below the poverty threshold. These people allocate a substantial 80% of their constrained earnings towards essentials like food and energy, resulting in little financial means to handle the increasing expenses of surviving in a society becoming more and more centred around money. Additionally, Shalini (2022) states that almost 89% of children observe parental disagreements or household conflicts and fights caused by limited living space, rigidly assigned gender roles, and their socio-economic status, involving various forms of violence such as physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual abuse. Hence, students encounter a range of difficulties like overcrowding, difficult home situations, lack of basic resources and insufficient educational facilities (Prakasam, 2014; Arora, 2016).

Findings

1. The Current Instructional Strategies Used in English Language Classrooms in Burail School

(a) **Conventional and Convenient Pedagogy.** As per the researcher's observation, conventional and convenient techniques were practiced such as reading aloud, clarifying definitions and writing on the board when required. Chapter reading was done mostly by student's who were good in reading. Also, there was no rotational reading practice. Here are the supporting excerpts from the interview that students testify that there is no turn basis of reading in the classroom:

Amit said, “*Madam, ek ya do baccho se chapter padhati hai jo reading mein ache hai*” (Teachers will make only one or two student read the chapter who are good in reading.)

Karan said, “*ek ya do bacche read karte hai, jo padne mein acche hai*” (Only one or two students read, who are good in reading.)

The classroom instruction was more teacher-oriented. There was very less discussion on real life examples for better relevance. There was lack of expression, intonation and the feel to connect with the story characters. Bilingualism was used to aid student comprehension of sentences or stories, students do not take notes in class; instead, they wait for the teacher to give them answers to write down for homework or they search for it online. Also, there was no group tasks or activities/ reflective activities nor any emphasis on additional book reading recommendations were given.

(b) **Lack of Resources and Accessibility.** Researcher also observed that the students weren't allowed to go to library but were suggested to look for online resource. When the researcher asked about library period from the students they responded “*koi library period nahi hai*”. So that means there is lack of resources and accessibility to reading. Additionally, there is no book recommendation for students for any leisure reading by teachers. Moreover, the school offers sports club, eco club and NSS but lacks a reading club, reading workshops, spelling or story competitions or any form of storytelling especially in English.

(c) **Knowledge-Based Teacher Training.** There are teacher training programs conducted by CBSE and other teacher training platforms like DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) but the teachers find it tedious after a long day work and other administrative duties. Many a times these trainings are just knowledge add-ons and lacks the practical aspects required in training.

2. The Impact of the Current Instructional Strategies Being Used

(a) **Lack of Interest and Motivation.** These existing strategies doesn't have much impact on the students in fact they limit the learnings in the students such as less interactive opportunities and less engagement with text. As student do not find the English stories and texts engaging or relevant to them. They form a belief that English is too difficult and become disinterested in making an effort. Here are some of the excerpts from the interview:

Amit said, “*Mai English pad leta hu lekin mushkil shabd nahi. Kabhi kabhi dubhara padna padta hai samajh ne ke liye, aur jab samajh nahi aata toh mera interest chale jata hai*” (I can read English but not difficult words. Sometimes, I have to re-read again to understand and if I am not able to understand then I lose interest.)

Arjun said, “*Grammar mushkil lagta hai, sentence bnane me mushkil lagta hai aur kabhi kabhi kuch shabd bolne mein confusion hoti hai*” (I find grammar difficult, sentence making is also difficult and sometimes I get confused on how to read few of the words.)

Karishma said, “*mujhe English mushkil lagti hai, main blank ho jati hu*” (I find English difficult and I become blank.)

Also, rote learning becomes the focus instead of understanding. There is lack of reflective activities, additional resources and additional reading and story-telling workshops. Karan adds “*padne ka iccha nahi hai, kyuki meri baadi nahi ayegi*” which means there is no desire to read because I know my turn to read will not come.

