

Examining the Role of Reading in Overcoming the Challenges of an Urdu-Medium School in Pune, India

Maryam Shaikh

Abstract

Students studying in Urdu-medium schools in India face a number of hurdles in their education, from poor infrastructure to a lack of access to quality reading materials. This paper discusses the educational scenario of one Urdu-medium school in Pune, India. As an intervention for the teaching of English, this paper outlines a lesson plan based on a culturally relevant story, taking into account theories of second language acquisition, dialogic teaching, and multilinguality. Classroom proceedings point to the benefits of reading stories: lowered affective filter, high vocabulary recall, improved critical thinking, all of which can enhance the language skills of the students, and improve the quality of education at Urdu-medium schools.

Keywords: Urdu-medium school, shared reading, dialogic teaching-learning, children's literature, multilinguality

Introduction

Year after year, reports highlight the poor performance of students belonging to the Muslim community in India (Sachar Committee, 2006; Mehta, 2023). Muslims have the lowest enrolment rates, and demonstrate a 17.6 per cent dropout rate from school due to socio-economic factors such as forced early employment, school inaccessibility, and more (Kurrien, 2021; Gouda & Sekhar, 2014, p. 80; Shaban, 2014, p. 27).

Many Muslims opt for schools where Urdu is the medium of instruction. These schools follow the state board curriculum. There are around 4,900

Urdu-medium schools in the state of Maharashtra, offering education to around 13 lakh students, from Standard 1 to 12 (Shaban, 2014, p. 2).

These schools, however, are reported as being terribly under-resourced (Shaban, 2014, p. 1) for various reasons such as the decrease in the budget allocation, reduction in the allocation of scholarships, ushering in the closure of schools, and resulting in a system that lacks equity and inclusivity (Ara, 2023). Urdu-medium schools therefore not only suffer from the shared struggles of low-fee schools, but also suffer from arbitrary government decisions targeted towards minorities. Researchers argue that concentrated attempts at strengthening the conditions of such schools can improve the educational and economic mobility of Muslims (Shaban, 2014, p. 2). This study, focusing on English language skills, is one such attempt.

Considering the adverse conditions of such schools, it is important to address the phenomenon of “unfavourable circumstances” that West (1960) characterizes as:

a class consisting of over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches (not sitting at individual or dual desks), accommodated in an unsuitably shaped room, ill-graded, with a teacher who perhaps does not speak English very well or very fluently, working in a hot climate. Moreover, the pupils in such schools are more subject to Elimination than those who are more favourably circumstanced; more of them leave school before completing the course; less of them go on from school to higher studies. (p. 1)

Maley (2001) adds how students studying in difficult circumstances have to walk to school after performing household chores, sit in crammed, dirty classrooms, and learn English from textbooks that may not be relevant. Because of the differences from classroom to classroom, Kuchah (2016) broadly sums up “difficult circumstances” as “those circumstances that are outside the control of teachers and learners but which affect their daily experiences of teaching and learning significantly” (p. 150).

Such conditions are often seen in Urdu-medium schools in India, termed as “rote learning factories” (Kurrien, 2021). Their drop-out rate is alarming, with only 10 per cent students reaching Standard 12, in Maharashtra (Shaban, 2014, p. 62). For higher education, students have no option but to select English or regional language (non-Urdu) undergraduate programmes. Due to their poor command of English,

students are “unable to deal with technical subjects”, resulting in failures and drop-outs (Zakaria, 2004, p. 413). Further, a lack of skills in English “deters the community’s effective integration with mainstream life and development, and also hinders its access to positions of power, profit and privilege” (Kurrien, 2021). To address these issues, specialized English language programs are essential.

While West (1960) argues for extensive reading as a means to build English language skills, this poses as a challenge for Urdu-medium students who do not have exposure to quality reading material. Urdu-medium schools have fewer libraries than their English and Marathi-medium counterparts. Only 7 per cent of Urdu-medium schools employ a librarian, making the “library” a mere collection under lock and key, where books, magazines, newspapers are rarely read (Shaban, 2014, pp. 82-3). The lack of exposure to reading materials hampers students’ language acquisition, explaining their poor performance in English.

Considering the pressing needs of students in Urdu-medium schools on one hand, and the importance of English as a language of opportunity on the other, this study offers a possible intervention for the teaching of English. This paper consists of two sections, the first discussing the educational scenario of an Urdu-medium school in Pune, while the second discusses observations from a lesson as part of the intervention.

