

Learning and Language

English as Medium of Instruction in Low-cost Private Schools

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In low-cost private schools in India, English as a medium of instruction attracts children of poorly educated parents with a low-income background. A primary survey in Delhi and the National Capital Region finds that mediating primary-level education through an unfamiliar language poses language barriers and adversely affects the learning outcome. The agency in using English for communication is limited. The learning deficit is undetected through successive grades in the primary level due to translation- and memorisation-based teaching processes, and focus on textbook-based exercises. The study finds that parents do not get a fair exchange in return for committing their limited resources towards education.

Private share in school enrolment in India has increased rapidly at the expense of government schools. The government school share in elementary enrolment (Classes 1 to 8) declined from 80.4% in 2003 to 58.6% in 2016–17, with private schools getting a higher share of enrolment (Mehta 2006, 2016).¹ In India, some privately managed schools receive government aid, and the government has a say in matters such as teacher recruitment and school fees (Kingdon 2017). Such aided schools, closer to government than private schools in their characteristics, accounted for 7.8% of elementary enrolment in 2016–17 (NIEPA 2018). Private unaided schools accounted for a much higher share of 30.7% of elementary enrolment. In this paper, we discuss private unaided schools that account for the major part of private school enrolment. These will be referred to as private schools.

Within private schools, school characteristics, including fee structure, vary widely (Noronha and Srivastava 2013). Those private schools that charge very low fees have been regarded as filling a gap in the demand for schooling in India since they provide education at a low cost to the poor (Tooley et al 2007; 2010; Tooley and Dixon 2005). Among many such private schools which charge low fees,² or the low-cost private schools (LCPS), a marketing strategy to attract students is to advertise the medium of instruction as English. A promise of instruction in “English medium” pulls parents towards private and away from government schools (Baird 2009; Sarangapani 2009; Karopady 2014; All India Federation of Teachers 2008 qtd in Baird 2009).

When children learn in a language different from the one they speak at home, it can act as a barrier to learning. While such a language barrier has been acknowledged for education of tribal children, a similar context is the use of English as the medium of instruction in LCPS, which are attended by students from low-income households who have familiarity with only vernacular languages (UNICEF 2014; Jhingran 2005). Since parents usually pay considerable part of their limited income on their children’s education in the form of expenditure on private schooling and on private tuition, the issue assumes greater importance.

This paper aims to explore the learning achievement as well as the classroom experience of children studying in primary levels in English medium LCPS in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR). It attempts to explore how learning outcomes are influenced by the use of English as a medium of instruction and whether its use as a barrier to learning.

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There are few studies available in this under-researched area, especially for India. The present study aims to fill this gap.

English as a medium of instruction gained importance in India as economic benefits of education through this medium became evident (Daswani 2001). India's service-led growth has benefited from the export of high-skilled services aided by well-educated, English-speaking professionals who have been instrumental in India's emergence in software and information and communications technology (ICT)-enabled services (Dahlman 2010). While these professionals were helped by tertiary education, even jobs with lower levels of educational requirement these days often need some knowledge of English. Being fluent in English (compared to not speaking any English) was found to increase hourly wages of men by 34% (Azam et al 2013).

The draft National Education Policy, 2019 put emphasis on the "functionality and fluency" for teaching English language in schools (MHRD 2019). The need to address common people's aspirations to use English fluently in their daily communication while teaching English has been emphasised in earlier policy documents (NCERT 2006). However, the ground situation presents a contrast. A study conducted in government schools at the primary level in seven Indian states found that Classes 1 and 2 textbooks focus less on listening and speaking skills, and more on developing reading and writing skills (NCERT 2012).

In English medium LCPS, students belong to low-income families, where parents have little knowledge of English. Teachers' competence in such schools is reportedly inadequate, in terms of teaching English as well as teaching science, social studies, etc, in this foreign language (Nambissan 2012; Kurien 2005 qtd in NCERT 2006: 2; Bhattacharya 2013). The temporary nature of employment in low-paid teaching jobs and inadequate teacher training have been mentioned as features of LCPS (Nambissan 2012).

The use of English as a medium of instruction can thus lead to the students in such LCPS suffering from the twin disadvantage of being "cut off from both language and content" (Bhattacharya 2013).³ Pedagogical deficiencies were also highlighted in another study where three case studies were undertaken in Delhi, Johannesburg and London, respectively (Bhattacharya et al 2007). The case study in Delhi indicated an overdependence on textbooks and examinations.