(b) **Exam-Oriented Approach.** The emphasis appears to be on covering the curriculum and getting ready for exams instead of enhancing fundamental skills. Students strive to acquire sufficient English skills solely for the purpose of passing exams and teaching is also solely done for the minimum required marks needed for passing English. When the researcher asked how they try to learn for English exams? Here are some of the excerpts that the students responded:

Karishma said, “*main paanch ya che baari likhti hu aur English sentence yaad karne ki koshish karti hu*” (I write the sentences five to six times and try to memorize the statements in English.)

Mamta said, “*main yaad karti rehti hu jab lekin tab bhi bhool jati hu*” (I try to keep memorizing again and again but still I forget.)

Anupam said, “*main ya toh youtube istamal karte hu ya fir yaad karta hu*” (I use youtube or I try to memorize.)

Karan said, “*agar samajh nahi ata to bas ese hi sentence yaad karta*” (if I don’t understand then I just memorize.)

(c) **Lack of Career Goals and Guidance.** Students share that they desire to see themselves successful, also they believe that if they know English then they will get a decent job. They associate English with status and a white collar job as shared by the following students. Three of the students among them are not sure what they want to do in life, while the rest of them know what they desire to do in life but have no directions.

Amit said, “*English jaruri hai agar mujhe successful hona kyuki customers se baat karni hoti hai, aur jinko English aati hai, unko job asaani se milti hai*” (English is important if I want to be successful as it is needed to speak with customers and knowing English will easily get me a job.)

Arjun said, “*Agar mujhe bade company aur office mein kaam karna hai toh English jaruri hai*” (If I want to work with a big company or office then English is important.)

Also in opposition to the above statement:

Karan said, “*Mujhe pta nahi kya karunga magar English jaruri nahi hain, idhar ke log sab Hindi bolte hai*” (I don’t know what I want to become but English is not important, people over speak Hindi.)

Karishma said, “*English jaruri hai magar mujhe nahi pta kya karna hai, dekhti hu job options available hoga toh usse karungi*” (English is important but I don’t know what I want to do. Let’s see whatever options will be available, I will take that up.)

These students may find it difficult to picture themselves achieving academic success or following specific career paths without seeing successful individuals from similar backgrounds as examples (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). The absence of guidance can also restrict their chances to connect with valuable networks and opportunities that can help with their personal and professional development (Stephens et al., 2014).

3. Specific Challenges Being Faced by Students in Developing Reading Skills

(a) **Language Barriers.** A large number of students have limited English exposure at home as they come from non-English speaking backgrounds. This hinders their ability to comprehend the language at school. All the students have shared their plight of not being able to read and speak English confidently as there is no one speaking this language at home or even in school.

(b) **Unhealthy Home Environment.** The majority of students originate from low-income households dealing with different socioeconomic challenges such as substance abuse, family members in jail, financial hardships, etc. This results in a disruptive and unhelpful setting for concentrating on academic work at home.

As per the case of Karishma, her father died as he was alcoholic and he also used to mistreat her mother. Her mother left her at an early age and then her aunt brought her with her to this area. The financial hardships, lack of resources, lack of space and the mental trauma of being left behind makes it challenging for her academic growth.

Another case is of Mamta, where her 2 elder brothers are drug addicts, the eldest one has died because of it and the younger one is also in it. These issues are add on's that stress her out where she is not able to concentrate much in her studies. At the back of her mind, she worries about her brother or being jailed for dealing in drugs.

In Shubham's case, his father is a drug addict, his father is always getting himself in trouble and associates himself with theft and different gangsters in the area. He is worried for his father. When his father is not in drugs, he is a wonderful father but he cannot escape this situation.

Also, at a general and occasional level, these students also see lots of arguments and disputes between parents and other elders in their room, these instances makes the environment unhealthy shaping a negative purview towards life for any child growing in this area.

Lack of space is also another concern that does not promote reading or studying in a general sense, as stated by the students that they live in one room with their parents and siblings, where TV, talking, cooking and guests visits and other things are going on simultaneously, limited access to basic amenities and inadequate educational resources can further compound the difficulties they face in acquiring language skills and developing reading proficiency (Prakasam, 2014; Arora, 2016).

