

# Effects of School Language-Home Language Gap on Primary Education: A Study of First Generation Learners of Disadvantaged Groups

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## ABSTRACT

*Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) estimates that 44 per cent children in government primary schools of India in standard fifth cannot read a standard two text (ASER, 2008, 2009). High dropout rate from primary and elementary education combined with such poor performance in reading poses a serious challenge before Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which aims at universal quality elementary education. Acquisition of reading and writing skills is the prerequisite for any successful school learning. One of the important reasons for this poor performance in reading may be the difference between curricular language and home language. The school language may be entirely different from the language children are used to at home. This dichotomy in language can pose barriers in comprehension that impede children's learning, especially of first generation learners from working Class backgrounds as they lack additional support structures from home. In such situations it is the school's responsibility to facilitate the process of transition from the home language to the school language. The present paper discusses such an effort carried out in the schools of Varanasi district of UP. This project was financially supported by UGC.*

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## Introduction

Widespread literacy has been a desired goal in India since independence. However, there is a wide gap between the stated goal in the Constitution and in reality. Even though the percentage of literacy has increased, the number of out-of-school children and the dropout rate from school is a nightmare. Most people who are considered literate are incapable of comprehending what they read. In our country for a majority of children the primary responsibility of facilitating reading falls on schools, the only learning site available to them.

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The importance of reading skills for young children is beyond doubt because it is crucial and vital for any other learning. Reading is most difficult for students because it involves the combination of many skills and cognitive abilities. Reading is a process of finding meaning in written words. A good reading competence is a necessity for academic studies, professional success and personal development. In pedagogic literature reading is recognised as a distinct development area in the formative years of schooling. But beyond educational goals reading is also a source of enjoyment and pleasure. If a child is competent in reading and likes to read, a new world of knowledge will be open for him/her. Reading for pleasure has not been given much of importance in Indian schools and it remains more a theoretical concept. Millions of children learn reading every year but fail to achieve lasting reading skills.

Several methods of teaching of reading have been proposed and advocated from time to time and these can be classified in to two broad groups (Fries, 1963; Gray, 1956), 'synthetic method' and 'analytic method'. The alphabetic method included in the analytic method was the standard method of teaching reading for alphabetic orthographies for at least 3000 years until the 19th century. By the second half of the nineteenth century the alphabetic method was losing its dominance (Smith, 1965) and three alternative methods of teaching reading came into existence: phonic method, look and say method, and sentence method (Farnie, 1985). Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sentence method, which was more global than Look and Say, was advocated in the United States. The rationale of this method was that language is recognised in whole units that express thoughts. Hence, the teaching of reading commenced with the meaningful reading of these whole units that are sentence rather than letters or words (Smith, 1965). From the turn of the century until the 1920s, the story method was a quite popular global successor to the Sentence method in the United States. Subsequently, in 1960s and 1970s the Language Experience Approach to teaching reading gave birth in part to Whole Language Approach. Whole Language, however, has a stronger emphasis on wholeness and integrity of the literary activities in which children engage. Authentic literature for learners, including beginner readers, is advocated (Goodman, 1989). In this approach, it is important to start with reading of books rather than rote recitation of alphabets. Separate letters of the alphabets do not mean anything. Reading is not an isolated behaviour. It involves simultaneous processing of all

three types of clues: graphophonemic clues (shapes of letters and sound associated with it), syntactic clues (word order); and semantic clues (meaning of the words).

Sadly, methods used in India for the teaching of reading in early classes are quite obsolete and incapable of sustaining the child's motivation. Rather these traditional alphabetic methods turn reading into a chore (Kumar, 2008). The whole process is so irrational and exhausting that it is hardly surprising to find government primary school children unable to read comfortably even in Class V. Though all children who enter school have a good command over spoken language, they fail to comprehend standard curricular or school language. This dichotomy of language affects adversely first generation learners of deprived sections because they have limited vocabulary, lack print rich environment, and negligible support at their home. Thus, the primary responsibility to make students learn to read lies with schools. There is an urgent need to bridge the gap between the home language and the school language. It requires a different kind of reading pedagogy, which must be sensitive to the vernacular language and at the same time can help the process of transition from spoken to written language. With this background the present study has been undertaken to fulfill the following objectives.