Objectives and Methodology

This paper aims to explore the learning achievement and classroom experience of children studying in primary levels in English medium LCPS. It also explores how learning outcomes are influenced by the use of English as a medium of instruction and whether this acts as a barrier to learning. Proficiency in English at the primary level is expected to indicate a child's ability to also learn other subjects in English medium, with textbooks and examinations mediated in English.

Primary survey: Conducting research on LCPS is difficult because authorities of privately managed schools are averse to

allowing outsiders inside the school premises. These small-sized schools may be "recognised" or "unrecognised" officially, but many sample schools did not conforming to norms prescribed by the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act).⁴ School authorities in a Noida-based school refused to fill the questionnaire given by the survey team.⁵ In another school, the authorities thought that the team was spying on behalf of a rival school. Thus, gaining insight into an under-researched, yet important segment of the schooling landscape is fraught with difficulties.

The following surveys were conducted during March–September 2016: (i) household survey, (ii) learning achievement tests for English and in-depth interviews with children, (iii) parent interviews, and (iv) school surveys. Parents were the main informants for the household survey. A total of 545 children and six schools were covered. The detailed questionnaires for the primary survey were discussed at a meeting with experts and were revised after taking into account the experts' comments.⁶ Rajasthani and Priyanka Camps, two unauthorised colonies situated in Madanpur Khadar in Sarita Vihar were the sample sites in Delhi. In Noida, the sample site was Barola, an urban village spread over Sector 50 and Sector 78.⁷

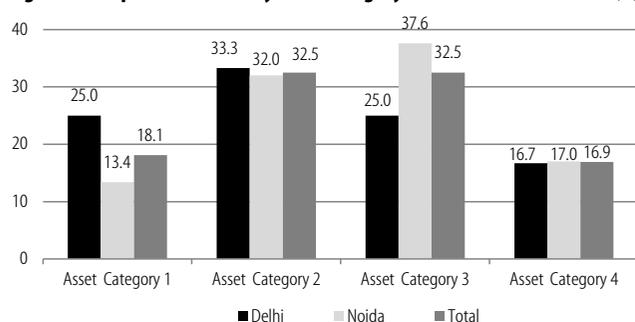
Household survey: This included the listing of around 700 households in Delhi and Noida together based on a short questionnaire. The survey was conducted in households with at least one child going to private school and attending Classes 1–6. The number of households surveyed was 326, comprising 132 households in Delhi and 194 households in Noida.⁸

Learning achievement tests and in-depth interviews with children: A total of 78 children were selected for in-depth interviews, comprising 37 children in Delhi and 41 children in Noida studying in Classes 5 or 6. Tests for this study aimed at capturing the comprehension and communication skills in English rather than assessing class-level competencies.

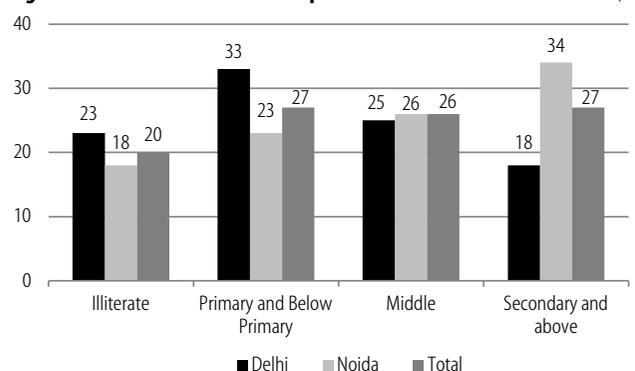
Children were interviewed in a friendly manner at their homes and given a set of learning achievement tests.⁹ Tests were based on the English subject because English is the medium of instruction in the sample schools. By the end of primary school, students in English medium LCPS would be expected to have some proficiency in the use of English. Else, it would have negative implications on their learning attainment in other subjects, too, since the learning materials as well as written examinations are conducted in English.

Teaching methods and classroom experience are integral to the learning process, particularly for the sample students since as they have a poor educational home background. Questions on language of instruction, teaching methods and assessment, and other related areas were expected to provide a glimpse into the classroom process and environment as perceived by children.

Parent interviews: Interviews with 22 parents in two sites attempted to understand their perceptions of the benefit or problems related to the schooling process, assessment of

Figure 1: Sample Households by Asset Category (%)

Source: Household survey 2016.

Figure 2: Mothers' Education in Sample Households (%)

Source: Household survey 2016.

teachers and facilities at the school, motivation for sending them to English medium LCPS, schooling costs, etc.

