

# CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF ELT WITH FOCUS ON READING AND SPEAKING SKILLS OF THE RURAL STUDENTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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## Abstract

Creation of natural environment of acquiring the targeted language under the guidance of trained faculty, mixed bag approach and well-designed curriculum is indispensable as we lack this scenario in all the rural areas. Crowded classroom is another major challenge that needs innovative approach to make the language learning easier and interesting. Research has to be done taking samples from rural areas to experiment novel methods of enhancing reading and speaking skills through integration of various forms of literature laying emphasis on reading which is the basis of speaking and writing. Efforts should be made to make the process of language acquisition in a simple and fun-loving environment through meticulously framed activities that will develop a penchant towards language, laying the path to extensive and intensive reading of literature which caters to skill development, creativity, knowledge, multiculturalism, global citizenship etc., in the later stages of their lives. Learning English language by associating with the indigenous culture and literature facilitates the stressless learning of language in the initial stage where an instant connection can be established. An attempt can be made to sow the seed of appreciating the literature at an early age among rural students through narration of stories and participation in dramas where there is an amalgamation of theater in which language and literature work parallelly resulting in development of contextual language and character building. Survey has shown that children between 2-8 years have immense ability of grasping the language. Curriculum needs to be designed considering these aspects as well so that we use this time gap to tap and retain their interest in language learning through online language games, phonetics, pictures, stories and in relation to environment. Artificial Intelligence should become an integral part of the learning process though it comes with a challenge in terms of affordability and misuse. This can be compensated in the proposal made by NEP 2020 on integration of art and sports, a cross-cultural pedagogical approach as a basis of learning concepts across subjects which can be applied to language learning as well.

**Keywords:** Mixed bag approach, rural students, reading and speaking skills, pupil-teacher ratio, inadequate teacher training, NEP 2020

## INTRODUCTION

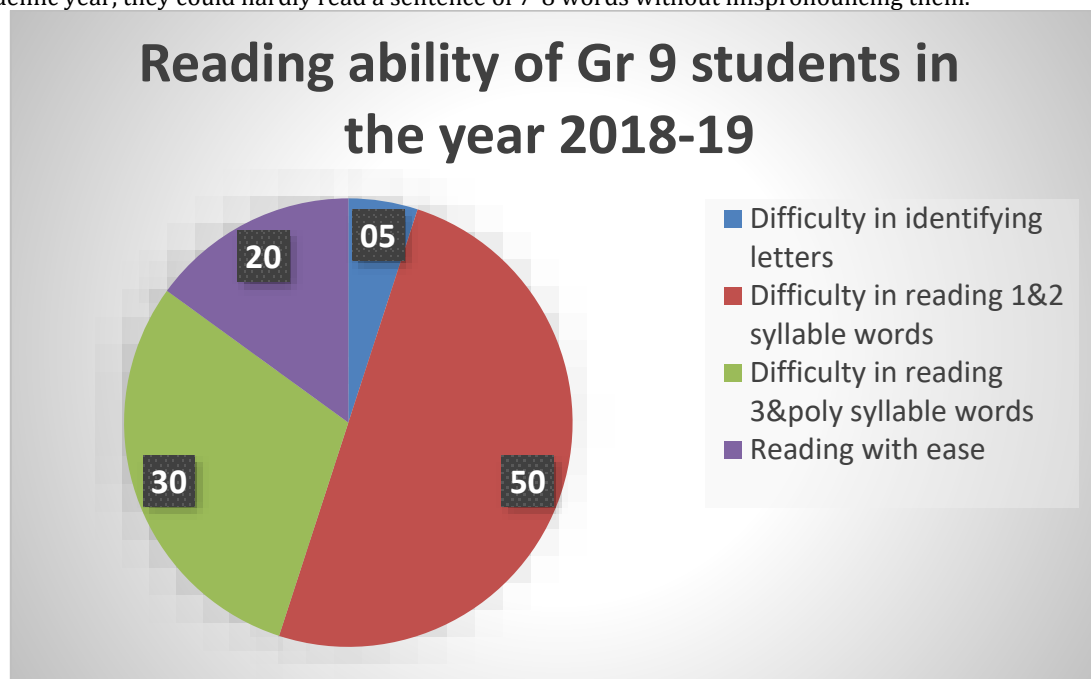
The concept of acquiring the language has travelled from acquisition in the natural environment to experimenting scientific approaches of language learning. However, there has been an incessant struggle on developing methods and strategies to make the foreign language or English language learning easier and entertaining. Efforts have been made to create a penchant towards English language at an early stage. The children who are exposed to English environment since their early stage of education are apparently fluent in communication. With further motivation and practice there could be an enhancement in their speaking and writing skills. Unfortunately, students from rural areas lack this exposure. Therefore, it poses a great challenge for the students in rural areas to acquire the language in subconscious process. My focus would be on how to improve reading & speaking skills of school students from rural background.