#### **Objectives of the Study:**

- To assess the impact of school versus home language dichotomy on learning outcomes of students.
- To study the impact of dichotomy of language on drop outs and failure in primary education.
- To propose a paradigm of micro-level planning for bridging the gap between home language and school language.

#### **Sample and Selection of the Schools:**

Initially, it was planned to select one school for the purpose of study, but the actual number of first generation learners of disadvantaged groups regularly attending the school in Class IV and V was small in a school as students are enrolled, but are not attending school (long term absentees). In order to have a reasonable number of Class IV and V students, four government primary schools located in slum or nearby slum areas of Varanasi city were selected through purposive sampling. The sample comprised all the students enrolled in Class IV and V in the session 2008-09 in the four schools mentioned above. Besides this, all regular (05) as well as contractual (08) teachers were also part of the sample.

## Sample Description

**Table 1**

School	Class IV		Class V		Total
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
School 1	07	08	07	06	28
School 2	00	00	04	02	06
School 3	03	01	02	00	06
School 4	03	03	01	03	10
Total	13	11	14	12	50

**Table 2**

Category	No. of Students		Total no. of Students
	Boys	Girls	
SC	14	12	26
OBC	10	10	20
Minority (Muslim)	03	01	04
Total	27	23	50

## Tools

The following self developed tools were used to achieve the objectives of the study:

1. Tests for Class IV and V were constructed in the subjects Hindi, Mathematics, and Social Studies to measure the comprehension of standard curricular language i.e., pronunciation, meaning, and its usage in their own sentences or contexts. Besides this, the students were asked to read a passage of their choice from Hindi text book. While administering the test students were asked to tell their own words (if they knew in local dialect) which they use to understand or describe a concept or phenomenon.
2. A self developed interview schedule was used for teachers to enquire into the problem of students' language and strategies or measures they adopt to address these issues within and outside the classroom.

## Research Procedure

Tests were administered orally on all students of the sample (50) in 2008-09. It was found that in all the schools students' reading ability and comprehension level of language was very low in all the subjects i.e., Hindi, Social Studies, and Mathematics. In the next

stage of study 15 students of Class IV (promoted to Class V in the session 2009-10) of the school-1, who performed very poorly on the test were selected for the treatment. All these students were declared 'Pass' in their Class IV examination. These students were chosen because they were attending school regularly. All of them were first generation learners of deprived sections. At the beginning of new session 2009-10, an activity-based treatment was given to these students for 45 working days. After the treatment the same test was administered to measure students' comprehension of school/standard curricular language.

### Result and Interpretation

**Table 3**  
**Pronunciation level of Students in Class IV-V (Pre treatment)**

Subject	Pronunciation Level # (No. of students)				Total no. of students
	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	
Hindi	04 (8)*	06 (12)	10 (20)	30 (60)	50
Social Studies	04 (8)	07 (14)	09 (18)	30 (60)	
Mathematics	02 (4)	05 (10)	09 (18)	33 (66)	