School survey: Three English medium LCPS in Noida and Delhi each, attended by relatively more sample students, were visited. Information was sought on enrolment, number of classes, class size, pupil–teacher ratio, facilities and multigrade teaching, among others. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teacher mostly in the presence of the school principal or an administrator.

Some Key Findings

Sample sites were selected purposively with concentration on low-income households. The 326 sample households were classified into four categories according to asset ownership (Figure 1).¹⁰ Categories 1 and 2 comprise poorer households, and constitute half the sample. When Category 3 is included, it accounts for 83% of households. Asset-wise, the Delhi sample respondents are worse off, as Categories 1 and 2 together account for 58.3% of the sample, compared to 45.4% in Noida.

One-fifth of the mothers are illiterate and 27% are educated till primary level (Figure 2). Only 27% are educated till secondary or above.

The distribution of occupation of the principal earner in the family shows a high share of drivers and auto-drivers as well as people in sales jobs. In Delhi, other major occupations are: construction labourer, tailors, security guards, etc. In Noida, the other major occupations are helpers, security guards and electricians.

Nearly 60% of the 545 sample children attend private tuitions. In view of this, both schooling and private tuition costs are discussed here.¹¹ Parents spend on an average ₹250–₹500 per month on school fees in Delhi and ₹400–₹600 per month in Noida per child at the primary level. They also spend ₹1,000–₹1,500 for annual charges in school and ₹3,000 and above annually for books and uniform for each child. Private tuition expenditure varies in a wide range of ₹80–₹450 per month.¹² Fees in the ₹80–₹250 range accounts for half the students attending tuition in Delhi and the corresponding share for Noida is 41%.

Monthly schooling cost, including private tuition, is in the range ₹650–₹1,300 per child for Delhi and ₹800–₹1,400 per child for Noida. Depending on the earnings of a typical family in the sites, with an approximate figure of ₹8,000–₹18,000 per month,¹³ the share in earnings could vary between 7% and 10%. More schoolgoing children would lead to a much higher share, and thus the cost implications for schooling and tuition are high for the sample low-income families.

Pupil–teacher ratios were found to be within the RTE-stipulated limits.¹⁴ The schools are equipped with drinking water, toilets, blackboards, etc. However, infrastructural facilities are poor with limited space, classroom number and size. Schools lack natural light and ventilation; small children are crammed in stuffy classrooms. Multigrade teaching was observed in some schools. Playgrounds are conspicuously absent. Sometimes terrace, or small courtyards are utilised for this purpose. One school each in Delhi and Noida appeared to be relatively big. Regulations for recruiting teachers seemed lax. Some teachers were found to be young and inexperienced undergraduates.

Learning Achievement and Language Issues

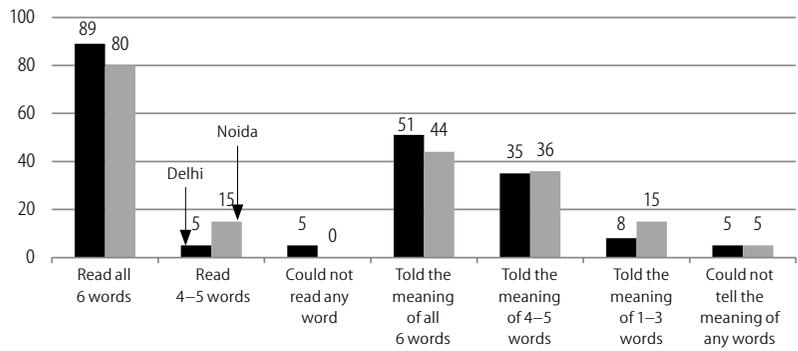
The three types of tests were administered. Test 1 was the ASER sample tests for Grade 1 level that evaluates the ability to read letters, simple words and simple sentences (ASER Centre nd). Children were required to identify some capital letters and small letters. They were asked to read six simple three-letter words, such as “cat,” “sun,” “red” and four simple sentences such as “What is the time?” and “This is a large house.” They were also asked to tell the meaning of the words and sentences. The reason behind introducing the additional dimension is to explore the students’ grasp of English at the end of primary level, which would indicate whether they can use and communicate in the language that is officially the medium of instruction.

In Test 2, 12 pictures showing activities, such as reading, running, eating, cooking, etc. were given to each child. The assessment included identifying the activity expressed in the English language and making any sentence in English about the activity. The latter would require using English on one’s own to communicate, since this was not a textbook-related question.

Test 3 involved each child being asked to read a passage from their English-language textbook and then explain the meaning in Hindi. This would test reading ability and comprehension.

