

The language versus literature question in Indian ELT

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WARWICK

APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Overview of the talk

1. Introduction, background and overview of the key problem
2. Audience participation: 3 polls and chat for comments
3. Recommendations and advice for teachers
4. Questions and further comments



Feel free to make comments, ask questions in the chat. I'll address these if appropriate.

Key terminology

- **Teaching English as language**

Prioritising the learning of basic skills in English, as typically happens in EFL contexts, covering the development of basic vocabulary and grammar acquisition and initial literacy in English as a written language.

- **Teaching English as literature**

Prioritising the appreciation of novels, poems, plays and other literary works (including in part or abridged), as typically happens in ESL contexts, prioritising reading and writing skills and development of more advanced awareness of lexis, style, metaphor, etc.

- Also Teaching English ***through*** literature (Prabhu, 1995)

Is India an ESL or an EFL context?

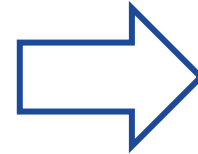
- Officially, India is ESL – due to official status of English in India
- In reality, it is only a SL for the urban wealthy (middle-class), who experience it regularly in their daily lives
- The vast majority of Indian learners (>80%: rural + urban poor) experience English as a foreign language – it is not part of their daily spoken or written language use
- ASER report (2022): over 50% of grade 8 learners cannot read very short very simple sentences in English, even fewer can understand them.
- Hence: “the ESL method is not best suited for teaching English to them [rural learners]; it must be combined with the principles of teaching English as a foreign language” (Annamalai, 2005, p. 34; also Anderson, 2024; Mukherjee, 2018; Mukhopadhyay, pers. comm.).

Recent developments in Indian (secondary and primary) curricula

- Tertiary education in India has prioritised teaching English as literature since the colonial period.
- But curricula for primary and secondary schooling has changed in many states more recently.
- Previous iterations of curricula recognised the need to teach English primarily as language (e.g. Maharashtra, Odisha, W. Bengal), involving simple, practical, communicative activities.
- More recent iterations (since c. 2010), often following CBSE curricula, have introduced a higher proportion of literary texts (SL approach), both English language origin and translated to English, and less practical material.
- Textbook development committee members are often English literature academics, rather than English language curriculum development specialists, hence the likely shift.
- Teachers in primary and secondary schools, particularly in rural and low-income urban contexts have experienced huge challenges as a result.

ASER 2022 English

- In 2022, 46.6% of children in Grade 8 can read these sentences (p. 66)
- This is up from 45.3% in 2016 but still below 47.1% in 2012.*
- Only 31.9% can understand them.**
- This is similar to many children in many low-income EFL contexts worldwide: A0-A1 level.
- Let's compare that with Grade 8 textbooks across India today...



Sentence

What is the time?

This is a large house.

I like to read.

She has many books.

- * Weighted average across govt. and private schools.
- ** 68.5% of the 46.6% who can read the sentences can translate them from English to the language of instruction (usually state official language).

NCERT

- NCERT. (2008) *Honeydew, Grade VIII*. National Council of Educational Research and Training.
- Text receptive complexity level: B2 (IELTS 6)

Do you know which events the dates below refer to?

(a) 4 July 1776

(b) 17 December 1903

(c) 6 August 1945

(d) 30 January 1948

(e) 12 April 1961

(f) 20 July 1969

The answers are on page 23.

I

I spotted it in a junk shop in Bridport, a roll-top desk. The man said it was early nineteenth century, and oak. I had wanted one, but they were far too expensive. This one was in a bad condition, the roll-top in several pieces, one leg clumsily mended, scorch marks all down one side. It was going for very little money. I thought I could restore it. It would be a risk, a challenge, but I had to have it. I paid the man and brought it back to my workroom at the back of the garage. I began work on it on Christmas Eve.

I removed the roll-top completely and pulled out the drawers. The veneer had lifted almost everywhere — it

spotted it:

saw it; found it
(informal)

scorch marks:

burn marks

was going for:

was selling for
(informal)

restore:

(here) repair

veneer:

a thin layer of
plastic or
decorative
wood on
furniture of
cheap wood

W. Bengal

- West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. (2013). *Blossoms: English textbook for class VIII*. West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.
- Includes words at C1 level (>IELTS 7): **prowling** and C2 level (>IELTS 8): **tweet**, **thump**, **perch**.

Let's continue:

Suddenly, September heard a tweet-tweet just behind her ear. The bird had come in quietly. September felt her heart go thump-thump against her chest, and she made up her mind to take no more risks. She put up her hand and took hold of the bird. The bird was quite used to this, so he suspected nothing. He was surprised when she carried him to the cage, put him in, and shut the door on him. He hopped up on the **ivory** perch and said, "What is wrong?"

September said, "Some of mamma's cats are **prowling** about tonight, and I think you are much safer out here."

"Well, just for this once I don't mind" said the little bird, "so long as you let me out in the morning." He ate a very good supper and began to sing. But in the middle of his song he stopped.

"I don't know what the matter with me is," he said, "but I don't feel like singing tonight."



Maharashtra

- Maharashtra State Bureau of Textbook Production and Curriculum Research. (2018). *My English Book 8: Standard Eight*. Maharashtra State Textbook Bureau.

