

**English Teaching in Government Primary Schools  
An Evaluation of the West Bengal-British Council Program**

**Pratham-ASER Centre  
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**1. Introduction**

Since 2007, British Council has been supporting the state government of West Bengal (WB) in its efforts to improve English language teaching and learning standards. The focus has been on designing an English syllabus, rewriting the textbook series at primary levels, and providing the new graded text books. The effort has been led by Ray MacKay and a team of 10 resource persons, identified by the West Bengal Board of primary Education, in consultation with the British Council.

Pratham/ASER Centre conducted a field study to evaluate the progress of the program in 16 districts of West Bengal. The study was carried out in 43 days during August-September, 2011, in 91 schools of 16 districts of the state. Of these 91 schools 48 schools were randomly selected,<sup>1</sup> from a frame provided by the West Bengal Primary Education Board and 43 were pre-selected by the Primary Education Board. The sample, therefore, is part purposive and part random.

The evaluation was based on 3 broad domains:

- I. Classroom observation --\_done in English classrooms of classes 1 – 4 in the selected schools. The objective was to record classroom organization and teaching practices in the classroom. A total of 139 classrooms were observed in the 91 selected schools – 72 in the sampled schools and 67 in the non-sampled schools.
- II. Group Questionnaire – administered to Class 1 – 4 English teachers. The objective was to understand teacher practices from their perspective as opposed to observation. Teachers were asked to fill out a detailed questionnaire on availability of English materials, their appropriateness in terms of topics and difficulty, time spent on different tasks like working in groups, types of mistakes they most often correct, method of evaluation, etc. Responses were received in 87 schools out of a total of 91 schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Systematic random sampling was employed to select the sample of schools.

- III. Teacher Information – administered individually to teachers. This format focused on individual characteristics of the teachers with special focus on training. Responses were received by a total of 258 teachers in 88 schools. Of these 135 were in the sampled schools (46) and 123 in the non-sampled schools (42).

## **2. Classroom Observation**

This part of the survey questionnaire was based entirely on observation in selected schools and classrooms. Apart from observing classroom teaching practices, the field investigators also recorded basic school characteristics like infrastructure and enrollment; classroom environment and availability of books; and language of communication in class.

A total of 139 classrooms were observed in 91 schools – 72 in the sampled schools and 67 in the non-sampled schools. Detailed tables are available in Appendix 1.

### **2.1 School characteristics**

- a. Of the 91 schools visited 35.6% schools had electricity, 88.9% toilet, 83.3% water facility, 43.3% playground and only 3.4% had a functional library. Clearly, there are large gaps in basic infrastructure provision.
- b. 56.7% schools had 4 or more regular teachers, 25.6% with 3 and 17.8% had 2 or fewer regular teachers.
- c. 16.1% schools had an enrollment of more than 200 pupils, 41.4% between 100 – 199 students and 42.5% less than 100.
- d. No electricity was found in all schools that were visited in 5 districts. However, more non-sampled schools had electricity, toilets, water, playground and library than the sampled schools. The difference is quite significant in electricity and water. Libraries were practically nonexistent in both sets of schools, with a functioning library present in only 1 sampled school and 2 pre-selected schools.
- e. The non-sampled schools had significantly more teachers – 71% had 4 or more teachers compared to 44% of sampled schools. On average there were 3.8 regular teachers per school – 3.3 in the sampled schools vs 4.3 in the non-sampled schools.

## 2.2 Classroom observation

- a. Overall the sample of classrooms observed was distributed uniformly across classes 1 – 4, with slightly more Std.3 (30%) classrooms being observed than Std. 1 (20%).
- b. Teaching activity was observed inside the classroom, as opposed to outside, in more than half of the schools visited. About 25% of the classrooms observed were multi-grade in nature – more so in non-sampled schools than sampled schools. The sitting arrangement was predominantly children sitting in lines.
- c. Most classes had blackboards, with the classes of the sampled schools a little more than the non-sampled schools. TLM was visible in half the classrooms, significantly more so in the non-sampled schools. Very little children's work was on display – in only about 14% of the classes; again the non-sampled school had an edge over the sampled schools.
- d. Most children (over 90%) had their own copy of MEB. But less than half the teachers had a copy of the teacher's book; however, almost all who had them were seen to be using it in the class.
- e. In the sampled schools, more teachers preferred using local language, when teaching English. Only 11.1% of them gave instructions solely in English, as compared to 46.3% in the non-sampled schools. Almost 50% used only the local language to give instructions, as compared to under 20% in the non-sampled schools. Similarly, close to 50% translated English content into local language compared to fewer than 20% in the non-sampled schools.
- f. Children are fairly comfortable greeting teachers in English -- 22.2% of the pupils in the sampled schools and 43.3% in the non-sampled schools were seen to be greeting the teachers in English all the time.
- g. Children rarely used English to ask questions; only 1.4% in sampled schools were observed using English predominantly to ask questions. No child in the non-sampled schools was found to be asking questions in English all the time. However, when it came to replying in English the non-sampled schools fared better than the sampled schools -- 22.4% compared to 8.3%. Even in speaking to the peers in English, the non-sampled school children felt more comfortable than the children of the sampled school, with 30% and 11%, respectively, using English all the time.
- h. No child was observed to be chanting rhymes in English all the time in the sampled schools; whereas 7.5 of the children in the chosen schools were found doing so.