\* Figures in parentheses are in percentage

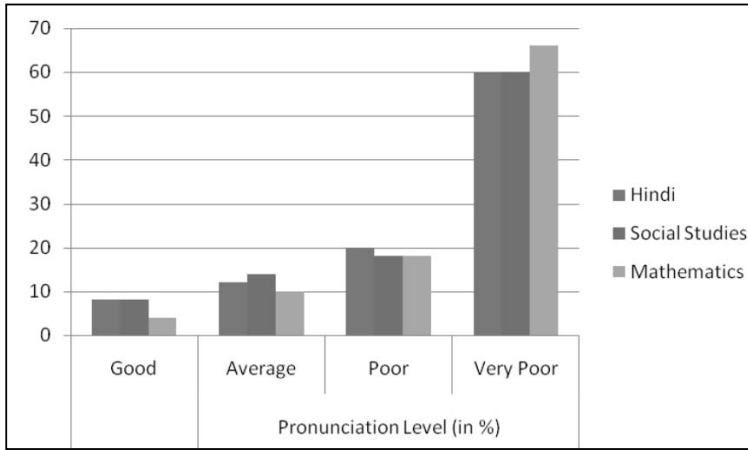
#### #Pronunciation Level

**Good** – pronounced more than 60 per cent of the words given in the test.

**Average** – pronounced between 40 to 60 per cent of the words given in the test.

**Poor** – pronounced more than 10 but less than 40 per cent of the words given in the test.

**Very Poor** – pronounced less than 10 per cent of the words given in the test.



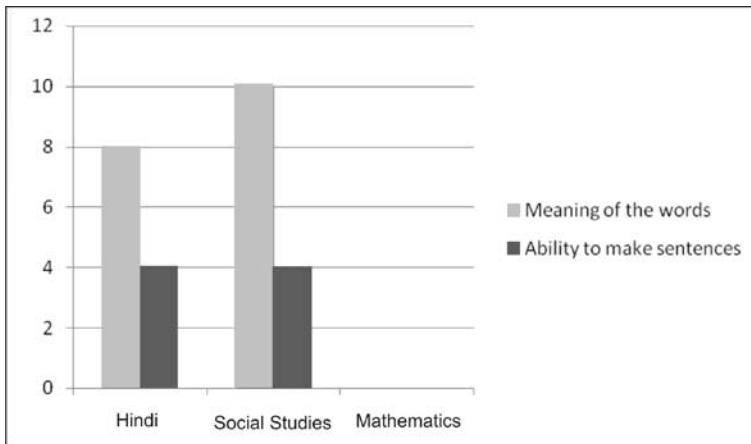
**Fig. 1** Pronunciation level of Students in Class IV-V (Pre-treatment)

It is evident from Table- 3 and Figure-1 that 60 per cent students of the sample pronounce less than 10 per cent of words given in the tests of Hindi and Social Studies. Situation is so bad that there are some students (mostly girls) in the sample who could not pronounce a single word. Only 8 per cent students were able to pronounce more than 60 per cent of the words of Hindi and Social Studies, for Mathematics number of students even goes down further to 4 per cent students and 66 per cent students are in very poor category. An analysis of test results showed that most of the students were unable to pronounce the joint letter words, Hindi words having Sanskrit overtones, and the words which are uncommon in common usage or used only in the framework of particular discipline.

**Table 4**  
**Comprehension Levels of Students in Class IV-V (Pre-treatment)**

Comprehension Level in	Able to tell the meaning of 50% words of the Test	Able to make meaningful sentences with the help of given words	Total no. of students in the sample
	(number of students)	(number of students)	
Hindi	04 (8)*	02 (4)	50
Social Studies	05 (10)	02 (4)	
Mathematics	00	00	

\*Figures in parentheses are in percentage



**Fig. 2** Comprehension levels of Students in Class IV-V (Pre-treatment)

Table 4 and Figure-2 reveals that only 8-10 per cent students are able to tell the meaning of at least 50 per cent of the words in Hindi and Social Studies and 4 per cent of them can use a few words to make meaningful sentences. In Mathematics there wasn't a single student who can tell the meaning of the words given in the test. It is surprising how these students got promotion to higher Class (IV-V) over the years without learning anything.

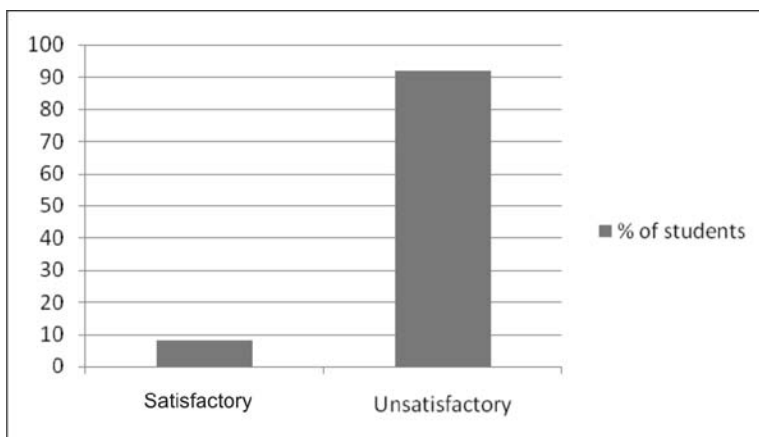
**Table 5**  
**Percentage of Students Who can Read a Passage from Hindi Textbook**

