

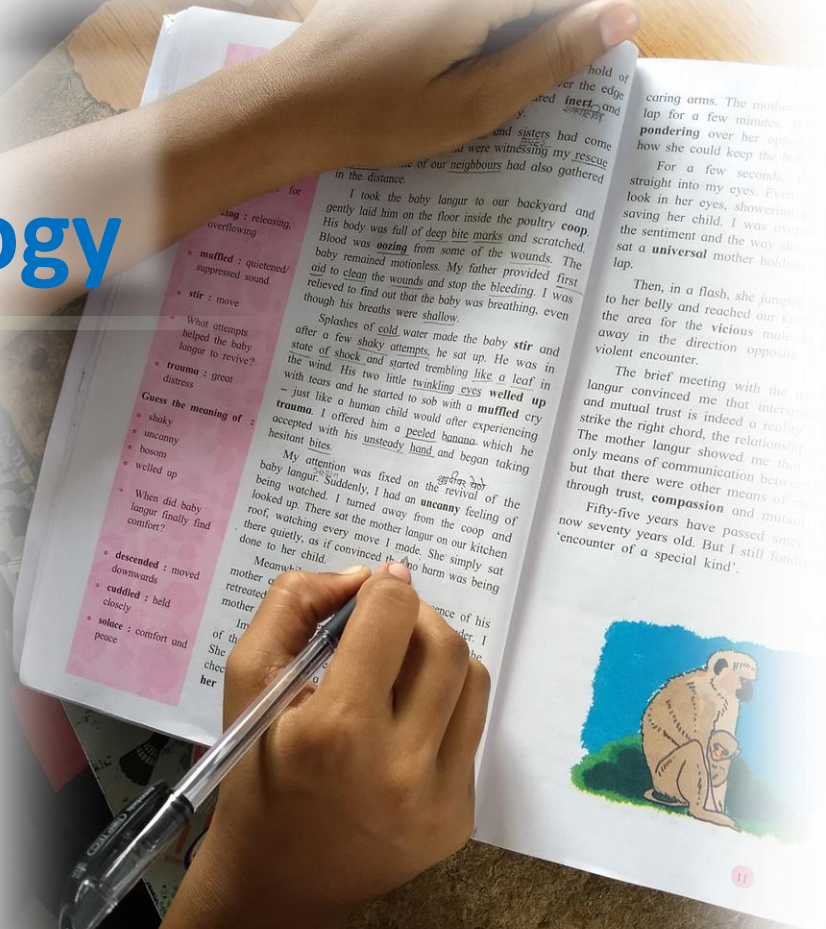
# Text interpretation: India's hidden pedagogy

Jason Anderson

KAASH Foundation / ELT@I FDP on  
Emerging approaches & trends  
August 2020



[www.jasonanderson.org.uk](http://www.jasonanderson.org.uk)



# Who I am?

- Teacher, teacher educator and researcher. Currently researching practices of 'effective teachers' in India.
- Worked in c. 20 countries worldwide, including low (Africa, S. Asia), middle (E. Europe, S.E. Asia) and high (W. Europe) income: broad range of experience.
- My 'perspective' is inevitably comparative. In order to make sense of what I'm learning about teaching in India, I'm comparing it with, e.g., Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, Sub-Saharan Africa, etc.
- Please **be critical** of the opinion that I offer. Experiment with my suggestions, and reject if necessary!



# Who are you? Type your answers in the chat

1. Are you a teacher? (Y / N)
2. For teachers, are you primary (P), secondary (S), college (C) or university (U)?
3. What subject? (type your answers)
4. For non-teachers, please write your occupation. (e.g., journalist, teacher trainer, school administrator, etc.)





# Focus of my talk / workshop

1. English language teaching at secondary level (grade 6-10) in government and government-aided schools, but also relevant for higher secondary ('junior college') and possibly primary 4-5. Some relevance for low-cost private education, but less so high-cost private schools.
2. Two contextual challenges faced by English teachers in India.
3. Description of the practice: 'translingual text interpretation'.
4. Discussion of potential ways to make it more effective.
5. A "decentred" approach: I aim to understand the challenges, and focus on solutions that Indian teachers are developing, rather than 'imported' ideas. See: [www.hornby-trust.org.uk/decentring-elt](http://www.hornby-trust.org.uk/decentring-elt)