Androcles and the Lion

Long, long ago, there lived a kind, gentle and **courteous** man called Androcles. But he had a very cruel master. In those days, kings, nobles, and other wealthy men used poor people as their slaves. Androcles was a slave. The slaves were forced to work for their masters. They had to do what their masters told them. They had no freedom, no rights. Even when they were unhappy with their master, they could not leave him. They were **bound by law** to obey their master, however wicked he might be.

Androcles did not like his heartless, wicked master. His master starved his slaves and often whipped them. Androcles felt that even death was better than serving such a master. He kept looking out for a good opportunity. At the first chance he got, he escaped from the **clutches** of his cruel master.

Now, although Androcles had thus run away, he was not a **coward**. He took shelter in a forest. He was not afraid of the wild beasts that roamed the forest. He did not mind that he had no roof over his head. He was happy that he was free as a bird to go wherever he wished.

- **courteous** : polite
- ♦ *How were the slaves treated at that time?*
- **bound by law** : strictly forced to follow the laws
- **clutches** : tight hold
- ♦ *Where did Androcles seek shelter, after his escape?*
- **coward** : one who gets easily afraid
- **flee** : run away, escape
- ♦ *What did the lion seem to tell Androcles?*

Telangana

- Government of Telangana. (2013). *Our world through English: Class VIII*. Telangana Govt. Textbook Press.

A Reading

Oliver Asks for More

(This is an extract from the novel 'OLIVER TWIST' written by the British novelist Charles Dickens (1812- 70). It is the story of an orphan boy named Oliver, who is brought to a children's home.)

Mr. Bumble walked on with long strides. Little Oliver, firmly grasping his gold – laced cuff, trotted beside him.

Oliver had not been within the walls of the workhouse a quarter of an hour, when Mr. Bumble informed him that the board had said he was to appear before it forthwith.

Not having a very clearly defined notion of what a live board was, Oliver was rather astonished by this information, and was not quite certain whether he ought to laugh or cry. He had no time to think about the matter. Mr. Bumble asked Oliver to follow him into a large white – washed room where eight or ten fat gentlemen were sitting round a table.

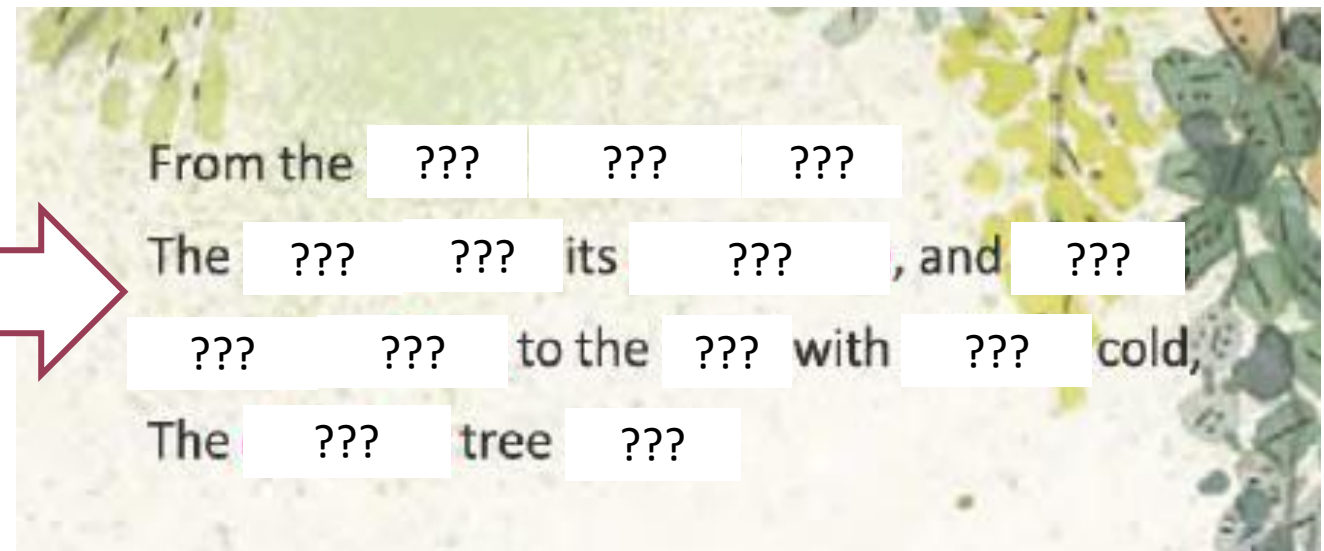
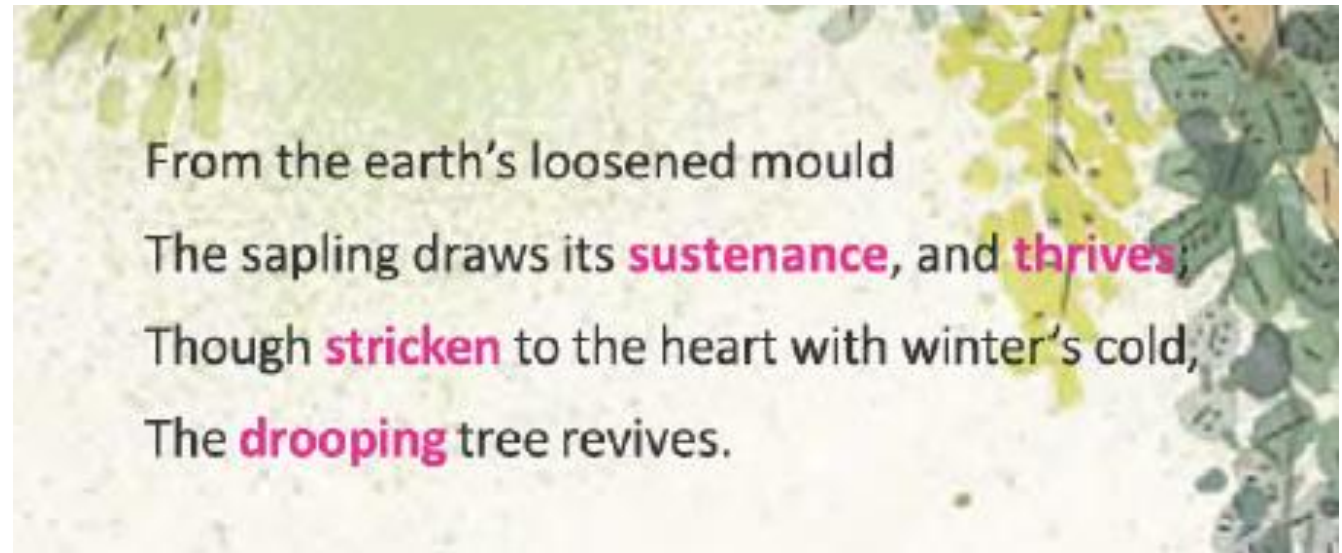
At the top of the table, seated in an armchair rather higher than the rest, was a particularly fat gentleman with a very round, red face.

