

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

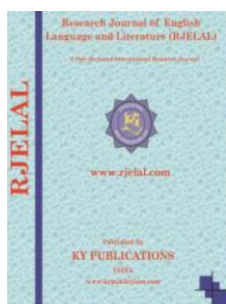
ENGLISH IN SCHOOLS OF JAIPUR: RISING PROMINENCE AND PLUMMETING PROFICIENCY

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.334>



ABSTRACT

India is a traditional land. A complex country with a myriad of cultures, traditions and practices entwined. Language is one such crucial component of the myriads of the multilingual Indian society. In the past decade, English has gained more significance than ever imagined. English has become vital to growth and development. As such, English-speaking is a major trend in India in general and in Jaipur in particular. There is a desire to learn and speak English. The access to English has widened - but so have the implications. It is important that the decision makes and policy makers do not focus on the immediate economic requirements, but rather prepare a well-planned roadmap for linguistic development of not just English but Hindi and other regional languages as well. This paper undertakes to analyse acquisition of English skills among school students in Jaipur along with evaluating the teachers' language proficiency. In addition to elaborate on the current status of English in Jaipur, this paper also utilizes and builds on the various other studies undertaken to understand English in schools.

Keywords: English language proficiency (ELP), Indian English, English language Teaching (ELT), literacy, elementary education.

Introduction

India's history with English goes back a long time. With colonial roots, English was introduced to India in the early 1600s. Fast forward to the current times, English has acquired the status of an "elite" language. The colonial status has now been forgotten, its status of that a "library language" is changing. There is growing demand for English-medium schools and fluency in English, there is major need for fluency in English, especially for access to better jobs. Amidst these major changes, there is a lack of assessment tools, language proficiency measures, shortage of English teachers, teachers' limited language proficiency, inequality of

learning and teaching discourses, English being taught as a standalone language with no sustained model and institutions rushing in to fill the gap without any roadmap.

Graddol (2010) in *English Next* says:

India is home to what is probably the most complex society in the world – complex not just because of its size, but because complexity seems to be in its DNA, reproduced in a fractal pattern from national to local village level. Indian society embraces some of the most modern, hi-tech fuelled, global-travelling life-styles alongside the most abject poverty.

In the cities of India, it is possible to experience many centuries of urban development on the same day. Within this complexity grows the English language; implanted in colonial times, and argued over ever since. Some in India claim it is a burden, others a liberation. Many complain that English has created one of the biggest social divisions in an already divided society – between those who can speak English, and those who cannot.

English in Jaipur

Amongst the social issues, English has gained a reputation, and there is no denying that English is necessary for economic growth and social betterment. In a country like India, with its burgeoning population, it is mandatory, and should have been so, to establish a plan for acquisition of English. This plan should have been regionally modified. NCERT (2006) in its Position Paper, "Teaching of English" says, "The visible impact of this presence of English is that it is today being demanded by everyone at the very initial stage of schooling." This phenomenon is observed in Jaipur, Rajasthan as well.

Since the launch of RTE, there has been an effort to make quality education accessible to all sections of the society. However, in complex Indian geography and demography, learning and teaching methods need to be systemized, especially when it comes to language. Coming to Jaipur, the Azim Premji Foundation's District Profile (2016) on Jaipur District states that Jaipur District's total literacy rate is 75.51 per cent, of which 67.62 per cent is rural and 82.47 per cent is urban (sourced from Census of India, 2011). This report also states that: Jaipur has 4077 Govt. schools, of which 4052 are till elementary grade. The district has 154 contractual teachers, of which 153 teach elementary grade.

Linguistic skills are undermined. Private schools have been mushrooming in Jaipur, and while no current figures are available, *Times of India* in its issue of 27 August 2014, discusses a report by the Rajasthan Council for Elementary Education (RCEE) saying that:

State capital is fast becoming a centre for school education. The list of private schools here has

increased by 1,235 between academic years 2011-12 to 2013-14. This is probably the highest number of schools that have come up in any single city in the country in a period of two years.

The growing demand of every guardian for his child is to learn, and speak in English, which is a status symbol, along with being a student of a "reputed" school has giving way to these figures. The current numbers would definitely be much higher. To match this meteoric rise in school numbers and subsequent admissions, there have to be teacher recruitments. Most of the teachers recruited were into the profession "because of lack of doing something better". For most others "it was a timepass". Some of the teachers had no previous working experience at all and were handling classrooms, trying to teach the students a foreign language, of which, they themselves had a meager grasp. Commenting on this phenomenon, NCERT (2006) in its position paper "Teaching of English" says that, "Teacher education needs to be ongoing and onsite (through formal or informal support systems), as well as preparatory. Proficiency and professional awareness are equally to be promoted, the latter imparted, where necessary, through the teachers' own languages."

A total of 15 schools were examined. This figure includes the top schools of Jaipur. Teachers' interviews and interactions with students helped to find out the current status of English teaching and learning. Teachers were enquired about their teaching methods. Most of the schools follow a centralized "lesson plan" prepared by one of the teachers. This lesson has to be strictly adhered to. As such, there is no evaluation or cogitation of the lessons by the teachers. They blindly proceed to teach whatever has been fed to them. As a result, there is a complete lack of understanding of the language, and English teaching and learning has been reduced to textbook learning or what is frequently called as falling prey to the "Textbook Trap".