# Contextual challenge 1: The reading 'proficiency gap'

*This indicates a clear need for strategies, such as Pratham's 'teaching at the right level' programme (World Bank, 2019)*

- ELT textbooks at grades 6-10 typically require B1-B2\* (upper intermediate) reading proficiency.
- Learner proficiency in many classrooms (esp. disadvantaged) closer to A1-A2\*.
- ASER (2018): only 58% of rural 14-18-year-olds surveyed could correctly read A1-level sentences in English, and only 79% of these (46% of the total) could correctly translate them to a more enabled language.
- My research, urban, government-aided school of mainly disadvantaged learners, effective teacher: Grade 10 learners had passive vocabulary averaging 1900 words (A2). Extremes of 1100 (high A1) to 2700 (low B1).

\*CEFR levels: A1 = elementary; A2 = pre-intermediate; B1 = intermediate; B2 = upper intermediate.



## Contextual challenge 2: The ‘dual focus’

- English is taught both as **language** (basic literacy, vocabulary, grammar and four skills) and **subject** (literature: prose and poetry) in India.
- Despite being a **foreign** (not second) **language** for the vast majority of learners (Mukherjee, 2018), they are expected to learn about English language literature (both Indian and foreign) while they are still gaining initial literacy.
- No listening or speaking focus (most textbooks and exams).
- Texts (“**the lessons**”) are often long, complex, challenging, involving low frequency lexis, unfamiliar cultures, etc.
- Exams test both proficiency and understanding of ‘set’/‘seen’ texts. Students can ‘pass’ (i.e., score 25-35%) on their knowledge of exam techniques and reproducing answers to set texts.





# What do I mean by ‘text interpretation’?

- It's common across India. My research: 3 states. Over 280 observations. Over 100 interviews. 41 teachers.
- It may be unique to Indian ELT, relative to the ‘proficiency gap’ and the ‘dual focus’.
- It's usually **translingual** (i.e., involves complex blending of resources from English and learners' languages; Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018)
- Often called the “**bilingual method**” (Chattopadhyay, 2019) or “**translation method**” (Rajkhowa & Das, 2015). But what happens in India is not akin to “grammar translation” (Howatt, 1984). Very different even to “bilingual method” in other countries (e.g., Butzkamm & Cauldwell, 2009).
- Surprisingly little analysis of different approaches to this practice, or discussion of it. Meganathan (2017) discusses in some detail. Any others?
- Only one of many areas of classroom practice that I found interesting and unique to India.



# Your experiences of text interpretation

- What happens in the 'bilingual' or 'translation method' (i.e., text interpretation)?
- What does the teacher do?
- What do the students do?

Write a comment or two in the chat box.





# Basic text interpretation

*This is our starting point: What advice would you give this teacher?*

3 typical procedures, often in this order:

- a. Recitation** of text (i.e., ‘the lesson’): Teacher typically calls upon stronger learners to read aloud (rather than silent individual reading) or reads aloud her/himself.
- b. Explanation** of text by teacher, including direct translation of sections, translation of lexis, paraphrasing of content. Students generally passive, taking notes, often annotating text with L1.
- c. Dictation** of answers to comprehension questions by teacher, sometimes with explanation. Students mainly notetaking passively.

Little internal lesson coherence. Some lessons involve just recitation, others just explanation, others just comprehension questions and/or exercises.



# Scaffolded text interpretation

Greater variety of procedures:

- a. T breaks the text into separate lesson **chunks**.
- b. T **introduces text**.
- c. Recitation and explanation happen simultaneously, also **eliciting** meaning of lexis.
- d. T makes notes of **key lexis on board** as she/he explains.
- e. T gives students (SS) **time to take notes**, even guidance on what to note down.
- f. T **checks SS' understanding**: asking questions in both languages, allowing L1 responses / eliciting L1 summaries.
- g. T gives SS time to work on **comprehension questions** (or alternative tasks if these are too difficult) in bench groups. T **monitors**, answers SS' questions.



# Comparing 'basic' and 'scaffolded' interpretation

## Basic

- a. **Recitation** of text (i.e., 'the lesson'): Teacher typically calls upon stronger learners to read aloud or reads aloud her/himself.
- b. **Explanation** of text by teacher, including direct translation of sections, translation of lexis, paraphrasing of content. Students generally passive, taking notes, often annotating text with L1.
- c. **Dictation** of answers to comprehension questions by teacher, sometimes with explanation. Students mainly notetaking passively.