Educational Scenario of an Urdu-Medium School

Semi-structured interviews were held with an English language teacher, school principal, and students of Standard 8, from a government-aided, co-educational Urdu-medium school in Pune, in December 2023. The school is located in a low-income, Muslim-dominated neighbourhood consisting of migrant families. The school was selected as it reflects several characteristics of a typical Urdu-medium school, with its high student-teacher ratio, staff shortage, absence of a functioning library, etc. Despite its shortcomings, the school is regarded as an asset by parents, as it fulfils its function of providing secular and linguistically and culturally-rich education, especially for girls, with practical benefits such as midday meals and negligible tuition fees.

Experiences of the Students

Students were very eager to share the challenges they face, immediately pointing to the poor infrastructure, such as the lack of a ceiling fan,

absence of clean toilets, noisy surroundings, and more. The lack of space and staff shortage has resulted in a skewed ratio of almost 80 students per teacher. The congested spaces make part of the classroom inaccessible to teachers and students, resulting in a constricted learning experience.

Students are unable to manage a healthy balance between study and play. Shedding light on the home life of the students, the teacher explained how a few female students are engaged as midwives for their mothers, managing child births at home. This means students often miss school for weeks. Similarly, male students are encouraged to start earning as soon as possible, performing odd jobs at local businesses. The frame of mind of such students is far removed from learning, hampering the quality of education.

Experiences of the Teachers

Teachers have the burden of engaging a classroom consisting of students more than twice the number recommended by the Right to Education Act (2009, p. 15). In the school under study, the English teacher is tasked with teaching English to 8th, 9th and 10th Standard students, preparing them for scholarship exams, performing the duties of a class teacher, and teaching Social Studies, Hindi, and Marathi, to all three secondary classes. This puts immense pressure on the teacher who lacks time to assess her students' work and share tailored feedback. Expressing her condition, she says, "I would love to conduct English games and activities for the students, but how much can I do?"

Additionally, the school principal explains that parents pay minimal attention to the quality of education their children receive, given that most students are first-generation learners. "Parents place their children in school with the intention that after Standard 10, they will either get married, or get jobs. There is little to no focus on education", she says. The low motivation levels and lack of importance associated with education is a challenge that the school has to consistently deal with.

Other Observations by the Author

Teaching in unfavourable circumstances leads to language lessons characterized by teacher-centric lectures and explicit grammar instruction, resorting to the safety of routines and patterns (West, 1960, pp. 2-4; Prabhu, 1992). Students repeat sentences such as the "thought

for the day” produced by the teacher, adopting a passive role. Such a methodology hinders the language development of the students, lowers their motivation levels, and reduces their autonomy.

To understand how this impacts students’ English language performance, a diagnostic test was conducted, revealing a mean score of 32.72 per cent. Students performed poorly in reading comprehension, with a mean score of 27.5 per cent. While they were able to selectively pick up keywords in a reading passage and respond to direct questions, they were unable to comprehend its overall meaning, express their opinions, or share inferences.

Interestingly, it was observed that students could read with relative fluency, but were lacking in reading comprehension. Sentences were read aloud, but were not understood. This dissonance between reading fluency and reading comprehension was acknowledged neither by the teacher, nor by the students.

Considering the compounded difficulties affecting the quality of learning English, this paper seeks to offer a possible intervention, taking into account the effectiveness of extensive reading, through texts that are socio-culturally relevant and aligned with the curriculum expectations (Maley, 2001; West, 1960).

Shared Dialogic Reading: A Possible Intervention

This paper argues for the use of stories as a possible intervention to deal with the challenges of teaching English in an Urdu-medium school. The theoretical underpinnings for this intervention, and the outline of one such lesson are discussed below.

Second Language Acquisition

The Input Hypothesis suggests that language acquisition depends on the learner receiving enough comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981). Further, it is argued that reading can serve as the primary mode for language acquisition, as it offers inputs that are both comprehensible and compelling. Reading for pleasure becomes a key factor to increase student motivation levels, improve attitudes towards reading, and lower affective filters (Krashen, 1981; 2004).

Additionally, the use of stories focuses on a balance between input and output, encouraging students to interact with each other. This

engagement allows students to notice their output with reference to the learners, tutors, and texts around them, leading to self-correction and language acquisition (Swain, 2005; West, 1960).