Along with this, there is hardly any focus on listening skills. There is a lot of focus on speaking skills, but writing and listening fall behind. A similar trend was found in an investigative study conducted

by NCERT, EdCIL, and Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan (2012), which said that in government state textbooks at level 1 (classes I & II) focus less on the listening and speaking skills and do not build familiarity with the language. Similarly, the private schools do introduce English, but they fail to build a familiarity with English. Also, another trend observed was that the teachers frequently resort to local/regional language to explain English. Again, English is not internalized as a language, not understood in totality but in the “library language” manner that it has been treated in. Also, the poems and stories are taught without any larger, meaningful contexts.

One very important point that should be made here is, that Grammar as a component has been completely ruled out of classroom teaching. It is beyond comprehension as to how would a child understand the basics of a language without grasping the basic grammar rules. A couple of workbooks have replaced comprehensive grammar teaching. These workbooks hardly have any explanations and comprise of general practice exercises. The questions in these exercises are either solved in class or given for homework. The emphasis is on covering all the exercises rather than making the students understand the reason behind the answers.

Owing to such a scenario, the child’s ability to comprehend and accept English is quite limited. They also do not link the child’s life at school to life outside the school. Writing and reading are non-existent, with none of the schools dedicating even a weekly period for library or reading. Even if there is an allotted reading time, its purpose is to serve as a buffer period to catch up on anything remaining in the syllabus of any of the subjects. The “English Transition” as David Graddol (2010) calls it, is seeing a definite rise in spoken English, but not writing or reading in English. At the same times, Graddol (2010) also mentions that there is hardly any change in curricula reflecting the growing demand for English.

A Working Paper titled “Teaching of English at Primary Level in Government Schools” published by Center for Education Innovations (2013):

According to the 2011 Census, Rajasthan has the 33rd worst literacy rate across India. Across all categories Rajasthan stands below the national averages. Overall the literacy rate for India is 74.04 per cent but for Rajasthan it is 66 per cent. The male literacy rate for Rajasthan is not far behind the national average, which is very good. However, the literacy rate for women in Rajasthan is much lower than the national average of 65.46 per cent at a very low 47.76 per cent.

On the whole Rajasthan has a long way to go to improve its literacy rate, especially for the females. For Jaipur in particular, the story is a bit different. Jaipur’s literacy rate is on the higher side, the rate being 75.51 percent (Census 2011). However, a comprehensive evaluation by ASER (2018) since 2005 found that most of the students are enrolled in schools but many are not acquiring foundational skills such as basic arithmetic and reading skills. The 2019 report documents the jumpy state of affairs in Rajasthan’s education scenario and Rajasthan has been placed among the bottom five states in learning outcomes – reading, writing, and arithmetic.

This indicates a worrying dichotomy – Jaipur city’s schools, with their marketing tricks, want to capture on the market for English without providing a working knowledge of the language. In government schools the scenario is even worse – as the studies have presented.

While the intentions of these and other schools might just be right, the implementation certainly is not. To tackle the growing demands while keeping up with the standards of English, the task is a daunting one. Best practices in terms of teaching and learning methodologies have to be established. Along with this, standardized frameworks need to be established, implemented, and adhered to. Basic practices of language teaching and learning should be followed.

There is a distinctive lack of skills when it comes to expressing oneself. The degradation is seen and heard almost everywhere, where people use and linger onto words like “nice” and

“awesome” to express their range of emotions and articulations. It is intelligible that what trickles down in the society is rundown, run-of-the-mill speech and language. As such, the children today are at a loss – not being apprised of or taught the basics of communication. The scenario in Jaipur city is worth concern, none of the 15 schools observed had any grammar, writing, reading, or listening courses introduced. Classroom teaching has been reduced exclusively to textbook memorization and solving exercises. Second-language pedagogy, more than the teaching of any other curricular subject, must meet the most stringent criterion of universal success: the spontaneous and appropriate use of language for at least everyday purposes.

Expression is important, children need to express themselves – clearly and effectively. It is a part often and now increasingly ignored. Today, children face difficulty in comprehending and using pragmatic language. They cannot understand the variety and range of vocabulary and grammatical concepts, don't have a grasp over the speech sounds, cannot express themselves whether in a classroom or in a social context – and while these are the part of a larger picture – these children do not even understand the effective communication also includes listening skills. Let's see what the Rose Report (2006) has to say about this:

The development of speaking and listening skills requires fuller and more intensive attention to make sure that children acquire a good stock of words, learn to listen attentively, and speak clearly and confidently. ...they are prime communication skills, hugely important in their own right and central to children's intellectual, social and emotional development.

When language takes a backseat and shorthand speech is the driver, it is an indication of the dwindling importance of words. We ought to look at the impact it has on every aspect of a person's life be in personal, academic, or social. Unfortunately, the schools largely ignore this part of development, and language literacy is construed as usage of the trendy words – and these are major hurdles which affect the development of a child's

thinking, evaluation, and not to mention the hit that the children's self-esteem takes.

Also, “spoken English” has emerged as a phenomenon, where mere “talking in English” is the requisite, the kind of English in which the syntax and phonics are done away with, and the emphasis is on “sounding” like one has a full control over the language is the vogue.

Understanding the nuances of words, rhetoric, and metaphors have become a thing of the past, reading and listening skills have been non-existent for quite some time now. Children are encouraged to be glued to mobiles and tabs, and libraries are rarer now than ever before. Even in primary schools, the students are not taught to read and try and understand the meaning of the sentence and the story – instead they are forced fed a set of questions, which they have to rote, and write down in their answer sheets. This is the new-age language teaching methodology, where the least amount of effort purportedly yields the highest marks – and the fact that communication is fundamental for a child's development is completely disregarded. Unless, classroom teaching replicates the universal success in the acquisition of basic spoken language proficiency acquisition of language for real-life application will be difficult.

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