

English Language Learning Outcomes in Punjab: A Comparative Study Using ASER (2016–2024) and UDISE+ (2021–2025) Data

Navneet Kaur Saini

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Saroop Rani Government College for Women

Amritsar, Punjab

Abstract

This paper presents a comparative study using the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER 2016–2024) and the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+ 2021–2025) to evaluate three aspects of English language learning: English reading proficiency across Classes 3, 5, and 8; infrastructure conditions for English-medium instruction; and the paradox of high enrolment and weak outcomes. Punjab emerges as a leader in foundational reading at the Class 5 level, with 21 percentage points above the national average, yet simultaneously experiences stagnant or declining outcomes at the Class 8 level, a pattern that this paper terms the ‘Punjab Paradox.’ Haryana, meanwhile, exhibits one of the highest post-pandemic literacy recoveries at the Class 3 level. National comparisons highlight the stagnancy of English reading proficiency at the Class 5 level around 24.5% since 2016. The paper offers recommendations informed by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the NIPUN Bharat mission.

Keywords: English Language Learning, ASER, UDISE+, Punjab, Haryana, Foundational Literacy, NEP 2020, Comparative Education, Learning Outcomes.

I. INTRODUCTION

The pedagogy around English language learning in India touches upon some of the most pertinent issues in the country’s educational discourse. In Punjab and Haryana, two contiguous states in northern India, the question of children’s level of English literacy directly informs the debate about the value of English-language education in the larger context of social mobility within a predominantly Hindi- and Punjabi-speaking population. Families across both states are realising the benefits of making English literacy a priority, especially for access to higher education and employment. The demand has led to an increase in the number of English-medium instruction options being made available in both government and private schools. Yet, the national data on English language learning outcomes paint a disappointing picture.

This paper presents a systematic comparison of the state of English language learning in Punjab, Haryana, and India as a

whole. It utilises the most comprehensive data on learning outcomes, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), and infrastructure data from the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+). ASER provides national data on foundational reading and arithmetic literacy, general school enrolment, and English language learning outcomes at various levels of reading proficiency and comprehension. UDISE+ provides data on the school infrastructure, teacher training, staff, and enrolment. Together, the two reports offer both an outcome-based perspective (ASER) and an input-based perspective for evaluating children’s English language learning (UDISE+).

The research questions driving this paper are as follows:

1. How comparable are the English language learning outcomes in Punjab, Haryana, and India as a whole?

2. What does the data say about English literacy proficiency in Punjab and Haryana at the pre-primary, primary, and upper primary levels?

The paper begins with a brief review of the literature surrounding the pedagogy of English in India. It then turns to an analysis of both data sets, identifying specific strengths, challenges, and potential areas of reform in both states. The final two sections discuss the paper's findings and recommendations, respectively.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. English Language Teaching in India: Historical Context

The pedagogy of the English language (ELT) in India has been shaped by the country's colonial and post-colonial history, as well as the needs of the contemporary global economy. Kachru [6] documents the nativization of English in South Asia, noting that Indian English has developed distinct functional domains and occupies a position of institutional authority in education, governance, and formal employment. For the states of Punjab and Haryana, English is both aspirational and exclusionary: families with means seek to secure English-medium education for their children, while those without have to rely on Hindi- and Punjabimedium instruction. This has been compounded by the three-language formula that positions Hindi as the predominant language of instruction, with regional languages such as Punjabi and English as additional components [7].

For learners in government schools in the two states, English is most often their third language. This has implications for the learning of the language, particularly as far as the pedagogy of teaching is concerned, not least because it requires consideration of the learner's home language (L1). Additionally, the question of comprehensible English input arises, one that is pertinent to both the government and private school sectors.