Dialogic Teaching-Learning

The intervention takes into account the importance of a dialogic classroom. Teachers should not be “Protagonists on the Platform,” but facilitators (West, 1960, p. 15). Dialogic teaching creates an environment that is cumulative, supportive, and creative (Phillipson & Wegerif, 2017). Such a “pedagogy of partnership” entails “involving students in the sourcing and selection of teaching materials”, and “involving them as partners in the teaching process” by engaging in group discussions, creating their own reading resources, and more (Kuchah, 2016, p. 152).

Such a dialogic pedagogy allows the teacher to identify errors made by students, and create a customized learning experience (Kuchah, 2016, p. 152). Grammar instruction can be tailored to the students’ needs, to “bring authenticity to the learning experience, provide opportunity for more learner-learner collaboration, enhance negotiation of meaning, motivate young learners and develop as well as take into account learner agency” (p. 155).

Multilinguality

To adapt these theories to an Indian, Urdu-speaking classroom, the concept of “multilinguality” is incorporated, allowing for a play of more than one language (Agnihotri, 2014). Thus, languages such as Standard English accessed through the textbook, along with Urdu, Hindi, Marathi, and the varied languages of the students and teachers are seen to co-exist in the classroom. When negotiating the meaning of an English text, students are encouraged to use their multilingual resources. For example, to convey the meaning of the word “mentor”, students made use of the Japanese concept of “sensei,” one they were familiar with through anime, followed by the Hindi “guru” and the Urdu “ustad”. This ability to fluently manoeuvre across languages and registers is regarded as an asset. Allowing for harmony between a functional language such as English and the varied vernacular languages reflects the real-life experiences of the students, and offers an alternative model to English language teaching, one that does not centre English at the cost of the multilingual diversity of the classroom.

Story-Based Lesson Plan

The lesson plan in Table 1 is developed keeping in mind the above theoretical framework. It is based on the text *Stage Fright*, written by Yamini Vijayan (2018) and illustrated by Somesh Kumar, relating the story of Champa, who overcomes her fear of public speaking. The lesson is divided into pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading sections (Grabe & Stoller, 2011, p. 132).

Table 1. Lesson Plan on the Text Stage Fright

Aim of the lesson		To understand the concept of character; to understand and use adjectives
Grammar in focus		Using adjectives in sentences in the Simple Present tense
Vocabulary		marvellous, terrible, terrific, terrifying, amazing, smooth, strong, clammy, silly, stage fright, rehearsal, advice
Class		Standard 8
Activity		Description
1.	Pre-reading	Ask students about their experience with public speaking: are they confident, nervous or anxious? Explain, through code-switching, the concept of “stage fright” and the use of the target vocabulary.
2.	While-reading	Read the story aloud, followed by students reading it aloud, in pairs.
3.	Story prediction	Pause the reading in the middle of the story (p. 12) and ask students to predict what happens next, with reasons. Write the predictions on the board. Complete the reading.
4.	Post-reading	As part of a whole-group discussion, students can share the new words they learnt, the illustrations they liked, or questions they may have.
5.	Post-reading	Conduct a small-group discussion on the character of Champa: her self-expression through song, her friendship with Basant, her emotional state, her community support, and her growth, assigning one topic to each group. Write phrases in Simple Present Tense such as “she feels, she thinks, she sings” etc. on the blackboard, to facilitate the discussions.

6.	Student presentations	Students can present their group discussions with the rest of the class. They can choose to speak in any language they are comfortable with, but can be prompted to use the target vocabulary.
7.	Take-home assignment	Imagine you have to sing a song in public, on Republic Day. How will you manage your emotions? Write a short story taking inspiration from <i>Stage Fright</i> .

Classroom Proceedings and Analysis

Comprehensible Input

The story was selected for its cultural and thematic familiarity, depicting a scene in India among friends and family, expressing the theme of stage fright. This decision to read a relatable story aligns with Maley (2001), who is critical of textbooks that represent characters engaged in situations which are far removed from the daily experience of students. The relatability of *Stage Fright* reduces the gap between the home language and English, and helps overcome one kind of alienation students may experience.

During the lesson, it was noted that the repetition of sentence structures in the text helped reinforce meaning. The inherent metre in sentences like “She sings through the rain. She sings through the heat,” brought ease and rhythm to the reading experience.

Additionally, students found the play of sounds amusing, such as in sentences like, “She makes her voice go up and down and down and up...”, or the exaggerated spelling of “loooooong breaths”, capitalizations such as “YES,” “SQUEAK”, or boldface in “**Thud! Thud!**”. Such orthographic features that play with the senses captured students’ attention. The reading of the story involved “Meaning & Sound & Sight”, creating a compelling experience with triple impact (West, 1960, p. 20).