Reading	No. and % of Students
Satisfactory	04 (8)*
Unsatisfactory	46 (92)
Total	50

\* Figures in parentheses are in percentage

**Satisfactory Reading** — able to read the passage fluently with proper intonation, punctuation marks and can understand what he/she is reading.

**Unsatisfactory Reading** — cannot read the passage fluently with proper intonation, punctuation marks and cannot understand what he/she is reading.



**Fig. 3** Percentage of Students Who can Read a Passage from Hindi Textbook

**Interpretation:** It is evident from Table 5 and Figure-3 that 92 per cent students of the sample can't read a passage from their Hindi text book fluently. Only 8 per cent students from the sample of 50 can read the passage in somewhat fluent manner and these students got the maximum opportunity to read in the classroom. During data collection process it was observed by the researcher that some of the students who could not pronounce the word and were unable to tell the meaning of the words, asked:

*"Didi ji likh kar dikha dein?"* (Madam, can we show in writing?). It seems that students can't pronounce or read meaningfully but they can copy the same pattern of letters from the textbook, apparently without understanding what they are writing. Muscular maturity provided them that eye-hand-coordination, which is required for copying but recognition and decoding of written words is a cognitive ability and one has to learn reading and decipher meaning out of written words. It was observed by the researcher that most of the times in the school students were busy copying words or text either from the textbooks or from the black-board. They were seldom allowed to read and reading opportunity was given only to those one or two students who were fluent in reading, the rest of the students remained seated silently.

### Responses of teachers

All 5 regular and 8 contractual teachers of all the schools were interviewed regarding the student's difficulty in reading and



comprehension. In response to the question that all students must be given the opportunity to read, teachers simply said, “*ye padh nahin sakte*” (they can’t read). All the teachers unanimously agreed that most of students have problem in reading as most of them do not speak Hindi but Bhojpuri (local dialect) at home. In response to the questions ‘what do they do to address this problem? Do they use Bhojpuri (local dialect) for instruction or for explaining a concept?’ all of them except one said that they don’t, though they were familiar with it and can understand Bhojpuri.

Teachers were indifferent towards their students and some of them had the strong notion that it is futile to make any attempt to teach them. It seems from their responses that they don’t consider that it is schools’ and teachers’ responsibility to make all students able to read and write meaningfully. One of the teachers remarked, “*ye roj nahin aate aur ghar mein bhi nahin padhte isiliye sikh nahin pate*” (students are not regular and don’t study at home, that is why they are not learning). All the regular teachers said that they were over burdened with administrative work, hence don’t find enough time to teach. There was shortage of permanent teachers in all the four schools and they were managing with the help of contractual teachers.

**Cohort Analysis:** To achieve a second objective of the study a Class wise cohort analysis of the students was done to find out dropouts and failure in selected schools.

**Table 6**  
**Cohort Analysis**

	No. of students admitted in Class I in 2004-05	New students joined the Same cohort at the level of Class II, III, and IV (2006-07)	No. of students reached in Class V in 2008-09
School 1	111	34	30
School 2	43	10	07
School 3	31	None	06
School 4	#	None	20

# School did not provide previous years’ records.

It is evident from Table 6 that dropout rate between Classes I to V is as high as 80 to 86 per cent. It means that out of 100 students admitted in the Class I only 20 to 15 students reach to Class V level. Dropout rate for schools 1, 2 and 3 is 79.32 per cent,