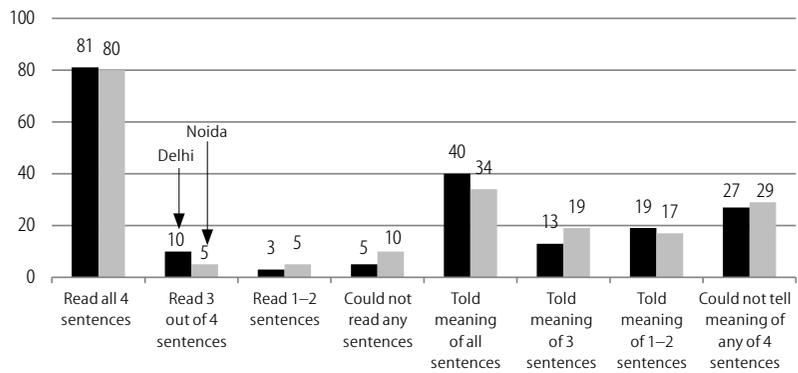
Results for Test 1 show that all students in Delhi and Noida can recognise alphabets, both capital and small letters.

Figure 3: ASER Test Results—Word



Source: Household survey 2016.

Figure 4: ASER Test Results—Sentence



Source: Household survey 2016.

The reading ability for simple words was good with 89% children in Delhi and 80% children in Noida able to read all six words (Figure 3). Two students in Delhi could not read a single word.

A high share of 80%–81% children in the two sites could read all four sentences (Figure 4), although some read haltingly. Four children in Noida and two in Delhi could not read even one sentence.

The performance declines when it comes to understanding the meanings of words (Figure 3). In Delhi, just half the interviewed children and in Noida, a little less than half (44%) could tell the meaning of all words. In each site, two children could not tell the meaning of any word.

The performance was much poorer for explaining the meaning of sentences (Figure 4). Around 35%–40% children in the two sites could tell the meaning of all four sentences. But nearly 30% children in each site could not tell the meaning even for a single sentence. This implies that these children would have reached the end of primary level without gaining any knowledge or understanding of English.

This has grave implications on two counts. One, given that most textbooks are written in English, performance in all other subjects (except vernacular) are likely to be adversely impacted. And two, the learning deficit is evidently carried through five or six years of schooling without detection or rectification.

In Test 2, 41%–43% of the children identified nine out of 12 pictures correctly, while only two children in Delhi could identify all 12 (Table 1). In Noida, none could identify all pictures

correctly. Two children in Delhi and one in Noida could not identify any picture correctly.

Often, children identified the activities and the investigator wrote these down; some children attempted to write, but spelling mistakes, such as “kring” for crying, “wocking” for walking, and “suming” in place of swimming were common. Thus, essentially the test captures knowledge and verbal skills rather than written skills. Another type of error was using nouns instead of verbs, although they were asked clearly in vernacular to describe what the person was doing. Rather than the name of the activity, such as drinking, eating, or knitting, children responded with “tea,” “lunch” and “sweater.”

Some 54% students in Delhi and 34% in Noida could not make a single sentence based on the activity in the picture (Table 1). This shows a lack of agency in the use of English among the sampled students. In Delhi, 34% children could make sentences for six or more pictures and this share was much higher at 48% for Noida. However, in Delhi, sample two children made all 12 sentences, while none in the Noida sample could achieve this.

To contrast with this performance of the interviewed students, we quote a paragraph from a typical English literature textbook for Class 5 in a sample school:

Once upon a time a king held a great feast and invited all her suitors. They all sat in a row, ranged according to their rank—kings and princes and dukes and earls and counts and barons and knights. When the princess came in, as she passed by them, she had something spiteful to say to each one.

The children are expected to read and understand such complicated sentences, yet those who made sentences mostly wrote simple sentences, such as “I am sleeping” or “She is cycling.” For these, too, grammatical mistakes occurred, such as “I am to cycling.”