B. Theoretical Framework

The paper applies two theoretical frameworks, namely, Cummins' (1979) Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis and Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis to ELT in government schools in Punjab and Haryana. Linguistic interdependence holds that competence in L1 provides learners with cognitive and linguistic resources necessary for acquiring competency in additional languages. This has direct implications for the teaching of English as a foreign language in government schools in Punjab and Haryana, where English tends to be learned as the third language. The hypothesis serves as a theoretical framework for examining the impact of foundational literacy in L1 on learners' competency in English. Specifically, it is pertinent to the findings of ASER around general reading proficiency.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis, in turn, seeks to explain the mechanisms of language acquisition. It argues that learners pick up a language by understanding messages that are slightly more advanced than their current level of competence (i.e., +1). The hypothesis suggests that comprehensible input is necessary for language acquisition and that such input must come in the target language. In practice, this applies to children learning English in both government and English-medium private schools. According to the Input Hypothesis, they need to be exposed to English input that they can understand to acquire English. The ASER survey finds that only 55.3% of children in government schools in Class 3 who could decode English sentences actually understood them. This highlights the importance of providing comprehensible language input, be it in the classroom or in their everyday environment.

Together, the two theories help highlight the key challenges around learning English in government schools in Punjab and Haryana. Both point to the need to strengthen foundational literacy in L1 and provide comprehensible English input, respectively.

III. ASER DATA: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING OUTCOMES

A. The ASER English Assessment

The ASER English assessment follows a progressive 4-step procedure administered to each child individually and includes reading aloud of capital and small letters, reading of three-letter words, and

reading of simple sentences. Children who could read sentences at the word or sentence level are also tested for comprehension. This allows the ASER team to compare progress across states and time. The English assessment module was introduced in 2009 [8] and has been conducted periodically since; data from 2016 [8] and 2022, therefore, serve as useful benchmarks for assessing trends. Furthermore, ASER 2024 contains general reading data per state, which serves as a proxy for foundational literacy since it is well established that L1 reading proficiency predicts English (L2) proficiency [1].

B. National English Reading Benchmarks: ASER 2016 and 2022

Table I below contains the national English reading data for the academic years 2016 and 2022.

TABLE I. ASER ENGLISH READING — NATIONAL BENCHMARKS

Indicator	2016	2022	Trend
Cl.5: Read English sentences	24.7%	24.5%	Stagnant
Cl.8: Read English sentences	45.3%	46.7%	+1.4 pp (marginal)
Cl.3: Comprehension*	—	55.3%	<6 in 10 understand
Cl.8: Comprehension*	—	68.5%	Improves with grade

*Among children who can read sentences. Source: ASER 2022 [2].

As Table I demonstrates, only 24.5% of grade 5 children nationwide could read an English sentence in 2022. This places Punjab in the top 3 national performers in terms of children who can read English sentences at the Class 5 level [2]. It is notable that English reading proficiency increases with grade: 68.5% of Class 8 children who can read English sentences comprehend them [2], compared to 55.3% at Class 3. On the other hand, the data on comprehension at the sentence-reading level for both Punjab and Haryana is far from satisfactory: at the Class 3 level, only 55.3% of children who could read English sentences actually understood them [2]. Thus, the most significant learning challenge in English language instruction in India is the lack of reading comprehension, particularly among government school students in Classes 5 and 8.

C. General Reading Trends: Punjab, Haryana, India (2018–2024)

Since the most recent ASER report does not contain state-wise English language data, the data from the 2024 ASER is used as a proxy for foundational English language learning. Based on Cummins' (1979) Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, foundational literacy in the L1 is a predictor of proficiency in English language learning [1]. Table II below contains the relevant data from the ASER reports for the academic years 2018, 2022, and 2024.

TABLE II. READING PROFICIENCY TRENDS — PUNJAB, HARYANA, INDIA

Indicator (Govt.)	IN 2018	IN 2022	IN 2024	State Highlights
Cl.3: Read Cl.2 text	20.9 %	16.3 %	23.4 %	Haryana: +10pp recovery [3]

Cl.5: Read Cl.2 text	44.2 %	38.5 %	44.8 %	Punjab: 66.0% — Leader [3]
Cl.8: Read basic text	69.0 %	66.2 %	67.5 %	Punjab: declining [3]
HR Cl.3 baseline	46.4 %	31.5 %	—	–15 pp pandemic loss [2]

IN = India national avg; HR = Haryana. Source: ASER 2018 [8], 2022 [2], 2024 [3].