Poetry

- West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. (2013). *Blossoms: English textbook for class VIII*. West Bengal Board of Secondary Education.

Nation (2015, p. 140):
“Research has suggested that learners need to know around 98% of the running words in a text for vocabulary not to be a major issue in comprehension”

what the
average child
probably
understands



Hicks, D., & Littlejohn, A.
(2002). *Primary colours:
Pupils Book 1*. Cambridge
University Press.

4C

I can help.

1

Listen and follow.

1

What can we do now?

We can jump!
One, two, ...

2

... three! Jump!
And you!

Me? Jump?
I can't jump!

3

Hello!
I'm Tom.

Oh, hello.

Help! My legs!
I can't walk!

4

Oh, no! Look
at the balloon.

Oh, silly Kip!

I can help.

5

Tom!

Thanks, Mum!
Thanks, Dad!

6

Thanks, Tom! Let's go!

Act
it out!

2

Look at Tom's farm. Match the animals and the words.

a horse a cow a duck a hen a chick a dog a cat

a: horse, b: dog, c: cat, d: hen, e: chick, f: cow, g: duck

3

Listen. What animal can you hear?

4

Look at the picture in Exercise 2.
Think. Find an animal that ...

can fly

can swim

can run fast

can climb

can jump high

can't fly

can't jump high

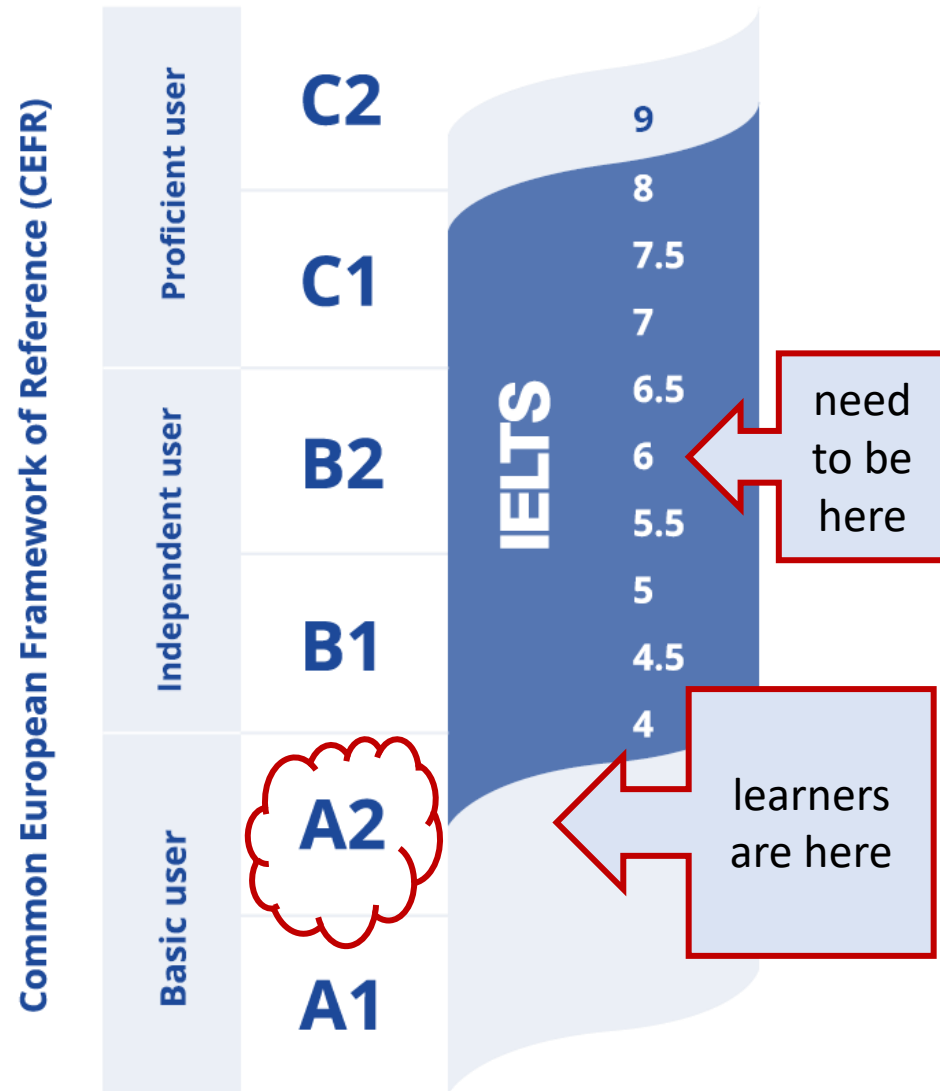
can't swim

What about the urban poor?

- Anderson (2021, p. 299), urban poor, good school, Maharashtra, expert teacher:
“grade 10 learners were found to have quite extensive passive vocabularies, averaging c. 1,900 words (c. A2; n = 22; range: 1,200–2,700), contributing to her consistently high SSC exam pass rates”
- Grade 10 textbooks across India typically contain texts of B2-C1 level complexity (2-3 bands above the learners’ receptive skills level).*

*Analysed using Cathoven Language Hub CEFR analyser (c):

<https://nexthub.cathoven.com/cefr>