86.8 per cent and 80.65 per cent respectively. School-4 did not give enrolment figures of previous years. This situation is alarming because no students were declared 'failed' in school records due to zero detention policy in primary classes. It means that students did not dropout of school because they failed. It can be said that students left school because they were unable to read, write and thus making any sense of school learning. Results of student's comprehension of school language (tables -3, 4, and 5) support this fact. It is one of the most significant reasons because parents were complaining informally that their wards are not learning much in school. Attending school regularly does not make any difference in their life so they remained absent from school for a long time. In informal talk one of the parents said,

*"Muft hai tab bhi roj school jane se kya fayada agar wah kuch padhana likhana nahin sikh raha hai"* (though it is free, what is the point to attend school regularly if he is not learning basic reading, writing, and numeric abilities). It is evident from Table 6 that chances to complete five years of schooling for a first generation learner of deprived section is very meager.

*Treatment:* 15 very poor readers (8 boys and 7 girls) of school- 1 were selected for activity-based treatment. All these students were attending school regularly. Inputs from classroom observations, interviews of teachers, were incorporated in the selection, design, and execution of activities. Pre-treatment assessment of students' comprehension of standard curricular language helped in selecting the level of activity to start with. The whole activity lasted for one and half months.

**Plan of Work (Treatment):**

1. Students were given ample opportunity to talk.
2. Researcher noted down the different indigenous (Bhojpuri) words used by the students for various objects and concepts.
3. A series of activities were organised as suggested in the handbook, 'The Child's Language and the Teacher' by Kumar, K. 2000. Some of the activities given in the handbook were used during talk sessions and for the teaching of reading. Besides this, words from the local dialect (Bhojpuri) used by the students have been utilised for bridging the gap between home language and school language and it was used for instruction and explanation too whenever needed. The whole treatment was divided into two broad categories,

**Table 7**  
**Description of Activities**

S.No.	Activity	Number of Days
A.	Talk	
A.1.	Opportunities to talk about oneself	3
A.2.	What did you see	3
A.3.	Asking the Explorers	3
A.4.	Guess What I Saw	3
A.5.	Analyzing the Pictures	3
A.6.	Opportunities to talk about objects and experiences at school	4
	<b>Total number of Days</b>	<b>19</b>
B.	Read	
B.1.	Story Telling and Reading of Story Books	12
B.2.	Dividing the Alphabet	4
B.3.	Reading Science	2
B.4.	Doing What You Read	2
B.5.	Last Word, Next Word	4
B.6.	Three Questions	2
	<b>Total number of Days</b>	<b>26</b>

*The Child's Language and the Teacher, (Kumar, K. 2000).*

### **Talk**

Opportunity and the freedom were given to all the selected children to talk about their life and hobbies. Initially, children's talk was incoherent, repetitive, and formal e.g. in response to the question, what do they like? all of them said that, "*Padhai achchhi lagti hai*" (they like to study), children usually talked about domestic violence faced by them. All the activities were very helpful to shed the initial inhibition of students of talking in front of the teacher and it served as an excellent ice breaker. 'Analysing the pictures' was the most helpful activity in listing Bhojpuri words spoken by students.

## Reading

Six kinds of activities were used in the classroom to encourage children to read. Whole language approach to reading was adopted. For meaningful reading selection of books for the children is the most important, for the present study 'Barkha Series', a collection of forty books published by NCERT for the teaching of reading was used. These story books have bright, colourful illustrations based on stories side by side written words are ideal books to start with. For this activity all the 15 students and researcher sat on the ground so that all the students can see the book while reading. It was suggested in the handbook (Kumar, 2000) that it should not be plain aloud reading of only written words so sometimes researcher elaborated by adding details or shortened the story by using her own words. Researcher had prior familiarity with stories as it was necessary.

Reading book sessions generated much interest and familiarity with books among students and helped in developing all the three types of clues that any use of language consists of i.e. graphophonemic clues, syntactic clues, and semantic clue. At this point no questions were asked. It was just to get students familiar with print and fun of getting meaning out of it. Response of the story reading sessions was so encouraging that after one week students started asking for books of their choice.

After this activity-based treatment students moved to their Class V textbooks. With the newly gained confidence they started reading. Researcher remained there for the next one and half months to help the learners as per need. After that the researcher administered the same language comprehension test on all 15 students. Results of the post-treatment are given in Table 7 and 8.