At primary level, children are being taught language as a subject than as a medium of communication. So, they end up rote learning the answers. At later stage, the anxiety and pressure of acquiring English language act as a major barrier in mastering the language. Having said this, one needn't achieve 100% in language. Majority of English teaching fraternity and the stake holders expect a whopping cent percent in par with other subjects while there could be a balance of effort invested between learning language and other subjects like math and science. Language acquisition shouldn't be associated with stress factors of other subjects. At the same time, it need not add stress to the learning of science and math. Instead, usage of mother tongue in teaching Math and science could be of a greater help in understanding the application of science and math as stated in NEP2020. If a student acquires LSRW skills and if she can communicate through these skills, that would be a reasonable achievement to support her higher studies and to help in professional development which is a gradual process that isn't achieved through solving any equation or applying any formula. Patience and continuous exposure to language learning environment should be created till their UG level.

It is a continuous process involving curriculum, teaching ability, conducive environment, motivation and guidance. Designing a curriculum needs a meticulous planning that caters to variety of learners based on the age group, locality, history in terms of their medium, literacy background of parents, former standards. If language is acquired in natural learning environment where the students grow up listening to, reading, writing and speaking English, it wouldn't be a challenging task to the students. Unfortunately, the children from rural areas are hardly exposed to English environment. They often come from a background where the parents lack education and awareness. They are not sent to preschool where they would otherwise have listened to the phonetics of English language at least to acquire it naturally from surroundings. As they grow up, they find the language more alienating. Paradox here is when they know, they should have acquired most of it by now but didn't result in anxiety and instead of trying to learn it, they start disassociating for another reason as well which is pressure of learning other subjects. There are different scenarios here - a child from rural area lives in an estrangement from the English-speaking world. They have to either study in a nearby school run by the government or a private school run for benefits. I would continue my focus on schools run by the government.

## CHALLENGES

Let's analyze a bit of primary schools which has strength less than 50. In rationalization, for 30, one teacher is allotted to train them in all the subjects. They are put in one class irrespective of their standard and are taught in a group. This is how the most important years between 2-8 are lost in emptiness instead of catering to their cognitive skills. Their thought process is only dominated by the immediate exposure to illiterate parents, field work, nil thinking and motivation, no inspiring stories or acquaintance with professions. Even if they consult a doctor or any other professional, they would never aspire to be one. They find themselves distant from any association with real education, participation in curricular and extra-curricular activities. Insufficient teachers are their only source of learning who are themselves vexed handling a heterogeneous age group and all the subjects. Poverty is another reason which forces them into child labour, thus, depriving them of not only education but also childhood. Some of them could get into unwanted adult company and pick wrong perception of values. This affects their ethical system and could lead to the child becoming a threat to the society. Unless the child attends the school, neither education nor language can be taught. Moral values and soft skills are assimilated through language learning which can be sown at an early age of their schooling. Even if the great minds endeavor to pull in the children through scrupulous curriculum, one should ask if teachers are upgraded to fit in this shift system from teacher centered to student centered to learning centered. This is a major challenge! Have the methodologies and approaches been updated to suit the trend? Are we providing sufficient training to the teachers to enhance their skills in order to communicate effectively with the students? When the students of 9<sup>th</sup> standard were tested in their reading skills during the bridge course in the beginning of the academic year, they could hardly read a sentence of 7-8 words without mispronouncing them.