(c) **Migration From Rural to Urban.** Research also indicates that moving from the rural area to an urban city can create difficulties for migrant children due to language barriers, making it hard for them to understand lessons, take part in classroom conversations, and finish tasks (Geva & Yaghoub, 2006; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Calderón et al., 2011). Additionally, a recent report from the National Statistical Office (NSO), Ministry of Statistics

and Programme Implementation, Government of India, indicates that a significant number of families relocated from rural areas to urban areas in search of better job prospects during the period from July 2020 to June 2021. Approximately 18.9% of these families opted to relocate to urban areas, typically establishing homes in slums in the urban cities with cheaper rent. This shift poses fresh obstacles, particularly for students who are now attending schools where the language used for teaching is not the same as their native language. Unfortunately, there are currently no concrete plans or initiatives established to assist these relocated children in the city (Pandey, 2021).

(d) **Three Language Formula.** The three language formula in the Indian education system, aims to promote national integration and multilingualism. Even though this implementation is admirable to make the students multilingual but ground reality is completely different, it is far more complex and challenging especially for students who come from low socio-economic background and are first generation learners, lacking the necessary support. The current style of teaching and the syllabus entails more emphasis on learning rules of grammar and vocabulary which often leads to rote learning and neglecting practical communication skills in any of the languages. Here are some experts from the students' interview:

Karishma said, *“Apni Hindi main grammar confusing lagta hai, usse jada English, uppar se tisra subject Punjabi samajhne me bahut time lag jata hai”*(I still find Hindi grammar confusing, English even more and now I have to learn Punjabi, it's time confusing.)

Amit said, *“humko main subjects jese maths, science, social science ke saath saath teen aur language bhi seekhna pad raha, bahut stressful lagta hai”* (We have to study main subjects like maths, science, social studies and on top of that three languages which becomes stressful.)

Anupam in sarcastic tone said, *“ese lagta hai ki hume language ka gift mila hai, sab language bolenge”* (It feels like we are gifted in languages and we'll speak in all the language.)

Karan said, *“bahut se shabd mein confusion hone lagti hai. Teeno bashay ko main mix kardeta hu, kabhi kabhi ese bhi lagta koi bhi basha mujhe acche se nahi aati”* (I find many words confusing. I often mix these three languages word with one another. Sometimes I feel like I don't know any language properly.)

4. The Underlying Gaps That Remain Unnoticed in the Teaching and Learning Practice

(a) **Feeling of Inadequacy.** As students have stated that teachers choose only one or two students who are better in reading than them are chosen in the class to read, may create a sense of being inadequate in their ability to read due through such perceived observations. This internalizes a belief of not being good enough and thereby reducing confidence. Since there is a lack of engagement and participation, the students interest will overtime decrease and feel as if the student's presence doesn't matter much to the teacher. This also highlights the lack of exposure of practice and unequal opportunities for the students in the classroom.

(b) **Weak Student – Teacher Bond.** A weak student-teacher bond can affect the communication, mutual understanding and trust between students and teachers. The students' are reluctant to ask for help from the teacher which may have stemmed from teacher's non-

availability or may be influenced by feelings of discomfort, shyness or a fear of judgment, which could prevent them from seeking much-needed support in learning.

(c) **State of Hopelessness.** Since these students come from low socio economic background, also being first generation learners, with lack of space; lack of opportunities in and outside the classroom, at the same time managing their home and school responsibilities especially for students with traumatic experiences creates a sense of hopelessness of dealing with situations that are not in their control.

(d) **Need for Caring and Kind Attitude From Teachers.** A caring and kind teacher can actually motivate and instil faith in students who feel discouraged in life or think less of themselves. As Amit and Arjun shared they want their teachers to motivate them and give attention to all students, not few. The students neutral response and the lack of positive experiences indicates the lack of emotional care and support or an emotional disconnection.