Reading ability, according to results of Test 3, was found to be good as four-fifths of the Delhi students and nearly three-fourths of the Noida students could read the textbook passage given to them. However, the share of children who could

Table 1: Results of Test Based on Picture Identification

| Test Based on Picture | Delhi % of Students | Noida % of Students |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|
| Identification of activity | | |
| Identified all 12 pictures correctly | 5 | 0 |
| Identified 9–11 pictures correctly | 38 | 41 |
| Identified six or more pictures correctly | 78 | 61 |
| Could identify less than six pictures | 16 | 37 |
| Could not identify any picture | 5 | 3 |
| Making sentence about activity | | |
| Made sentences for all 12 pictures | 5 | 0 |
| Made sentences for 9–11 pictures | 24 | 34 |
| Made sentences for six pictures or more | 34 | 48 |
| Made sentences for less than six pictures | 8 | 17 |
| Could not make sentence for any picture | 54 | 34 |

explain the meaning of the passage was less than half. As more than half the interviewed children could not tell the meaning of what they had read, it raises grave questions about the efficacy of the teaching and learning process in the school during the primary level though successive grades.

Students' performance in learning achievement tests implies that despite improvement in reading ability, a backlog of lack of comprehension is carried through the classes during the primary level of schooling, a level of education which is supposed to act as a foundation for the succeeding years of education.

Private Tuition and Performance

The performance of children in terms of making sentences about the identified activity in the picture identification test was analysed to assess the impact of private tuition on the results. The number of overall responses (78) is too small to be analysed with quantitative tools. However, inferences can be made about any direct impact of the tuition on the children's performance. The comparative picture of scores for making sentences for picture identification (out of a total of 12) for those students in Delhi and Noida who attend private tuition are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Performance of Students Attending Private Tuition in Sentence-making Test

| Delhi | | | Noida | | |
|----------------|--------|-----------------|----------------|--------|-----------------|
| Student's Name | School | Score Out of 12 | Student's Name | School | Score Out of 12 |
| Vikram | SPS | 0 | Ratnesh | SR | 9 |
| Aman | SPS | 0 | Kanika | AG | 0 |
| Atonu | SVN | 0 | Priya | SSS | 1 |
| Shivani | SPS | 0 | Khushboo | RS | 0 |
| Nikhil | GS | 10 | Muskan | FB | 11 |
| Akhilesh | SG | 0 | Himanshi | SC | 9 |
| Preeti | RJ | 0 | Nitin | SC | 0 |
| Jyoti | RJ | 0 | Diksha | GT | 10 |
| Ashish | DV | 10 | Tushar | SDV | 8 |
| Rukmini | SVN | 7 | Satyam | SR | 3 |
| Roshan | SVN | 0 | Vishal | SR | 3 |
| Kamlesh | SNR | 0 | Khushbu | PT | 0 |
| Bittoo | ST | 0 | Rahul | HG | 6 |
| Muskan | SVN | 0 | Khushi | SC | 8 |
| Raj | SPS | 0 | Anjali | SC | 3 |
| Shiva | AP | 11 | Deepanshu | SC | 3 |
| Priyanka | RW | 1 | Nisha | KDP | 9 |
| Priya | GLR | 10 | Mehak | LRS | 0 |
| Riya | GS | 7 | Tanishka | SC | 11 |
| Bharat | GS | 10 | Khushbu | SR | 0 |
| Ritika | GLR | 12 | Bhaskar | RS | 7 |
| Shweta | KGP | 4 | Vaishali | SR | 0 |

Only the first names of the children are mentioned and school names have not been disclosed to prevent identification.

Out of the 22 students in Delhi who attended private tuition, 12 scored zero, that is 54% of the students could not write a single sentence on their own about the pictures given to them (Table 3). In Noida, this share was lower at 31% for seven students out of the 22 who attend private tuition. Overall, in both the sites, around half the students scored 3 or less out of 12. The scores in the higher end are more evenly distributed in Noida compared to Delhi. However, given that

a high share of 50%–55% of students who attend tuition performed very poorly, it appears that attending tuition has little association with performance in the given test that was not related to textbooks.

Table 3: Distribution of Scores* in Sentence-making Test for Students Attending Private Tuition

| Site/score | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
|------------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
| Delhi | 12 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| Noida | 7 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 0 |

* Scores are out of 12.

School quality is likely to have an impact on student performance, although from the small sample, there is no evidence of this. For instance, in Noida, relatively more students—five—attending the school referred by the abbreviation “sc” are found, but their scores vary widely (0, 3, 3, 9, 11). However, the inference of poor learning outcomes is drawn for the heterogeneous bunch of English medium LCPS and it may well be possible that a few schools among those might be bigger and/or of better quality than the large majority.

Reasons for Poor Learning in English

Language and teaching issues were probed during the survey from the perception of students and teachers. Questions for child interviews were grouped under five categories: language of instruction, teaching methods and assessment, child's comprehension of lessons, support system for studies and extra-curricular activities. Here, we focus on the responses for the first three categories of questions. The lack of support for studies at home for the sample children and the quality of the private tuition they access have been discussed earlier.