One can understand the pathetic condition of their speaking and writing skills. What must have gone wrong? The teacher who teaches 9<sup>th</sup> now, blame it on upper primary teachers who shift the blame to primary while they shift the blame to students and parents! Let's not focus much on blame game here instead think about how to improve

their reading and speaking skills even if they come with not even basic knowledge of language. This is a challenging task to all of us. However, nothing can be denied which was in the blame game. Enough has been discussed on blaming the students of their illiterate and rural background. What happens to a student who is promoted to upper primary school with poor LSRW skills? Bridge course improves the students in LSRW but how far does it help in bridging the real gap of 4-5 years! There is also pressure of completing the syllabus. It is disappointing to issue story books of Level 1-4 to 9<sup>th</sup> standard students. At this ratio, level 1-5 books can only be issued to 6<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> standard while we see that students from urban areas can dig deep into volumes of Harry Potter series and Seven Habits of Highly Influential People. How does this condition change? It doesn't change in the either way of over burdening the teachers or students. The pupil-teacher ratio that very well represents our popularity in population census, is another hindrance in language learning which kills the objective of interactive classrooms. In such scenario, the child has to wait for his turn to read or speak. It is not strange to identify children in 9<sup>th</sup> standard having a problem with identifying letters. Where does this problem come from – primary, upper primary or high school? How can this be sorted out at this level needs a deep study.

## NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2022

NEP 2020 favours the medium of instruction in mother tongue till Grade 5 which would lead to some doing well in upper primary and high school while some struggling to cope up with subjects like math and science which are in English medium so the language learning is sidelined. Diving deeper into NEP 2020 we get further clarity on its criteria on limiting of English language which is evident in recommendation of bilingual teaching of science and mathematics so that students learn the concepts easily. However, I contradict with my own statement of limiting the English language if my former statement carries any negative connotation since the same can be applied to learning English as well. There are various methods and approaches to teaching language and every approach or method comes with a drawback. So, it is a basic idea that language teacher should be trained well enough to use a mixed bag of approach considering the level of students. Based on experience, though not so often, one can use old methods if they suit the set of students we are dealing with. It is important to rote learn verb forms like tables are done in math (understand logic at the same time). An experiment was done using conventional teaching methods; it is proved that they are necessary in teaching certain aspects of language to particular bunch of students. NEP recommends gamification and usage of apps in learning language which is pertinent and effective in current context as Artificial Intelligence is an integral part of the learning process though it comes with a challenge in terms of affordability. This can be compensated in the proposal made again by NEP 2020 on integration of art and sports, a cross-cultural pedagogical approach as a basis of learning concepts across subjects which can be applied to language learning as well.

To combat the dominance of English language, 2 Indian languages are made mandatory under its three-language formula which would keep the students abreast with their native culture and literature. This concept is leaning towards promoting cultural unity and multilingualism through exchange of other language literature. Though English is the global way of communicating, it didn't undermine the importance of regional and classical languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia which are loaded with rich literary wisdom useful in character building. A part of indigenous culture and literature can be associated with English language as well which could facilitate the stressless learning of language in the initial stage where an instant connection can be established. For example: a rural student would associate himself/herself with the character of 'Swamy' in 'Malgudi Days' than with 'Harry Potter'. However, special emphasis isn't laid in English language teaching except for innovative and experiential methods which includes games and apps though it comes with certain drawbacks of misusing of internet. As scientific approach is still underway, perhaps, NEP didn't rely on efficacy of scientific approach.