- i. The children of the sampled schools were noticed to be better than the sampled schools when playing games in English. With 14.9% and 8.3%, respectively, using English all the time.

### **3. Group Questionnaire**

A group questionnaire was administered, to English teachers of classes 1 – 4, on a wide range of classroom issues, such as availability of books, contents in the books, usage of English, activities based on MEB, ways of tackling a child's mistakes by the teacher, method of evaluation in the class and impact on teaching methods.

Responses were received from teachers in 87 schools – 46 in the sampled schools and 41 in the non-sampled schools. Detailed tables are available in Appendix 2.<sup>2</sup>

#### **3.1 Availability of books**

- a. Almost all children have books across all classes (close to 95%), in both sampled and non-sampled schools.
- b. About 80% of children received the book at the start of year across all classes. However, this proportion was slightly higher in the non-sampled schools. However, according to teachers, across Std. 1 to Std. 4 almost 50% of the children received the books after the school year.<sup>3</sup>
- c. Between 35-40% of teachers, across classes 1-4, reported that old books were given to the next batch of students.
- d. About 80% teachers reported that books were received from the SI's office.

#### **3.2 Appropriateness of material**

- a. Between 67% of teachers in Std. 1 to 77% teachers in Std. 4, found the topics of the book appropriate for the class. However, a larger proportion of teachers in the non-sampled schools agreed about the appropriateness of the material.

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<sup>2</sup> Responses in this section were self-reported by teachers. Where there are common domains, it is possible, therefore, that they don't match with responses from the classroom which are solely based on observation. And it is also possible, that responses contradict each other to questions which are framed differently but are eliciting the same information.

<sup>3</sup> Here the question was framed as "when did the children receive their books?" and the choices were "before the school year"; "after the school year"; or "did not take place". The response was in contradiction to the response received to the earlier question that simply asked whether children got a new book at the start of the school year.

- b. Over 50% of the teachers found the difficulty level to be appropriate for their classes.
- c. A majority of the teachers in class 3 and 4 found the grammar level appropriate for their classes. However, only 40% of the teachers in Std. 1 found that to be the case.
- d. Over 70% of teachers in all classes found the spelling and vocabulary content to be appropriate.
- e. Over 80% of the teachers, in classes 1-3, found the activities in the book to appropriate for their respective classes. Even in Std. 1 the response was about 80%.
- f. The teachers of higher Stds.3 and 4 found the stories in the books appropriate to their respective class. The rate of agreement progressively increases from Std 1 to Std 4.
- g. The rhymes seemed to be more appropriate in the lower classes of Std 1 and Std 2, with more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the teachers agreeing. However the agreement progressively goes down in higher classes, from 69% in Std. 3 to 61% in Std 4.

### 3.3 Time on Task

Teachers were asked how much time they spent on each of the following activities in class: group activities like the whole class listening or repeating, children working in groups/pairs, children learning a rhyme and children doing exercises.

- a. In Std. 1 and 2, most time is spent on listening and repeating activities for the class as a whole and the least time on doing exercises in books. There is very little variation across the two types of schools.
- b. Older children, in Std. 3 and 4, in contrast spend more time doing exercises and working in pairs. Not surprisingly, the least time is spent on learning rhymes. In these classes, there is some variation in the pattern across the two types of schools.

### 3.4 Usage of English book (MEB)

- a. Most teachers responded saying they use MEB all the time – the proportion varied from about 94% in Std. 1 to 92% in Std. 3 and 4. However, more sampled school teachers seem to use the English book all the time as compared to teachers in the non-sampled schools. The difference ranges from 5.5 percentage points in Std. 2 to 3.3 percentage points in Std. 3 and Std. 4.
- b. About 40% teachers across all classes admitted using other supplemental material part of the time.