Language of instruction: English and Hindi are both used for teaching (Table 4). The teacher explains the lesson in class and the majority of children said that the explanation was in Hindi. Word meanings are usually explained in class.

Table 4: Summary of Responses Related to Language of Instruction

| | Delhi | Noida |
|--|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Which language is mostly used for teaching? | Both English and Hindi | Both English and Hindi |
| Does teacher explain lesson? | Yes | Yes |
| Explains lesson in which language? | Mostly Hindi | Mostly Hindi |
| Does teacher explain word meanings? | Yes | Yes |
| Questions in class asked in mostly which language? | English | English |
| Does child find it difficult to reply in English? | Yes | Yes |
| Does teacher give time to think in case of difficulty? | Yes | Yes |
| Does teacher help or scold if child takes time to answer? | Mostly help but some scold | Mostly help but some scold |
| Does the child find it easier to reply in vernacular than English? | Yes | Yes |

Three-fourths of the surveyed children in Noida and 62% in Delhi said that in class, questions are asked in English and a majority of them said that they find it difficult to reply in English. The teacher gives time to students to think if they cannot reply promptly. Around 60% students reported that the teacher helps them answer, but many also said that the

teacher scolds them if they cannot reply. Most said that they find it easier to reply in the vernacular compared to English.

Teaching methods and assessment: The teachers ask the children to read aloud from textbooks and help them if they face difficulty in reading, after which they explain the lesson in Hindi. The teachers' daily routine is that they come in, take attendance and teach (Table 5). Two children from a school in Noida said that their teacher comes in, sits and does nothing.

Table 5: Summary of Responses to Teaching Methods and Assessment

| Teaching Methods/Assessment | Delhi | Noida |
|--|--|--|
| Are children asked to read aloud from textbooks? | Yes; reads then explains in Hindi | Yes; reads then explains in Hindi |
| What is the daily routine for teacher? | Comes, takes attendance, checks homework (some), starts teaching. Some ask questions | Comes, takes attendance, checks homework (some), starts teaching. Some ask questions |
| Are group/pair activities given in class? | Yes, more (65%) | Yes, less (34%) |
| Are children asked to write/talk about something? | Many said yes: topics My school, my friend, etc. | 50% said yes, 50% said no Topics: similar |
| Does teacher stop teaching to check if students have understood? | Yes | Yes |
| Does teacher ask all or individually? | Mostly all together | Mostly all together |
| Does teacher pay attention to all or a few? | Usually addresses whole class | Usually addresses whole class |
| Use of teaching-learning material | Use of blackboard; less use of chart | Use of blackboard; less use of chart |
| Does teacher chat with students? | Most said yes; usually she talks and students respond | Most said yes; usually she talks and students respond |
| Does the teacher praise students? | Yes | Yes |
| Is homework given and from where? | Yes; mostly from textbook exercises | Yes; mostly from textbook exercises |
| Is copy checked and mistakes explained? | Yes | Yes; a few said teacher scolds/beats for mistakes |
| System of examination | Weekly and monthly. Some said thrice a year, some said once every two months. Fifty-seven percent reported *FA/SA system | Weekly and bi-annual. Some said once in two months. 66% reported FA/SA system |
| Whether marks and answer sheets are shown | Marks are shown; answer sheets shown only for weekly tests | Marks are shown; answer sheets shown for only weekly tests |
| Whether mistakes in examination answer sheets are explained | Most said no | Most said no |

*FA: formative assessment; SA: summative assessment.

Group and pair work are techniques for collaborative teaching that provide a chance for social interaction, where the teacher moves away from the role of authority and works as a facilitator (Raja and Saeed 2012; Rahaman 2014). Such activities have been found to facilitate a child's social and personal development, and they also enjoy working with their peers. Some 65% children in the Delhi sample said that they are given work in pairs/groups for science, poem learning, craftwork, math, drawing, environmental science, rangoli and for making charts, timetable, science projects, etc. In Noida, less group/pair activity was observed but activities mentioned were more varied and innovative such as

chart-making on the water cycle and food chain, science projects on waste management, photosynthesis, salad making, etc.