It targets on attainment of foundation literacy by Grade 3 but sadly, some students lack it even in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades. A National Mission on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy will be set up by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) on priority. Hopefully, making it as an emergency national mission, it would be prioritized and produce desired results. Library and Reading Campaign programs were initiated by the central government which is effective indeed if followed scrupulously by the individual schools as it witnessed students picking interest in reading. If this is followed from Grade 1, it would help in improving their standards which in turn will help them in understanding core subjects well. This could be necessary as state governments have autonomy to prefer their medium of instruction which is gradually getting upgraded to English. This step seems imperative considering the global relevance of English language.



Though NEP recommends pupil-teacher ratio of 1:30/25 to teach regional languages, implementation seems nearly impossible. This recommendation should extend to all the subjects including English language and grades from 1<sup>st</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> and ensured it is followed. Otherwise, agenda on how to deal with overcrowded classrooms need to be included in already planned professional development training of teachers. Talking about TTP, perhaps, a basic all India/State level test can be conducted to choose the best Resource Persons instead of recommendations and seniority as parameters. The training differs from urban to rural areas in terms of exposure, literacy background and attitude of rural community (polite utterance). Teaching rural students poses an altogether new challenge after the advancement of technology that reached their hands in the form of internet. A 6<sup>th</sup> standard student has access to unwanted knowledge which is detrimental to his personality and society and influences his moral and academic education. The picture we imagine of innocence exists among them but in a different way of not understanding what is important to them so teaching here prioritizes driving away known to unknown in a few cases that includes not just abuse of internet but bad company of idlers that motivates them towards picking bad habits like drinking, smoking, stealing, lying etc. which apparently pulls them away from education.

## STRATEGIES

Many methods and approaches have been researched and developed to improve speaking, reading and writing skills of the Indian learners. With the advent of IT & globalization, a whole new world of language has opened up with new additions, slangs, adoptions from other languages beautifying and making it a language of commoner. Though this is the urban scenario, it remotely reached the rural areas. The onus of improving the language skills of rural students still seem to wholly or mostly lie in the hands of curriculum designers and teachers.

When it comes to usage of methods and approaches, a teacher should be adept in adopting the suitable approach based on her/his classroom dynamics. As the study is on how to improve reading and speaking skills in rural students, allow me to make my inferences. A student who is exposed to English language as a major subject only in Grade 6 till which he had been studying in his mother tongue would be gripped by fear and anxiety on the negative side; willingness and enthusiasm on the positive side. Well, our study is on majority of those who experience fear and anxiety.

The introduction of language even at Grade 6 should be dealt in a play-way method that involves learning and fun. A bridge course of 2 months can be developed that includes rhymes, reading, phonetics, basic grammar, fun-based exercises, storytelling with actions and props, short and simple skits, speaking and writing activities involving simple topics with the clues given by the teacher etc. With the amalgamation of theater through narration of stories, script writing and participation in dramas, an attempt can be made to sow the seed of appreciating the literature at an early age in which language and literature work parallelly resulting in character building and development of contextual language. In order to improve the basic English skills, support classes were taken up for Grade 10 students who couldn't read or write basic sentences. Grade 1- 5 text books were given to those 12 students and were made to read aloud drawing their attention to how the words are spelled and pronounced. Though this isn't a novel approach but was prolific in the given situation. Gradually, the students in the support classes started reading on their own by relating to the words they have already spelt and read. There was a drastic change in the reading level of some students while others witnessed a noticeable change. This instilled confidence in them and they eventually picked up the language at an improved pace. If the same is applied in the reading activity of bridge course from Grade 6, results are inevitable. This fades fear among the students and creates interest towards the language. The same can be continued with higher standards of language till they reach Grade 10. The syllabus of the bridge course should be integrated in the text books itself which would ensure its implementation otherwise anything given extra is considered extra and kept aside.

As mentioned earlier, methods can be shuffled and mixed bag of it can be used to suit the needs of our students. For instance, instead of tagging that all the words which start with AEIOU take an as article and remaining letters take a as article, a different approach of teaching articles was taken in English grammar. Alphabet in our mother tongue Telugu were made use of. Telugu has achulu and halulu (aksharamala in Hindi). The sound of Achulu in telugu language runs parallel to the pronunciation of all those words that take an as article. The sound of halulu in our mother tongue runs parallel to the pronunciation of all those words that take a as article. Telugu can be replaced with Hindi (aksharamala) to produce the same learning outcome. This bilingual method has been put to proper use in driving in the concept which would be followed by exercises on application of the concept.