<https://ielts.org/organisations/ielts-for-organisations/compare-ielts/ielts-and-the-cefr>

Conclusion: The impact of the increasing literature focus in Indian ELT

- Texts in current Indian primary and secondary English-language curricular are far above (2-3 CEFR bands) the independent receptive skills reading ability of the majority of Indian learners.
- The use of “authentic” texts written for native speakers (even children) of English is a key issue: “Books written for young native speakers of English typically use a vocabulary which is much larger than the vocabulary size of foreign language learners” (Nation, 2015, p. 140)
- This is not to even mention the stylistic, schematic and semantic complexity and resultant ***cognitive load*** that the use of texts from high literature written for adults brings.
- Pritchett & Beatty (2012, p. 1; also Anderson, 2023): “learning could go faster if curricula and teachers were to slow down”
- And this is not just in English lessons...

Pratham's Teaching at the right level initiative

“Studies have shown that once acquired these capabilities endure over time. TaRL is an effective and low-cost strategy that helps children to “catch up” in a short period of time.”

<https://www.pratham.org/about/teaching-at-the-right-level/>



> UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Recent figures for rural India indicate that over 96% of children are enrolled in school. With almost all children in school, the critical question facing the country – are children learning?

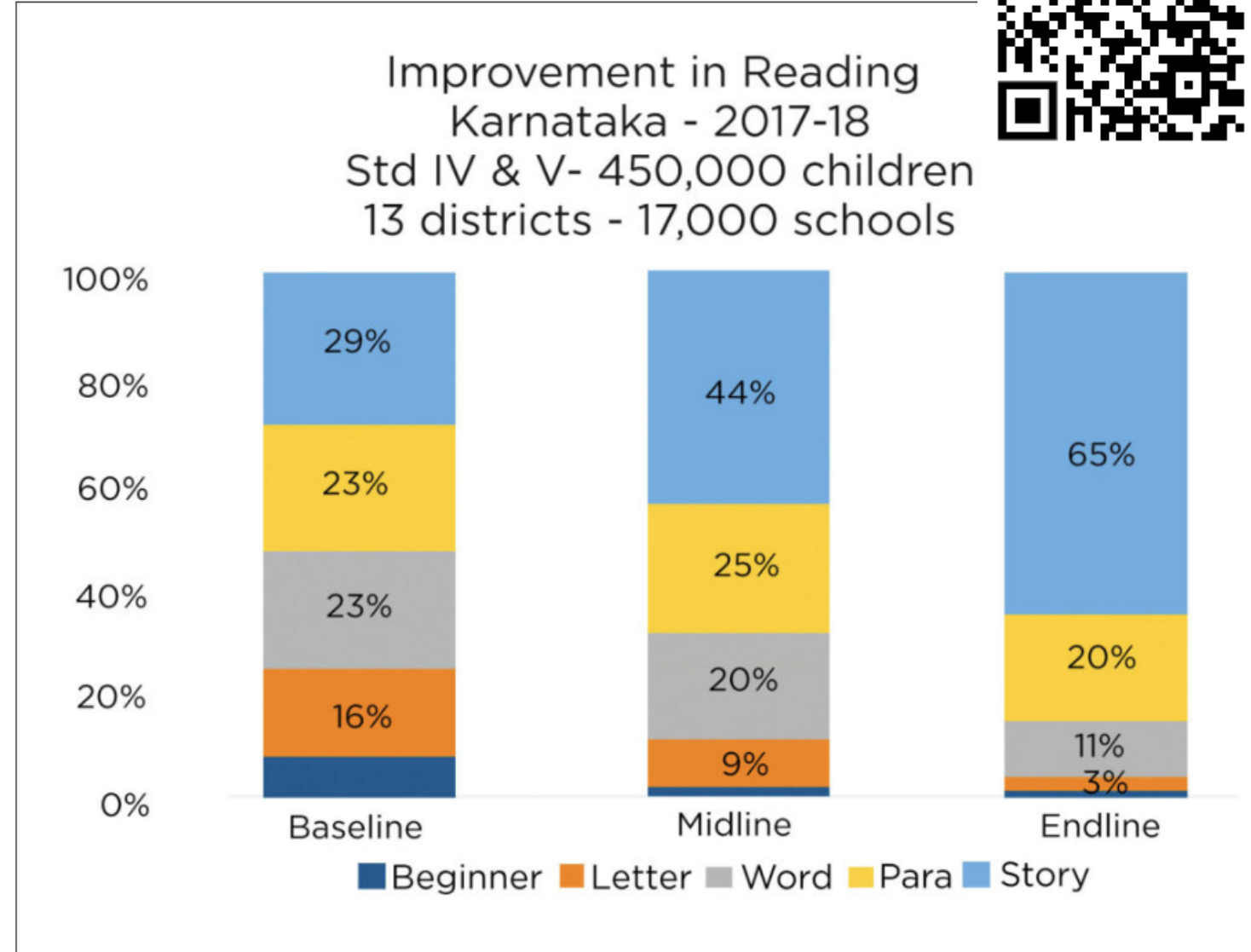
Since 2005, ASER - the Annual Status of Education Report - has attempted to answer this question. Facilitated by Pratham, ASER is a nation wide household survey that reaches a representative sample of children in every rural district in