Recommendations and Conclusion

1. Social- Emotional Connection and Teacher's Belief on Students

The interaction between teachers and students is an important element in the classroom. During the time in school, students have the learn to develop their emotional intelligence by receiving feedback from teachers while interacting and communicating with them, which can help them learn how to express and manage their emotions effectively. However, if teachers do not build this mutual trust, belief and empathy, then this might affect the students' emotional and social well-being. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers should have a good understanding of the significance of emotions, both their own and their students, how they respond and portray their belief system through their actions and responses can affect the students overall. This greatly impacts the social, emotional, and cognitive growth of children (WAN et. al, 2023; Seery, 2019; Poulou, 2015).

2. More Practice Oriented Syllabus

Such methods emphasize more on pronunciation, syntax, and word selection through verbal communication, reading, and writing lessons. However, there is a deficiency in focusing on communication and interaction among students during practical activities. As more language teaching methods have been introduced, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has become quite popular in different language learning institutions. The CLT approach in language education is a successful method that emphasizes interaction-based learning, using texts for practice and connecting classroom learning with real-life language use (Nunan, 1991; Santos 2020).

3. Differentiated Instruction

Teachers who practice differentiation believe that every child is unique and has their own individual learning style. They also have the option to tailor their instruction to align with the interests and strengths of the students. This instruction can help in promoting more culturally relevant teaching, that can aid in the literacy growth students from diverse backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gibbons, 2002; Nieto, 2009; Tomlinson, 2014; Gay, 2018).

4. Interactive Teaching Methods

Utilizing interactive teaching methods promote better learning and critical thinking. These strategies also enhance student involvement, enthusiasm and ability to remember. They encourage engagement, smaller group discussions, and communication abilities, which are crucial for achieving success (Gibbons, 2002; Walqui, 2006; Yamashita 2008; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Also use of real life everyday examples can make the text more relatable. Through the utilization of these strategies, students gain the ability to manage their own learning and develop into self-sufficient learners, a valuable skill that will serve them in all facets of life (Kamran et. al., 2023).

5. Bridging Courses and Remedial Classes

The bridging courses and remedial lessons can help students with language barriers can help them cope up with language gap of understanding. Also in addition, mentorship to students can also aid in their language learning (Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Vijayakumar, 2020).

6. Collaborative Learning

Working together in groups has been proven to help both younger and older students in many different subjects. It's especially helpful for students who are still learning English. These group activities allow them to talk about the lesson and practice using English in a comfortable environment. Some students may feel nervous about speaking in front of the whole class, but in a small group, they feel more at ease and can learn from their peers (Calderón et al., 2011; Roberson & Kleyhans, 2019).

7. Use of Technology

Interactive whiteboards, gamified learning like in applications like Duolingo and many more. Educational Shorts and Reels and some free online courses are also helpful in learning new words and phrases in language learning (Ibrahim & Jadaan, 2024).

8. Reduce Administrative Workload of Teachers

Teachers with much of administrative responsibilities are often seen giving less time for instructional preparation and feedback provision for students. There is a heavy burden and burnout on teachers which have to offer the best in both- teaching and administration. Administrative duties often overshadows the teaching which adversely affects the students learning (Kyung-Nyun, 2019; Kanwal et. al, 2023).

In conclusion, the reading gap among first-generation learners from low-income families in Burail is a complex issue requiring a multifaceted approach. Challenges such as ineffective pedagogy, lack of motivation, language barriers, and limited resources are evident. Current instructional strategies have limited impact on reading skill development. To address this gap, collaborative efforts among school stakeholders, including differentiated instruction, interactive teaching methods, and technology integration, are crucial. By fostering an engaging learning environment and addressing social and economic factors, we can empower these students to succeed academically. This study calls for further research and action to ensure equitable education for all students, emphasizing the importance of continuous evaluation and collaboration to bridge the reading gap effectively.

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