Direct method which can be called contrast of bilingual method is useful in improving speaking skills of the students where they are forced to think in English. In their struggle to find words to speak and understand what others speak, they dig their memory of words and sentences; relate it to the new words of communication and retain it forever. This was found to have drawbacks by Dr. Michael West's, professor in Dacca University who proposed loud and silent reading in his new method 'The New Method of Teaching English'. This is beneficial only if it is followed by testing the students in their comprehension ability. So, it needs to be properly monitored by the teacher. The target here isn't about listing the methods but is an attempt to show that every method has drawbacks and advantages. It is useful if it is applied in the right context.

According to Stephen Krashen's the Monitor Model theory which has five hypotheses, the Monitor Hypothesis connects the acquired system and learned system. This works when the students have already acquired language



but keep checking their speech to correct themselves. For this hypothesis to workout, primarily one should have acquired language which is witnessed in urban areas. The students from the rural areas have a different scenario. For instance, they often find it difficult to pronounce few words without mother tongue influence. For e.g., they pronounce against as againest and world as worold just like north Indians pronounce school as ischool. When the word call or draw is pronounced, we have to round our lips to do it correctly but we make a mistake as we don't have any sound equivalent to it. It needs practice of those sounds which is done through regular communication but they hardly communicate in English to practice and correct themselves. I recommend that drilling of such words and sounds that are not found in MT is important. These may sound as outdated approaches but slight inclusion of such approaches will only benefit the rural students. I would like to add a disclaimer here that the discretion of the teacher should be based on her/his thought on 'how will the student learn'.

As science is effective in producing desired results, linguists are applying scientific approach to teaching learning process which involves five steps of observing, questioning, associating, experimenting and networking (reference). Let us see how one can apply this controversial approach to language learning by taking a speaking activity:

A painting of an urban scene in the class was displayed for the students to observe. They observe and compare it with the village scene and knowledge is constructed. The second step is testing their knowledge in grammar, vocabulary and cognitive skills through questioning. Here, interaction takes place which highlights the concept of associating with the students where students are actively involved and come to a conclusion after discussion. How is experimenting done in language context? They are evaluated/assessed based on the knowledge acquired in observation questioning and associating. Then comes the final step of networking which has been applied throughout the initial process where there is collaboration among students and between teacher and students. The practicality and success rate of every piece of prose & poetry, vocabulary, grammar, creative expression, conventions of writing have to be experimented and measured. This reminds me of X-seed curriculum where every minute activity is planned for the teacher and students including the teaching material, display boards, quantity of content to be taught, method of teaching the content etc., The complete class transaction plan of 40-minute duration is spread explicitly in the curriculum. It needs more than scientific approach to learn language. Peer motivation can have the best influence on language learning but in rural areas we seldom find this concept as every student comes from the same background. In such circumstances, exchange programs in collaboration with private schools should be initiated. Rural students should be given a chance to interact with urban students for which platforms can be created. Students from urban areas can visit government schools and discuss subject knowledge. Similarly, rural students should be given an opportunity to interact with eminent people of the society – Collector, Commissioner, S.I, MLA etc. They can be taken on field trips to libraries and universities to motivate them further.

English is a glamorous language which every rural student fancies to speak but hesitate and hide in his/her cocoon. A mixed bag of methods and approaches as per the requirement of the students would produce the desired result. It is not the method or approach alone that need to be put under magnifying glass in ELT of rural students. Drop-out ratio has to be regulated. Pupil-teacher ratio has to be limited to 25-30 students. A wide exposure and opportunities have to be created to overcome fear and anxiety. Teacher and society need to be empathetic and support them; curriculum should be exclusively designed to bring them on par with the urban community; give them ample opportunities to improve and deal with them with a lot of patience.

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