Illustrations

Students depended heavily on the illustrations to comprehend the text. The Indian setting put them at ease, along with the humour incorporated in the story and illustrations. The text was read thrice by the students, and each reading resulted in laughter, maintaining a low affective filter, and ensuring a thorough recall of the story.

The illustrations also prompted certain facial expressions. Imperative

sentences such as “take a long and deep breath”, “give me your widest smile”, etc. were used in the classroom, merging the act of reading for pleasure with a Total Physical Response strategy (Asher, 1969). The result was effective. A week later, students were able to recall the meaning of these phrases, and through inductive reasoning grasped the strategies to overcome their own stage fright. The playful use of sounds and gestures incorporated in the story, amplified through the illustrations, allowed for the engagement of diverse learners and learning styles.

Much of the lesson focused on building a Minimum Adequate Vocabulary. As West (1960) argues,

Unless the learner acquires reasonably fluent use of an effective vocabulary, he will not go on talking after he leaves school; and if he does not go on speaking the language after he leaves school, he will not go on learning: on the contrary he will soon forget what he has learnt. (p. 38)

Merging the target vocabulary with a high-interest story allows for greater retention. Students volunteered to make several sentences using the target vocabulary, such as: “This wall is terrible” (pointing to the cracked wall in the classroom), “My friend writing is so terrible”, “Basant is best friend of Champa”, and more. Students made appropriate use of adjectives and employed the Simple Present Tense in their sentences, through negotiations between the text, the teacher, and each other, without explicit grammar instruction.

Group Discussion and Presentation

Despite studying together till Standard 8, students were unfamiliar with the concept of a group discussion, finding it difficult to step out of the teacher-centric routine. While they freely discussed the prompts within their groups, they were not confident sharing their opinions with the larger classroom. Taking into account Krashen’s (1981) emphasis on a lowered affective filter and the silent period, students were not pressured to speak in English. Students employed translanguaging techniques by speaking in Urdu, but used key words in English with the help of a multilingual word bank, which consisted of the target English vocabulary, along with its synonyms in Urdu, Hindi and Marathi. Translanguaging was noted in sentences like “Republic Day programme ke liye **rehearsal** karna important hai”, “Champa ko **stage fright** hota hai”, etc.

The students' first-hand experience in stage fright allowed them to empathize with Champa. They also took inspiration from the support the character Basant extends to Champa, and accompanied their classmates to the front of the class. Explaining this gesture, a student said, "My friend needs a support system", without realizing he was speaking in English.

Critical Thinking

Students were able to tap into different texts to enrich their critical analysis, and related the story of *Stage Fright* to that of *My Name is Bana*, which they had read in the previous lesson. The latter narrates the story of Bana, an activist and public speaker from Syria, who seeks refuge in Turkey due to the war (Alabed & Riaz, 2021). Drawing a connection between the two stories, students came up with the following sentence: "Bana tells Champa about war in Syria. Champa feels terrible".

While the sentence seems simple, it reflects an understanding of several aspects covered in the lesson: the use of the Simple Present Tense; the comprehension and use of the word "terrible"; the recall of the stories about Bana and Champa; the geopolitical awareness of the war in Syria; its impact on the different characters, and more. These nuances are significant considering the fact that the students were previously very hesitant to form English sentences, and received no explicit grammar instruction.

Giving evidence from the text, students also problematized the story *Stage Fright*, and introduced the question of whether Basant is "poor", to understand why he did not feature as the protagonist. Some others argued that Basant is a "jasoos" (spy), resulting in the introduction of new vocabulary such as "spying". Students were willing to consider the characters as real, complex humans, and questioned the underlying narrative of the text, during the language lesson.

Inspired by the texts and the classroom discussions, a group of four students came up with the following story:

Ten years later, Champa become a popular singer. Champa and Basant going to their stage to Turkey for singing. Then he performing. He is so good. Champa going to her home, but miracle. Champa meet Bana. Bana was giving a lecture for her Syria. Champa is so impressed by its lecture. Champa speak, "Hi Bana." Bana say, "Hi! Wow, you are famous singer." And she becomes her close friend. Then, Champa and Bana go

to different country in the world and sing and give lecture together.