The children were asked whether the teacher asks them to talk or write about something in class, to understand the teacher's efforts towards developing children's own agency in using the English language. Half the students in Noida and a majority in Delhi responded in the affirmative. It was not clear whether this is given as homework, or students have to write extempore. The choice of topics indicates the former, in which case such activities do not help to assess their grasp over the English language, and rather show one more instance of rote learning. Some topics were: my city, my friend, the Prime Minister, animal life, my house, my dream, my school, newspaper reading, my family, my teacher, my vacation, thought of the day, Taj Mahal, freedom fighters and Gandhi. According to students, the teacher stops to ask whether they have understood, which may indicate an intent to ensure that learners progress simultaneously. However, this question is directed to the whole class, rather than individual students, so individual learning gaps may remain hidden.

The blackboard is the main teaching material used, and it is used for writing word meanings, questions and answers and diagrams. The work done in class is restricted to exercises in the books and two students in Delhi said that teachers mark answers in books.¹⁵ Most students said that charts are not used as teaching material.

There was an attempt to probe whether the child learns in an interactive atmosphere. The majority of respondents said that the teacher chats with students. Most said that the teacher talks and students respond, while a few said that the teacher speaks and the students listen. Children said that the teacher praises them often.

Teachers give homework regularly and mostly from textbook exercises. Only four students in Delhi and 10 in Noida said that they also get homework from outside their textbook. They have been asked to use the internet to find out about history, freedom fighters, for doing holiday homework, movie reviews and to source material for debates. The teacher checks homework and also explains mistakes to students.

The formative assessment and summative assessment system is prevalent in most of the schools. Marks for the examinations are conveyed to the children, but answer sheets are shown only for weekly tests and not for annual exams.

Before discussing the implications of the teaching methods, we take a look at the children's perception about understanding English lessons. Nearly half the children responded that they cannot follow their English lesson, which is supported by the Test 3 results. Children in both sample sites said that they like teachers who explain lessons well, teach nicely, are frank, make studies enjoyable, and those who do not scold.

Quality and training of teachers: The child interviews revealed that teachers are friendly. However, the teaching quality may be inadequate, as nearly half the children said that they cannot understand English lessons. Yet, the teacher interviews showed a lack of awareness regarding this poor comprehension. Teachers may not be making enough effort to assess each student's progress, perhaps in order to cover syllabus on time.

The student and teacher interviews also indicate that teachers assess students' performance with almost entire reliance on textbook exercises, the answers to which are provided by teachers or private tutors and memorised by students. Teachers do not ask children to attempt questions on their own, using their own choice of words. Rather they take memorised answers at face value, and hence, the learning gaps remain unidentified.

From the school surveys, it was found that few teachers have formal training. Many do not possess adequate education, let alone job experience, and have joined teaching right after passing the higher secondary level. The schoolteachers themselves often work as private tutors, raising doubts about their competence to provide additional insight for the students. When schoolteachers privately tutor students from their own school, there is a danger of compromising their independent judgment in marking/assessing those students. The teacher may also give less weightage to classroom teaching in relation to the private tuition classes.¹⁶

A few important observations from the preceding discussion help to explain the deficits in learning achievement and also the way learning deficits continue undetected through the primary levels, notwithstanding the fact that teachers appear to be friendly and approachable.

First, the teaching method shows that students read the lesson aloud and the teacher explains it in Hindi. Thus students practice reading, but cannot understand individual word meaning, or more importantly, how the English language sentence is constructed or the syntax thereof. They are unable to express their thoughts and ideas in English.¹⁷ Students are also not encouraged to decipher the meaning of the lessons themselves. Similar findings were reported for another study.¹⁸ Even if the meaning of some difficult words is supplied to the children, they do not know how to use those words and just memorise those. Again, teachers seldom ask students whether they have followed the lesson in the way it is written in English, rather the meaning in Hindi is stressed. This learning process based on translation and memorisation, inhibits actual learning of English language.

Second, teachers ask the class in general whether they have understood the lesson, which means the lack of comprehension of individual students does not become apparent. Third, the usual practice is to do exercises given in the textbook, the answers to which are often found in the lesson (and sometimes marked in the textbooks). This encourages rote learning. The grasp of a student over the language they are unfamiliar with is therefore hardly ever tested, leading to accumulated learning deficit over the years during the primary level itself. This has far-reaching implications for education in the higher classes.

Conclusions

We have seen that imparting education at the primary level through an unfamiliar language poses barriers for children attending English medium LCPS, and does not develop their agency in using English for communication. While reading ability was demonstrated to be good, the comprehension, be it in terms of simple words, sentences or passages from textbooks,

was quite poor. Their agency in using English on their own was revealed to be extremely limited.