Pratham's Teaching at the right level



- TaRL is successful.
- It's being exported to countries across the Global South:
<https://teachingattherightlevel.org/>
- Yet ELT curriculum writers in India don't pay attention to the evidence...
- Why?



Your opinion

I will now share some questionnaire items via Mentimeter. If you would like to give a more detailed opinion, please use the chat to share your voice.

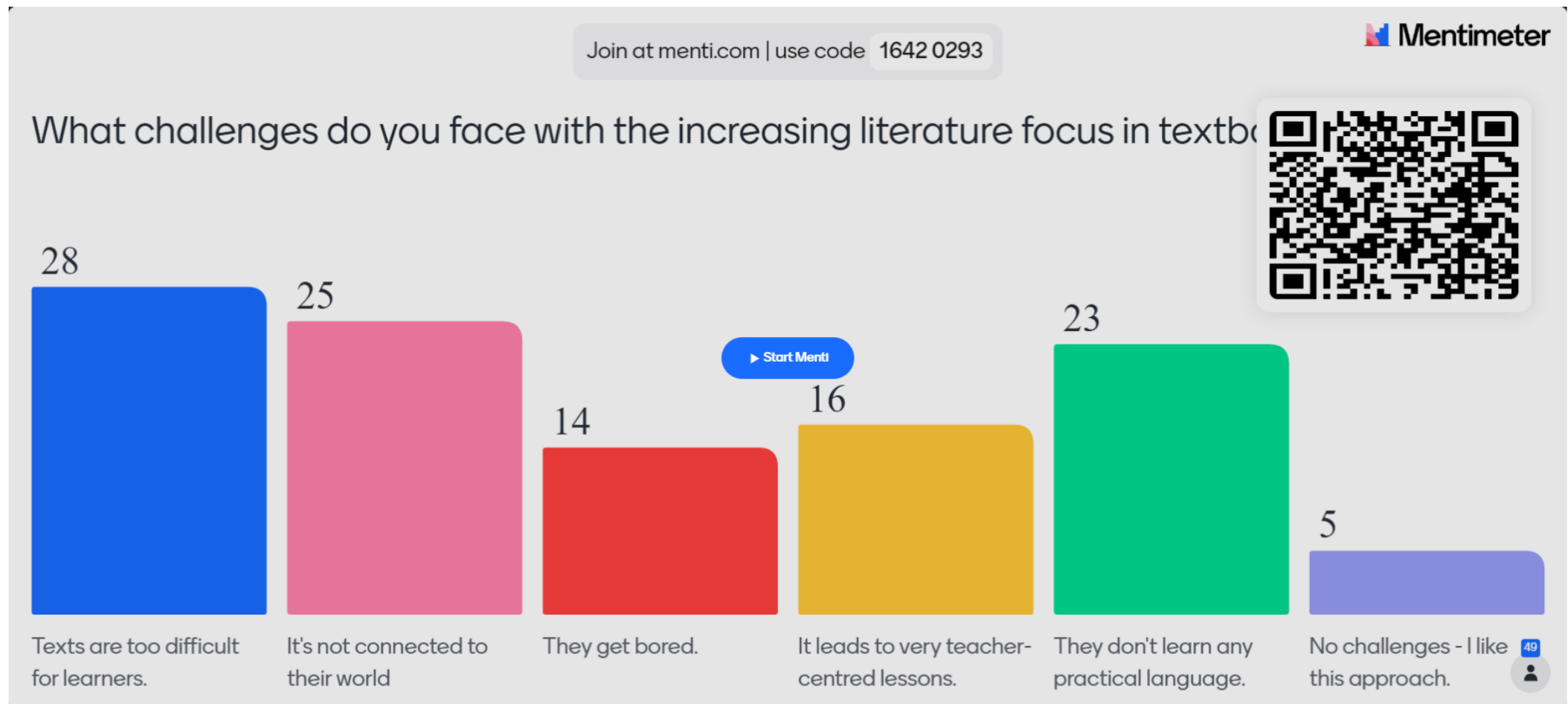
Here is the link:

<https://www.menti.com/alv6i489taob>



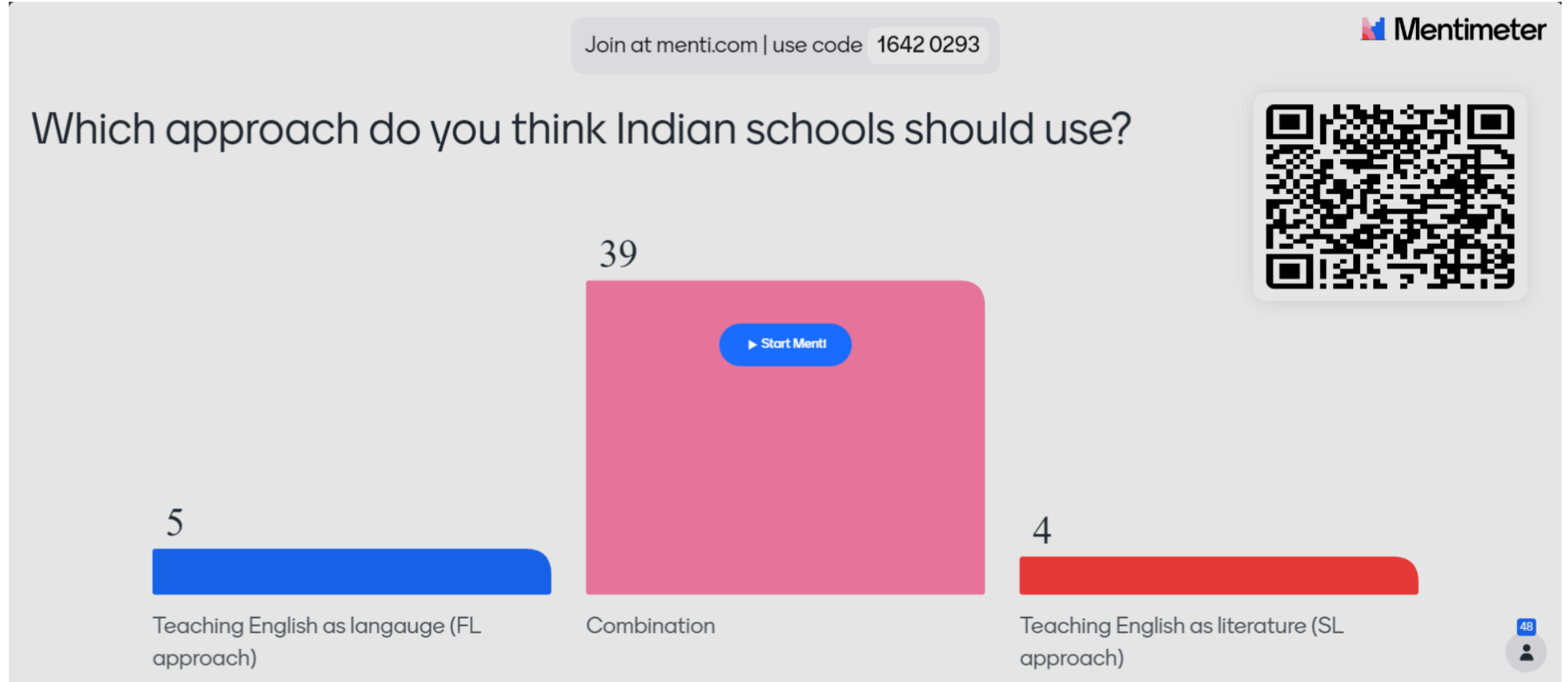
What challenges do you face with the increasing literature focus in textbooks/exams?

<https://www.menti.com/alv6i489taob>



Which approach do you think Indian schools should use?

<https://www.menti.com/alv6i489ta>



What do you think about Pratham's 'Teaching at the right level'?

<https://www.menti.com/alv6i489taob>

Join at menti.com | use code 1642 0293

 Mentimeter

What do you think about Pratham's 'Teaching at the right level'?



Who wins and who loses from the increasing literature focus?

- **Winners:** Students from privileged backgrounds who have more exposure to literature, more enculturation in literature studies, more English in their daily receptive (reading, online communities, family) and productive (family, friends, gaming) skills: i.e. the **urban middle class**. These students often have also have access to high quality English-medium instruction.
- **Losers:** Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom English is a foreign language, and have little, if any opportunity to learn English outside the classroom, often compounded by teachers who themselves are challenged by the texts: i.e. **the rural and the urban poor**. Some are further disadvantaged by being put in low-quality English-medium instruction, meaning they may have only limited access to their mother tongue.



What can we do as teachers if we can't change the curriculum?

Expert opinion*, also supported by Anderson (2021, 2023):

1. Provide the learners with the means to access the text independently (vocabulary, understanding, Indianization)
2. Supplement curriculum content with regular, simple practical activities to improve learners' underlying proficiency

**Vinayadhar Raju Prathikantam, Lina Mukhopadhyay, Ravinarayan Chakrakodi, Santosh Mahapatra, Kuheli Mukherjee, Nurjahan Naik Khwaja and Amol Padwad*

Suggestions and advice for Indian teachers 1

Good idea? Share your thoughts in the chat.

Vinayadhar Raju Prathikantam (Telangana):

Indian stories written in English tend to be much easier for learners to understand, because of links to their current understanding, culture and vocabulary:

- Try to '**Indianize**' any foreign texts, by comparing the characters to people that they will know or things in the text to things that are familiar to them (e.g. food, tools, furniture, clothing).