The exposure to reading texts such as *Stage Fright* inspired students to be writers of their own stories, allowing them to experiment with their English language skills, and build on their knowledge of world affairs. This also led to the creation of new reading material produced by students, for future language learning (Kuchah, 2016, p. 154). The students' story conveys the underlying theme of the power of communication, whether it be through Champa's song, Bana's lectures, or the story written by the students themselves, which can go a long way in bringing about a change in the world. Through stories, the students were able to appreciate the value of the spoken word, and contemplate on what the amplification or the silencing of a voice may mean.

Conclusion

While the challenges faced by students in Urdu-medium schools may be considerable, concentrated efforts such as the introduction of compelling, comprehensible, well-illustrated stories, may change the way students approach the English language, one which they are motivated to learn, but are equally anxious about. With appropriate teacher training and awareness amongst school managements about the benefits of reading, a sustainable strategy can be developed. This can be implemented through free voluntary reading, group discussions, role-plays, and more, by a conscious selection and distribution of books from the school library, or through open-access resources available online. This would motivate students to read stories on a regular basis, improve their language skills, adopt a global perspective, and gain the confidence to voice their opinions. A shared dialogic reading programme can therefore improve the English language skills of the students, boost the quality of education at Urdu-medium schools, and serve as one of the ways to overcome their many challenges.

References

- Agnihotri, R. K. (2014). Multilinguality, education and harmony. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 11(3), 364–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2014.921181>
- Alabed, B., & Riaz, N. (2021). *My name is Bana*. Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

- Ara, I. (2023, February 7). Budget cut for Minority Affairs Ministry intensifies. *The Hindu*. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/news/budget-cut-for-minority-affairs-ministry-intensifies/article66462801.ece>
- Asher, J. J. (1969). The total physical response approach to second language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 53(1), 3-17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/322091>
- Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2011). *Teaching and researching reading (2nd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Gouda, S. M., & Sekher, T. V. (2014). Factors leading to school dropouts in India: An analysis of national family health survey-3 data. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 4(6), 75-83.
- Krashen, S. D. (1981). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Pergamon Press Inc.
- Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The power of reading: Insights from the research (2nd ed.)*. Libraries Unlimited.
- Kuchah, K. (2016). ELT in difficult circumstances: Challenges, possibilities and future directions. In T. Pattison (Ed.), *IATEFL 2015 Manchester Conference Selections* (pp. 149-160). IATEFL.
- Kurrien, J. (2021, March 25). The significant limitations of Urdu medium schooling. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/education/exam-results/the-significant-limitations-of-urdu-medium-schooling-101616571303110.html>
- Maley, A. (2001). The teaching of English in difficult circumstances: Who needs a health farm when they're starving? *Humanising Language Teaching* 3/6 November. <http://old.hlomag.co.uk/nov01/mart4.htm#top>
- Mehta, A. C. (2023). *The state of Muslim education in India: A data-driven analysis*. Education for all in India. <https://educationforallinindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/the-state-of-muslim-education-in-india-by-ArunCMehta-based-on-UDISEPlus-AISHE-2023.pdf>
- Phillipson, N., & Wegerif, R. (2017). The thinking together approach to dialogic teaching. *Deeper Learning, Dialogic Learning, and Critical Thinking*, 32-47. 10.4324/9780429323058-3.
- Prabhu, N. S. (1992). The dynamics of the language lesson. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26(2), 225-241. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587004>
- Right of children to free and compulsory education act, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, Act 35, (2009). https://upload.indiacode.nic.in/schedulefile?aid=AC_CEN_9_9_00006_200935_1517807327595&rid=342
- Sachar Committee. (2006). *Sachar committee report*. Ministry of Minority Affairs, Government of India.
- Shaban, A. (2014). *Draft of Urdu medium schools in Maharashtra: An assessment of their infrastructure and possibility of developing them in model schools*. Tata

- Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. https://mdd.maharashtra.gov.in/Site/Upload/Pdf/Combined_Urdu_medium_Schools_report.pdf
- Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis: Theory and research. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 471-483). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410612700-34>.
- Vijayan, Y. & Kumar, S. (2018). *Stage fright*. Pratham Books
- West, M. (1960). *Teaching English in difficult circumstances: Teaching English as a foreign language with notes on the technique of Textbook Construction*. Longmans.
- Zakaria, R. (2004). *Indian Muslims: Where have they gone wrong?* Popular Prakashan and Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

Maryam Shaikh is a Research Fellow, Humanities and Social Sciences Department, IISER Pune.
maryam.k.shaikh@gmail.com