Learning deficits continue to be hidden through successive grades due to translation- and memorisation-based teaching processes, and focus on textbook exercises. Such assessment does not probe a child's knowledge regarding a lesson, as it mostly involves reproducing fixed passages from the textbook. This unsatisfactory learning experience is compounded by inadequate competence of teachers and their apparent lack of motivation to probe the progress of individual students. The home factor is important since most children belong to low-income households with relatively low education levels, and thereby the child gets little help from home. Private tuition is their support system, but test results indicate that private tutors cannot help in improving children's grasp over the English language or in their agency in using the language for communication. This is not surprising given that many private tutors are schoolteachers themselves.

Parents do not get a fair exchange in return for committing their limited resources towards a decent education for their children, as reflected in the low-learning achievement of children in the key subject, English, as well as schooling and private tuition costs, which comprise substantial shares of the monthly household income. It needs to be underscored that these parents have low education levels, and lack the capability to assess the education quality. The cramped unhygienic conditions in LCPS, lack of regular sports activities, and limited extracurricular activities compound the inequities.

Thus, while English-medium LCPS appear to be filling a gap in demand for schooling fuelled by aspirations for English-medium education among poor parents, there is a high cost in terms of poor education quality for the children. However, this is an important segment of the education scenario in India, which may not only stay, but expand further in future. This avenue of school education thus demands serious attention by policymakers, especially in the areas of reform in teaching methods, teacher recruitment, and curricular reform, in order to improve the learning outcomes of children from low-income households who are being taught in a language that is miles away from their daily lives and transactions.

It is a welcome step that the National Education Policy, 2020 has provided renewed focus to the power of language. The policy advocates the need for classes in early years to be conducted in students' local languages. It has highlighted the importance of adopting a bilingual approach in teaching children whose language is different from the primary medium of instruction, including the use of bilingual teaching-learning materials. It states that "wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language" (MHRD 2020). These recommendations, in addition to the recommendation for creating an independent school regulatory authority for each state to prescribe basic uniform standards for public and private schools, will surely give hope towards quality education for the children attending low-cost private schools.

NOTES

- 1 Other unrecognised institutions and madrasas (recognised and unrecognised) accounted for 3% of enrolment in 2016–17.
- 2 Such schools are also called budget schools.
- 3 Study based in Noida.
- 4 Schools that are “unrecognised,” according to the RTE norms of school education, are not supposed to operate.
- 5 In one school in Delhi, the owner-cum-principal thought that we were sent by a rival school to gather information.
- 6 The principal researcher has benefited greatly from the comments provided by Anuradha De from Collaborative Research and Dissemination, Suman Bhattacharjea from ASER Centre and Amrish Dongre from Centre for Policy Research.
- 7 For details of the localities see Endow (2018).
- 8 In a single household, there are sometimes other children attending government schools, so some government schoolgoing children are also part of the sample.
- 9 These will be discussed in the section “Some Key Findings.”
- 10 The six assets are: washing machine, refrigerator, two-wheeler, computer/laptop, television, air cooler. Category 1 includes households with no asset and one out of six assets. Category 2 refers to those with two out of six assets; Category 3 to households with three or four assets out of six; and Category 4 includes those with four-wheeler/air conditioning or at least five out of six assets.
- 11 For a detailed discussion of costs, see Endow (2019).
- 12 This range of fees accounts for 85% of the responses.
- 13 The lower range is based on data for Priyanaka and Rajasthani Camp from an evaluation report for the Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) by the Institute for Human Development (IHD). The higher range is based on the fact that families with relatively better income levels than average are likely to send their children to private schools and also based on the principal researcher’s experience of working in the sites, taking into account that the main worker’s wages are often supplemented by earnings from domestic and other types of work by the spouse. Other sources indicate comparable figures: low-income families earning ₹9,000–₹20,000 per month and an all-inclusive fee of ₹500–₹1,650 per child per month charged at affordable private schools (FSG nd).
- 14 Figures could not be cross-checked.
- 15 Although others did not mention this specifically, marking answers seems to be a common practice, and is corroborated by teachers’ interviews which are not discussed here.
- 16 Private tuition is sometimes carried out within the school premises after school hours, which goes completely against ethical considerations.
- 17 Although they do have grammar classes, the children perceive grammar and literature as two separate compartmentalised subjects and grammar is not used for helping in reading, writing or understanding text.
- 18 “[T]eachers taught texts in English primarily by translating words, phrases, or sentences into Hindi ... The teaching-in-translation approach resulted in a series of problems ... This affected students’ ability to identify the meaning of individual words” (Bhattacharya 2013).

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