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# Let learners learn

Apart from focusing on specific skills, English classes need to break away from the teacher-centric models and foster independent learning among students

Language teaching must be distinct from the teaching of subjects like Maths, Physics, or Economics. Yet, current practices rarely reflect any such distinction, especially at school level. Language syllabuses outline ambitious objectives and learning outcomes such as to enable learners to become fluent and flawless users and to empower them to be 'autonomous' by mastering the language. They also aim to equip them to employ the language effectively and naturally in both formal and informal contexts. However, at the initial stages (Levels 1 and 2), the basic objective is imparting foundational skills and, by level 3, learners are expected to have acquired the core linguistic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (LSRW).

### Reality today

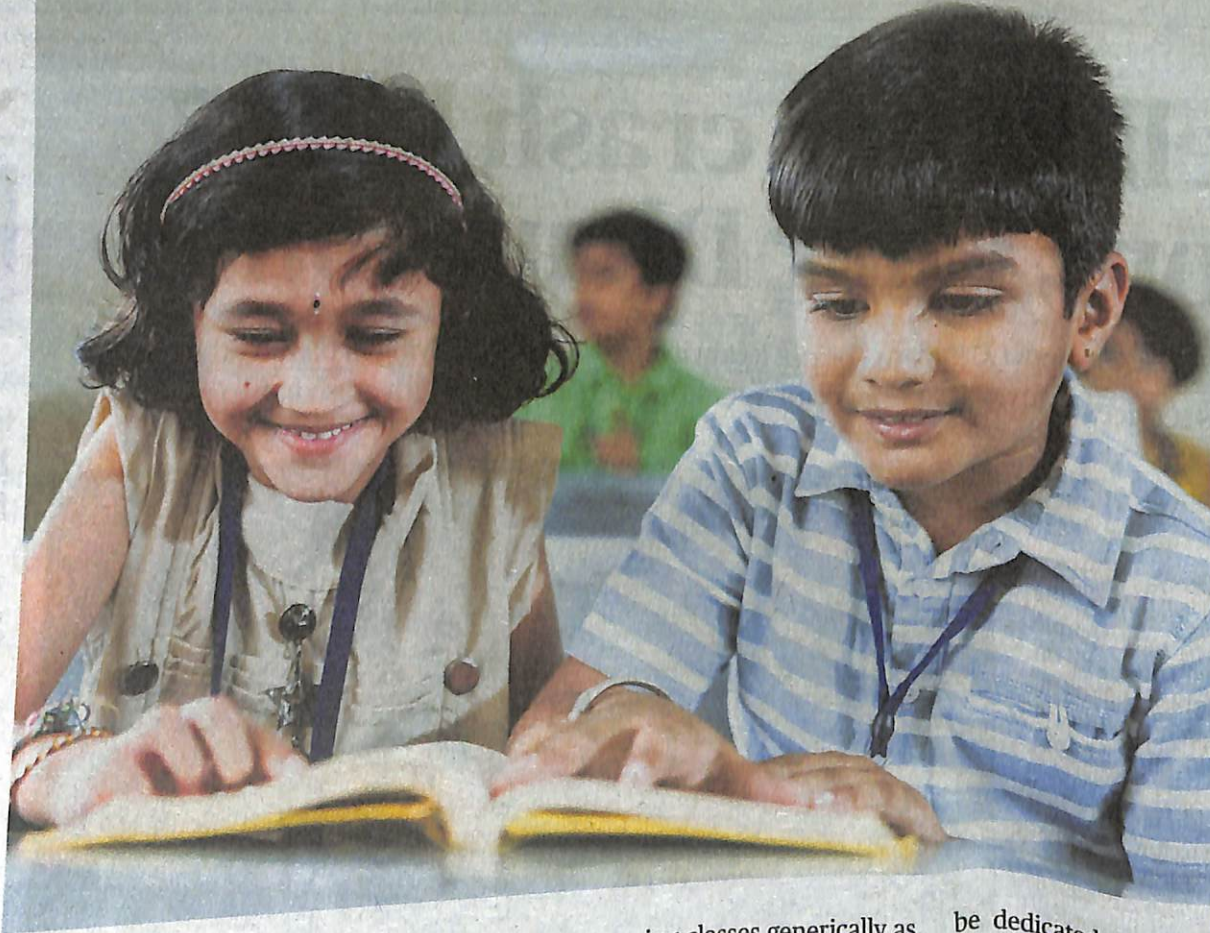
However, the reality of today's teaching-learning ecosystem tells us a different story, raising certain poignant questions: If learners have acquired the basic skills, why do teachers continue to re-teach them at higher levels? Why aren't they letting learners expand on their own to refine the acquired skills? Isn't the classroom engagement actually stifling their cognitive development by overemphasising teacher-led instructions? Why do teachers, even at the advanced stages, read