Indianized and non-Indianized texts



Akkayya brought so many things – cucumber, *gongura*, drumsticks, *appadams*, *vadiyams* and coconuts. “I hope you don’t mind, I have brought you all these things, like *Kuchela*. I don’t know whether you’ll like them or not,” she said, rather hesitantly.

“Why do you say that? You’ve actually brought all the things we wanted! We don’t get these things here. If your *Maridi* has *gongura pulsu*, cucumber *pappu* and drumstick *charu* he feels as elated as if he has had a sumptuous feast! With my office work, I am unable to make *appadams* and *vadiyams*. Even if I have some free time, I am too lazy to do such work. You know me, don’t you?” I said with a laugh.

“That’s true, but by the time you come back from office you must be dead tired. How can you then prepare *appadams* and *vadiyams* and make *idlis* and *dosas*? I don’t know how you are able to manage work at home and in the office,” *Akkayya* consoled me.

“What a wretched job! Sometimes, I feel like giving it up. You know, people say, solve your problems at home before you solve those outside. To neglect work at home and look after office work is an uphill task for a woman,” I said, speaking from experience.

“Don’t think like that, *Ammalu*. How fortunate you are! Touchwood! You’ve studied well, have a job like a man and are earning very well. You don’t have to beg anyone for anything. You are able to lead a dignified life unlike us who have to depend on our husbands even for a few paise worth of *karivepaku*,” said *Akkayya*.

The grass is greener on the other side, I thought to myself. “What’s your daughter doing now?” I asked, changing the topic.

Bonsai Life by Abburi Chadevi (grade 8, Telangana)

The Trial

Joan of Arc, born in 1412, was a French peasant girl who claimed that the “voices” of saints had told her she was called on by God to aid her country. This French national heroine took to the field of battle during the Hundred Years’ War (1337 -1453). At the time, the desperate French army had suffered a number of losses to the English, but Joan brought renewed confidence by lifting the siege of Orleans in nine days and taking back the city of Reims. She was soon captured by the English.

Joan of Arc, who had been caught by the British in the war, was imprisoned and presented before the court.

- Introduction of the characters :**

 - Inquisitor:** Brother John Lemuiter, a seemingly mild , elderly man
 - Canon John D’Estivet:** The chief Prosecutor
 - Canon de Courcelles :** The Canon of Paris. He is a young priest who helps to compile sixty-four charges against Joan.
 - Brother Martin Ladvenu:** A young monk assigned to be Joan’s confessor
 - Cauchon :** The academic theologian who represents the “considered wisdom of the Church”
 - The Chaplain :** A clergyman

Rouen, 30 May 1431. A great stone hall in the castle, arranged for a trial-at-law, there are two raised chairs side by side for the Bishop and the Inquisitor as judges. Looking down the great hall from the middle of the inner end, the judicial chairs and scribes’ table are to the right. The prisoner’s stool is to the left. There are arched doors right and left. It is a fine sunshiny May morning.

The Inquisitor : Let the accused be brought in.

Ladvenu : [calling] The accused. Let her be brought in.

Joan, chained by the ankles, is brought in through the arched door behind the prisoner’s stool by a guard of English soldiers. With them is the Executioner and his assistants. They lead her to the prisoner’s stool, and place themselves behind it after taking off her chain. She wears a page’s black suit.

The Inquisitor : [kindly] Sit down, Joan. [She sits on the prisoner’s stool]. You look very pale today. Are you not well?

The Trial by
George
Bernard Shaw
(grade 9,
Telangana)

Suggestions and advice for Indian teachers 2

Lina Mukhopadhyay (EFL University, Hyderabad):

1. Build your learners' vocabulary systematically. This vocabulary is foundational for reading comprehension. One way of doing this is to get learners to keep systematic vocabulary lists of important words in each of the text (e.g., bilingual glossaries, which learners can test each other on at the end or beginning of each lesson).
2. Adopt a multilingual pedagogy. Make use of translanguaging to scaffold learners' understanding of complex metaphors or ideas in the text.

Good idea? Share your thoughts in the chat.

ध्यान रखें - /rakhen/	take care
कुछ साल पहले	a few years ago.
कंपनी	company
मालिक	boss
गपशप (करना)	gossip (v)
खूबसूरत	beautiful / handsome
दिन भर	all day
चुप (रहना)	(stay) quiet / silent
मेहमान	guest
एक बात और	one more thing
हम फिल्मों के बारे में बातें करते हैं	We talk about films
वह विदेशी की तरह नहीं बोलता	He doesn't sound like a foreigner (speak)
कल के बाद	after tomorrow

Suggestions and advice for Indian teachers 3

Ravinarayan Chakrakodi (RIE Bengaluru) and **Santosh Mahapatra** (BITS Pilani, Hyderabad):

1. Do activities around the text (e.g., any text that includes conversations can be converted to a role play that students can practice in small groups)
2. Take time every week to build basic communication skills (e.g., 1 lesson of 5) with practical activities to supplement the curriculum (e.g., role plays, email writing, etc.).

Good idea? Share your thoughts in the chat.

RIE Bengaluru materials

Structure to freedom approach:

1. students first listen and complete a conversation;
2. then read it out loud in pairs;
3. then improvise a new conversation with their own ideas and interests.