**Table 8**  
**Post-Treatment Students' Language Comprehension level**  
**(Number and % of students)**

Comprehension in	Pronunciation Level Good#	Ability to tell the Meaning		No. of students got the treatment
		Average*	Above Average**	
Hindi	15 (100 %)	10 (66 %)	5 (33%)	15
Social Studies	15 (100%)	9 (60 %)	6 (40 %)	
Mathematics	15 (100%)	12(80%)	3 (20%)	

# Good- Able to pronounce more than 60 per cent of the words given in the test

\* Average - Able to tell the meaning of 50 per cent of the words given in the test.

\*\* Above Average - Able to tell the meaning of more than 50 per cent of the words given in the test.

**Interpretation**

It is evident from Table 7 that after the treatment, students' performance has been improved significantly. All 15 students who received treatment were able to pronounce more than 60 per cent of the words given in the test of Hindi, Social Studies, and Mathematics. Ability to decipher meaning is shown in Table 7 into two categories average and above average. Out of total 15 students 10, 09 and 12 students told the meaning of 50 per cent of the words of the test of Hindi, S.S.T., and Mathematics respectively and are in the average category. However, the number of students who described the meaning of more than 50 per cent of the words and in the above average category is low as it is 5 students in Hindi, 6 students in S.S.T., and only 3 students in Mathematics test. But if we compare these numbers to the performance of pre-test scores, almost all students scored better. Improvement in students' performance is evident in all the subjects but the gains are more in Hindi and SST than in Mathematics.

**Table 9**  
**Post-Treatment Students' Language Comprehension level**

Comprehension in	Make Meaningful Sentences Using Words (No. of Students)		
	Up to 40 % of the words	More than 40% but less than 55% words	No. of Students got the Treatment
Hindi	12	03	15
Social Studies	14	01	
Mathematics	14	01	

**Interpretation**

Table 8 shows that intensive activity-based treatment has improved students' capacity to use the language (words) in different contexts or in their own contexts. Out of 15 students 12 students in Hindi, 14 students in S.S.T. and Mathematics were able to use up to 40 per cent of the words given in the test to make meaningful sentences. Though no student of the sample used more than 55 per cent of the words to make meaningful sentences, but this achievement is significant as all these students were poor readers, who performed poorly on all the dimensions of the pre-test i.e., pronunciation, tell the meaning and use of the words to make meaningful sentences.

The post-treatment scores show that performance of students has improved after undergoing through an activity-based treatment,

which helped transition from spoken to standard curricular language and the first generation learners of disadvantaged groups benefited by this exercise. It enhanced their limited vocabulary and aroused interest and love for books and reading.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of above findings it may be concluded that,

1. School and home language opposition affects student's achievement adversely and due to it students are not able to read and understand the school subjects as language cuts across all the disciplines.
2. Inability to read meaningfully is one of the major causes of dropout from government primary schools as students are not making any sense of school learning.
3. An intense activity-based programme designed as per the need of students to bridge the gap between the home language and the standard curricular/school language is proved to be useful. After going through this programme students' comprehension of school language has improved significantly.

### **Implications of the Study**

The true spirit of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* is to make all children learn read and write meaningfully. Due to various initiatives taken in SSA, a lot of first generation learners are now in primary schools, but unfortunately most of them are not learning (ASER, 2008, 2009). High dropout rate is a serious concern because the purpose of elementary education is defeated if all the children are not completing five years of schooling successfully. High dropout rate contributes to wastage in primary education. In the light of findings of the present study and other studies including ASER, 2008 and 2009 it can be said that most students dropout from school because they are unable to make sense of school learning due to inability to read. It is interesting to note that all the children when they enter in school have a good command over spoken language but fail to comprehend standard curricular or school language. The findings of the present study show that with careful planning transition from home language to school language is possible and students' performance can be improved significantly. The findings of the study have special significance for the planning of 'Residential Bridge Course' under *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* for the mainstreaming of dropouts and out-of-school children.

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