texts aloud and explicate them, instead of guiding learners to explore on their own? Shouldn't class time be devoted to acquainting learners with diverse reading texts and strategies to optimise their efforts? To materialise the stated objectives of teaching-learning of English, over-

hauling of the curriculum is a necessity. The first two of LSRW are innate human abilities, while the other two are acquired skills with reading typically preceding writing. As literacy fundamentally begins with reading, it demands prioritised attention. Instead of labelling

classes generically as 'English', timetables should specify the skills being dealt with. Signalling the shift, on each day, a period should be earmarked for a particular skill. Of the five periods in a week, two should be dedicated for Reading, as it is the 'mother of all skills', and one each can

be dedicated to Listening, Speaking and Writing. Moreover, reading classes must break free from the dated teacher-centric models. Learners should actively engage in the grandiose plan of learner-centric and learner-driven approaches a



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reality. This approach will foster learner 'independence' by shifting them away from teacher dependence. The role of a teacher should be restricted to organising 'tasks' – designing and organising activities in diverse formats such as individual, in pairs, triads, and small groups – ensuring inclusive participation of all.

### Wide range

J.K. Rowling once remarked, "If you are not interested in reading, you have not found the right book".

In a class of 30 or 40 students, no single text can appeal to all; hence, various kinds must be utilised. This requires an alternative syllabus construction, i.e., inclusion of 'seen' and 'unseen' texts. The 'seen' could be prescribed, but the 'unseen' should be identified by teachers and anchored on students' interests and needs, a practice adopted in progressive institutions.

Texts can span both fiction and non-fiction across multiple genres. Fiction, for instance, holds romance, mystery, horror, fantasy, sci-fi, and thrillers; similarly, non-fiction ranges from autobiographies, biographies, self-help, and travelogues, spiritual to scientific writings. Familiarity with this wide variety can facilitate learners to choose whatever interests them. Adults in their 40s and 50s confess that they may have read about 500 books, mostly

during their school and college days. This establishes the criticality of student days, for what they were to become later in their lives.

Reading, after all, is not just decoding but also involves comprehension, reflection and imagination, which enables them to be thinkers. So, to maximise their efforts, besides the text types, they must be introduced to strategies such as skimming, scanning, previewing, predicting, questioning, and inferencing. Mastery of these will accelerate the reading of more books with less time. For slogans such as 'job-ready', 'future-ready', or prepare for 'non-existent jobs', reading skills are the true foundation. 'Read to lead, and lead to read' is the maxim.

As language is for communicative purposes, 'noisy classes' are the norm. So, the cliched ideal of 'pin-drop silence' must be militated against. The censure of inability to acquire English is not owing to learners' incapacity, but systemic shortcomings.

The question remains: Are we truly ready to handle English courses differently? Subjects can be learnt through textbooks, but language demands efforts beyond textbooks, beyond teacher and classroom. The more one reads, the better they become.

The writer is a retired Professor of English and Chief Executive Chair of the English Language Teachers' Association of India

Think about the long term