Regional Institute of English South India. (2022). *Spoken English Programme for Students: Teacher's Handbook*.

UNIT - 12

Name of the activity: What is it to be a traveller?

Objectives: At the end of the session, **learners** will be able to improve their listening skill.

- they will be able to use different verbs.

Time: 1 period

Procedure: Input

- Ask the students to open the handbook and complete the telephonic conversation as they listen to the audio.
- Read the transcript aloud.
- Once done, make the students to sit in pairs and practise the conversation twice by taking the role of both the telephone operator and the tourist. Ask them to imitate the telephonic conversation with the same stress and tone. If necessary play the audio once or twice.

Task

Listen to the telephone conversation and fill in the blank spaces with appropriate expressions. Ask the student to refer to **Telephone rings in ABC Travels, Bengaluru**

Telephone rings in ABC Travels, Bengaluru

Telephone Operator: This is ABC Travels, Good morning, **how can I help** you?

Tourist: Good morning sir, I want to know the places of **sightseeing** in Bangalore.

T.O: Sure sir. There are many places to see and enjoy in Bengaluru like ISKCON temple, planetarium, Safari Park.

Tourist: Oh that's nice. Do you have any packages?

T.O: We have a one- day package. We start at BMTC Bus Stand, Yeshwanthpur at 7.30am. And drop you back at the same spot at 6.30pm.

Tourist: Oh that's great! What places do you cover?

T.O : ISKCON Temple, Rajarajeswari Temple, Banneraghatta, Safari Park, Sri Vishweshwaraiah Science Museum, Cubbon Park, Vidhana Soudha and High Court.

Tourist: Can you tell me the details of your package?

T.O: Sure Sir. You will be given enough time to visit all the important sightseeing places and a guide who will tell you about tourist spots.

RIE Bengaluru materials

Project-based approach:
students learn about something
and then create something
similar themselves

Regional Institute of English South
India. (2022). *Spoken English
Programme for Students: Teacher's
Handbook*.

UNIT 6

Name of the Activity: Stamps

Time: 1 period

Materials Required:

- The Postal Stamps, Thick plain/ unruled paper of the stamp size. Colour pencils/crayons/sketch pens

Learning Objectives:

- The learner can describe briefly and orally about the persons.
- Children can share stories among themselves.

Input

Ask the students to look at the handout: **Stamps**. Ask them to match the stamps with the descriptions.

After they have finished, discuss the following:

- The different stamps regarding its size, the year of issue, the stamp value and the figure on the stamp.
- The persons on the stamp - the name of the person; the region belonging to; their contributions or sacrifices; the titles conferred upon them if any.

Information to the teacher about the stamp



Name of the person: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi
(Freedom Fighter)
Birth: 02-10-1869
Place of Birth: Gujarat
His Contributions: Indian National Movement for the
freedom of India.

Communicative:

Ask them to refer to the handout: **Create a stamp**
Tell the students that they would be designing their own stamps. Ask them to design any one
or two of these stamps. They can draw a picture, add value etc.

A great person of your locality

A famous monument in your district.

Suggestions and advice for Indian teachers 4

Good idea? Share your thoughts in the chat.

Kuheli Mukherjee (W. Bengal):

Developing basic communicative competence among your learners:

- Do a little 'chit chat' with your learners every day (e.g., at the start of lessons): simple questions to practice basic communication skills (How are you? What did you do at the weekend? What did you have for tiffin?)

Suggestions and advice for Indian teachers 5

Good idea? Share your thoughts in the chat.

Nurjahan Naik Khwaja (Maharashtra):

- Break up longer texts with language games (e.g. to revise the lexis).
Two examples:
 1. **Find the word:** teacher says a word from the text. The first learner to scan the text and find it raises their hand, reads it out loud and translates it.
 2. **Slap the board:** Write 10 words from the text on the board. Two students come to the front of the class. You say the word in the local language. The first one who slaps the equivalent word in English wins a point.

Suggestions and advice for Indian teachers 6

Good idea? Share your thoughts in the chat.

Amol Padwad (formerly Ambedkar University, retired):

Teachers also struggle with the complexity of many of these texts, and it's OK to be honest about this, both to your colleagues and to your students:

1. Discuss the more difficult texts with other English teachers, either in your school or district. If you understand the texts well, particularly their background, context, and underlying message, that will help you to help the learners understand them.
2. Be honest to your learners that these are difficult texts. Where technology is available, encourage learners to also research the text, its background, meaning and any key lexis, metaphors, etc. in there – treat it as a project.

Conclusion

- The vast majority of Indian children are EFL learners, not ESL (e.g., Annamalai, 2005)
- These same EFL learners are the most disadvantaged in India (rural and urban poor).
- The current literature focus used in many states is making it more difficult for these learners to learn.
- This is because a) texts are linguistically far too complex, b) the contexts are sometimes unfamiliar and c) the cognitive load is too heavy.
- “learning could go faster if curricula and teachers were to slow down” (Pritchett & Beatty, 2012, p. 1)
- Teachers who can’t change their curriculum can help learners by:
 - a) Indianizing foreign texts
 - b) teaching useful vocabulary systematically
 - c) including simpler, more practical activities and regular simple chitchat
 - d) using a multilingual pedagogy such as translanguaging (see Anderson, 2024)
 - e) being honest with ourselves, our colleagues and our learners about these difficult texts

References, questions, comments and critique

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Slides:



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