## Scaffolded

- a. T breaks the text into separate lesson **chunks**.
- b. T **introduces text**.
- c. Recitation and explanation happen simultaneously, also **eliciting** meaning of lexis.
- d. T makes notes of **key lexis on board** as she/he explains.
- e. T gives students (SS) **time to take notes**, even guidance on what to note.
- f. T **checks SS' understanding**: asking questions in both languages, allowing L1 responses / eliciting L1 summaries.
- g. T gives SS time to work on **comprehension questions** (or alternative tasks if these are too difficult) in bench groups, **monitors**, answers SS' questions.



# Comparing 'basic' and 'scaffolded' interpretation

## Basic

- a. **Recitation** of text (i.e., 'the lesson'): Teacher typically calls upon stronger learners to read aloud or reads aloud her/himself.
- b. **Explanation** of text by teacher, including direct translation of sections, translation of lexis, paraphrasing of content. Students generally passive, taking notes, often annotating text with L1.
- c. **Dictation** of answers to comprehension questions by teacher, sometimes with explanation. Students mainly notetaking passively.

## Scaffolded

more structure

- a. T breaks the text into separate lesson **chunks**. some planning
- b. T **introduces text**. context/schemata
- c. Recitation and explanation happen simultaneously, also **eliciting** meaning of lexis. more 'translingual' ss involved
- d. T makes notes of **key lexis on board** as she/he explains. literacy / study skills
- e. T gives students (SS) **time to take notes**, even guidance on what to note. time to listen, then write
- f. T **checks SS' understanding**: asking questions in both languages, allowing L1 responses / eliciting L1 summaries.
- g. T gives SS time to work on **comprehension questions** (or alternative tasks if these are too difficult) in bench groups, **monitors**, answers SS' questions. formative assessment  
personalised support/ feedback  
peer support/ tutoring.





# Scaffolded text interpretation

*What advice would you give this teacher?*

Greater variety of procedures:

- a. T breaks the text into separate lesson **chunks**.
- b. T **introduces text**.
- c. Recitation and explanation happen simultaneously, also **eliciting** meaning of lexis.
- d. T makes notes of **key lexis on board** as she/he explains.
- e. T gives students (SS) **time to take notes**, even guidance on what to note down.
- f. T **checks SS' understanding**: asking questions in both languages, allowing L1 responses / eliciting L1 summaries.
- g. T gives SS time to work on **comprehension questions** (or alternative tasks if these are too difficult) in bench groups. T **monitors**, answers SS' questions.