### 3.5 Remedial Action

Teachers were asked how often they corrected different kinds of mistakes children made while studying English – grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. In addition, they were also asked the method they used to correct these mistakes – repeating after them, speaking correctly but not asking children to repeat after them and finally letting children correct each other.<sup>4</sup>

- a. In all classes, 1 – 4, pronunciation was the most often corrected mistake, followed by vocabulary and grammar. Close to 70% of the teachers said that they corrected pronunciation mistakes all the time, as compared to about 65% for vocabulary and in excess of 60% for grammar. In Std. 4, the proportion of teachers saying that they corrected all three different kinds of mistakes all the time was similar and close to 70%.<sup>5</sup> There are slight variations across the two different kinds of schools in Std. 3.
- b. In Std. 2, 3, and 4 teachers preferred to let children correct each other's mistakes – 75% of the teachers across the 3 grades. This option was closely followed by teachers asking children to repeat after them – in excess of 60%.<sup>6</sup> In Std 1, however, asking children to repeat after them was employed more often than children correcting each other. This is understandable for the younger children of Std. 1.

### 3.6 Evaluation<sup>7</sup>

- a. In Std. 1 – 3, the most commonly used method of evaluation in the oral test. Around 50% teachers said that they used an oral test to evaluate the children all the time. In Std. 2 and 3, the written test was a close second, with just under 50% of the teachers saying that they used it all the time. In contrast in Std. 1, the written test was predominantly used by only 20% of the teachers, which is not surprising. By Std. 4, however, the written test is the preferred method of evaluation, with close to 60% teachers saying that they used it all the time.
- b. MEB is the sole resource for evaluation in 30% schools. In 20% of the schools it is never used. More schools from the non-sampled set use MEB for evaluation.

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<sup>4</sup> No response was significant in these sets of questions.

<sup>5</sup> Since teachers were allowed to give multiple responses, the percentage of teachers across the 3 types of mistakes will not add to 100%.

<sup>6</sup> Here again, due to multiplicity of responses, percentages will not add up to 100%.

<sup>7</sup> No response was significant in these sets of questions.

### 3.7 Impact on teaching practices

Teachers were asked to think about the way they teach and asked how the following have affected their teaching practices: teacher's book; teacher's companion; MEB training; their own experience; observing other teachers; and pre-service training. They were asked to rank each of these in terms of most impact, some impact and no impact.<sup>8</sup>

- a. From the choices, teachers ranked MEB training and teacher's book highest. Across all classes, almost 60% said that these two had had the most impact on their teaching practices. On the other hand, they did not find the teacher's companion as useful.
- b. There was some variation between classes. Teachers in Std. 1 and 2 ranked MEB training above the teacher's book, while teachers in Std. 3 and 4 ranked the teacher's book higher than MEB training.
- c. Most teachers indicated that pre-service training and observing other teachers had little impact on their way of teaching.

## 4. **Teacher Information**

Apart from the group questionnaire, a separate was administered individually to teachers as well. This format focused on individual characteristics of the teachers with special focus on training. It also included information on usage and ownership of MEB by teachers.

Responses were received by a total of 258 teachers in 88 schools. Of these 135 were in the sampled schools (46) and 123 in the non-sampled schools (42). Detailed tables are available in Appendix 3.

### 4.1 Usage of books

- a. Almost 75 % of teachers said that they had a copy of the teacher' book. More teachers in the non-sampled schools have the book than the teachers of sampled schools.
- b. Among the teachers who had a copy of MEB, almost 50% of the teachers in the non-sampled schools had been using it for 3 or more years. This number was considerably lower in the sampled schools, where 40% of teachers had been using MEB for a year or less.

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<sup>8</sup> No response was significant in these sets of questions.

## 4.2 Training

- a. Most teachers were trained in batches of 31-60 and 61-90.
- b. Only 25% of the teachers said they passed on their training to someone else. Rest did not.
- c. Only 7.4% of the teachers were selected for training by their headmasters and less than 20% by cluster officials.
- d. Almost 60% of the teachers, were trained by Cluster/ District trainers, followed by MTs (19.77%) and Ray Mackay (6.2%).

## 5. **Concluding Comments**

### **MEB is widely used and freely available to both teachers and children.**

Most children (over 90%) were observed to have their own copy of MEB. Less than half the teachers were observed with their own copy of the teacher's book; though, almost all who had them were seen to be using it in the class. However when asked, almost 75% of the teachers admitted having a copy of the teacher's book. Most (over 90%) teachers said that they used MEB all the time, though, about 40% teachers across all classes admitted using other supplemental material part of the time.

### **The material in MEB was generally found to be appropriate by teachers.**

Most teachers agreed that the topics in MEB were appropriate for their class. Similar agreement was found for the grammar, spelling and vocabulary content, activities and stories in the book. The rhymes in the book were found to be appropriate in Std. 1. There were some reservations about the difficulty level of MEB.

### **English classes are rarely taught solely in English.**

Most teachers preferred using local language when teaching English. Similarly, children rarely used English to ask questions, though they were more comfortable greeting the teacher and their peers in English.