# Independent text interpretation

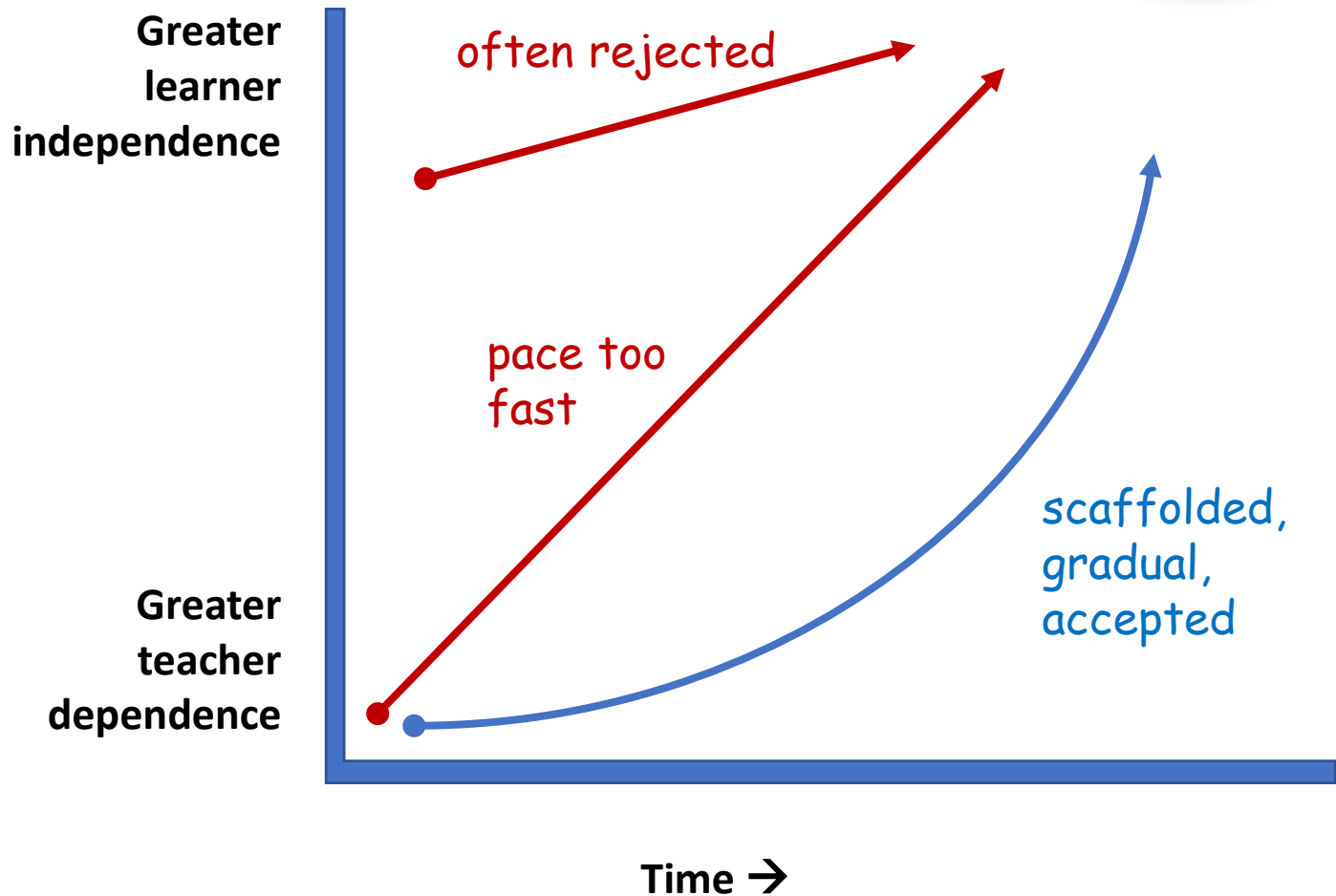
Possible at higher levels of learner proficiency. Text is often chunked into manageable portions for each lesson (as for scaffolded text interpretation):

- a. Teacher (T) **introduces text** (context, activating schemata).
- b. T **pre-teaches challenging lexis** (requires planning) often eliciting L1 equivalents.
- c. T sets learners **basic reading task**.
- d. Students (SS) **read text independently**, working on task individually or in pairs/bench groups (L1 allowed), T monitoring, providing support (L1 or English).
- e. T **elicits answers** to reading task items. SS respond. (L1 encouraged if English weak).
- f. T provides **responsive interpretation**, especially where learners had difficulty.
- g. Based on e. and f. (i.e., **formative assessment**), T may set second, more challenging task.

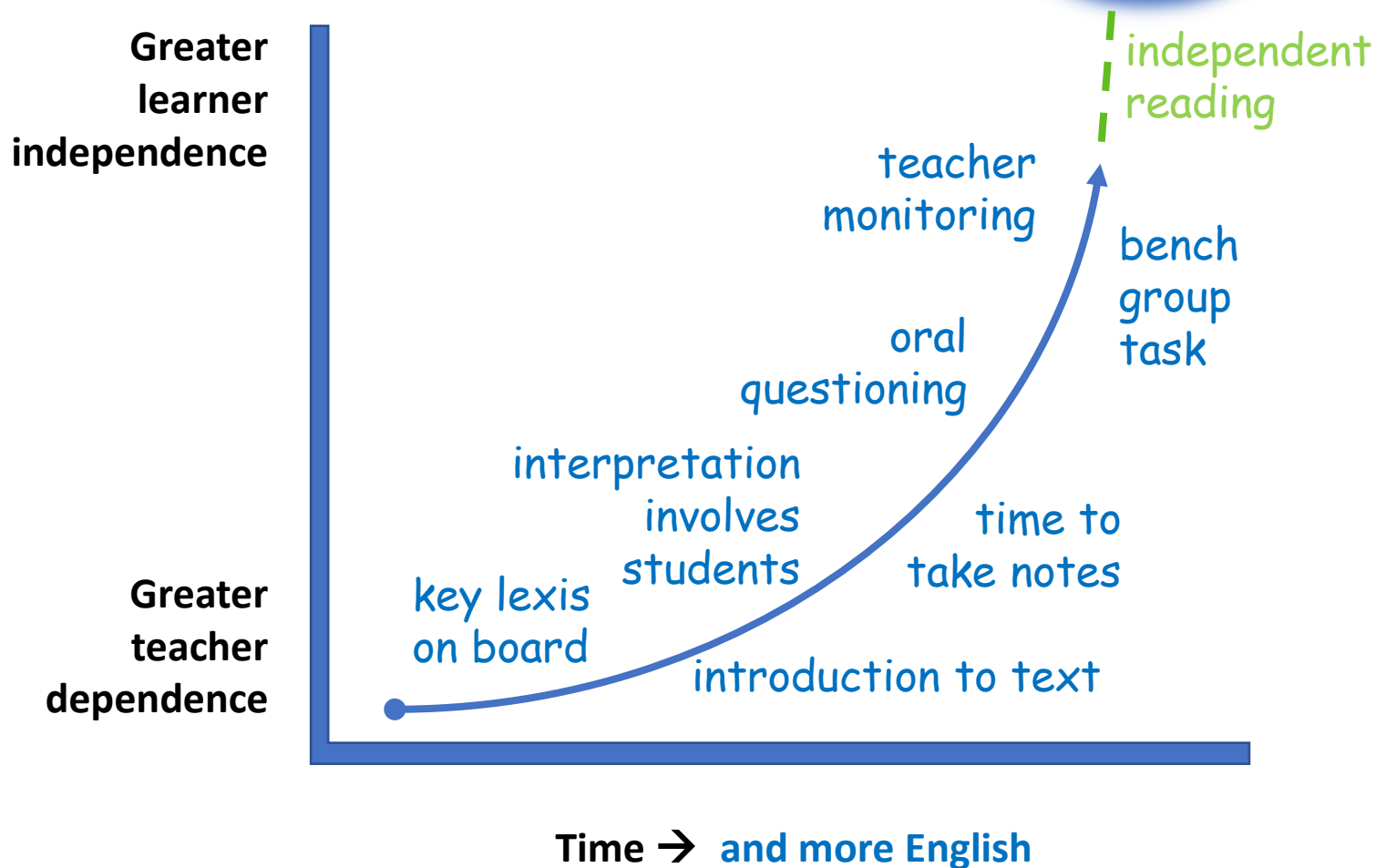


# Gradual scaffolded development (*either of students or teacher*)

our goal



# Gradual scaffolded development (*either of students or teacher*)





# Some important cautions/limitations

- Not every class will be able to progress along the cline: Contextual challenges may prohibit this.
- I've also seen very different practices (e.g., teachers encouraging much higher levels of independence among low-proficiency learners; extensive groupwork, project work, peer-scaffolding, etc.) that also seems to be effective – there are many ways to work with texts!
- This is only a small part of my research. This was conducted in 3 states only.
- Some evidence of a fourth stage, which I will report on in due course.



# References

Anderson, J. & Lightfoot, A. (2018). Translingual practices in English classrooms in India: Current perceptions and future possibilities. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 1-22 Open access: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1548558>

ASER (2018) Annual status of education report (Rural) 2017: Beyond basics. New Delhi: ASER Centre. Available from: [www.asercentre.org](http://www.asercentre.org)

Butzkamm, W., & Cauldwell, J. A. W. (2009). *The Bilingual Reform: A Paradigm Shift in Foreign Language Teaching*. Tübingen, Germany: Narr Studienbücher.

Chattopadhyay, K. (2019). What's happening in... India. *IATEFL Voices*, 272, 20-21.

Howatt, A. P. R. (1984). *A history of English language teaching*. Oxford. OUP.

Mukherjee K. (2018). An English teacher's perspective on curriculum change in West Bengal. in M. Wedell & L Grassick (Eds.) *International Perspectives on Teachers Living with Curriculum Change*, *International Perspectives on English Language Teaching*, pp. 125-145. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54309-7\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54309-7_7)

Rajkhowa, B. & Das, S. (2015). Competency of teaching English in Indian context: A situational analysis. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 6(1), 71-77.

Meganathan, R. (2017). English language curriculum at the secondary stage: Perceptions of learners and teachers. *Journal of Indian Education*, 42(4), 93-118.

World Bank (2019). *Ending learning poverty: What will it take?* Washington DC: World Bank: <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/32553>

**Slides on my website here:**  
<http://www.jasonanderson.org.uk/talks.htm>  
Feel free to share, critique, adapt,  
improve! 😊