Based on Table II, both Punjab and Haryana perform well relative to the national averages. As of 2024, Punjab's proficiency in reading at the Class 5 level is above the national average by 21 percentage points [3], placing it among the top-performing states nationally. It is also evident that the pandemic took a toll on reading proficiency across India, particularly at the primary level. Punjab maintained relatively stronger outcomes at the Class 5 level, while Haryana experienced a steeper Class 3 decline but a faster subsequent recovery. As of 2022, Haryana's reading proficiency at the Class 3 level was 31.5%, which was 15 percentage points lower than its pre-pandemic baseline of 46.4% from 2018 [2], yet by 2024 the state had achieved one of the strongest recoveries in the country.

D. The Punjab Paradox

As mentioned earlier, Punjab has, by several metrics, outperformed the majority of other Indian states in terms of foundational reading proficiency. In terms of children's ability to read at the Class 5 level in government schools, Punjab was in second place nationally with a reading proficiency of 66% [3]. Furthermore, Punjab has seen the largest increase in pre-primary enrolment in government schools since 2018; according to ASER 2024, the figure increased by 11.2 percentage points, indicating greater confidence in government schools [3].

Meanwhile, ASER 2024 explicitly highlights Punjab as one of the few states where reading proficiency in government schools has declined between 2022 and 2024. The arithmetic proficiency in government schools in Punjab dropped sharply by 14 percentage points between 2018 and 2022. This is the result of both the overall lower level of proficiency and a particularly steep decrease in proficiency between those two years.

This trend, which is termed the 'Punjab Paradox,' directly informs the state's English language learning outcomes. If the proficiency in general reading, particularly in language, is on the decline, it stands to reason that English language proficiency will follow suit. This is because both are primarily taught in government schools and share the same instructional medium, namely, Punjabi. The drop in proficiency is particularly concerning at the Class 8 level because this is when children begin to interact more with the language for communicative purposes, including reading for extended periods of time, listening to radio and watching television, and interacting in English with peers and family members.

There are multiple factors that contribute to this challenge, most importantly, the disruption of continuity between primary and upper primary levels. One of the most notable recommendations around language instruction in NEP 2020 is the introduction of a structured, sequential curriculum in language learning at the upper primary level. Currently, the transition between primary and upper primary is somewhat disjointed, resulting in inadequate exposure to extended texts and reduced teaching hours due to the addition of other subjects. This, in turn, is exacerbated by the lack of an English-specific reading programme at the upper primary level, similar to what NIPUN Bharat is currently providing at the foundational level. Addressing this transition is essential for improving language proficiency in Punjab.

E. Haryana: Pandemic Loss and Strong Recovery

Haryana's pandemic-period trajectory differs from Punjab's in both scale and recovery pattern. Prior to the pandemic, Haryana was among the states with higher reading proficiency in government schools: the reading proficiency in Class 3 was 46.4% [2], significantly higher than the national average of 27.3%. The

impact of the pandemic was particularly severe for government schools in Haryana: the reading proficiency in Class 3 dropped by 15 percentage points between 2018 and 2022. Similar declines were reported for Class 5.

By 2024, however, Haryana's performance is recovering strongly, as the state is explicitly named in ASER 2024 as recovering by more than 10 percentage points in Class 3. The most notable implication for Haryana's English language learning trends comes from its investment in the NIPUN Bharat mission. The focus on building foundational reading proficiency has enabled the state to establish a firm baseline for subsequent language learning in general and English in particular.

IV. UDISE+ DATA: INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS FOR ENGLISH EDUCATION

A. Punjab: Schools of Eminence

The most notable institutional development in the area of English language learning in Punjab comes from the introduction of Schools of Eminence (SoE). This initiative provided selected government schools with digital infrastructure, STEM laboratories, and teacher training, with a particular focus on introducing English-medium instruction. SoE is designed to have a significant impact on the English language learning outcomes in Punjab, both for the participating schools and for the system as a whole. The data from UDISE+ indicates that the initiative has already resulted in dramatic improvements in terms of technology infrastructure. More specifically, the availability of computers increased dramatically in Punjab between 2021 and 2024, from 47.5% to 99.0%. Similarly, the availability of internet access increased from 59.3% to 88.9% between the same years. The overall increase far exceeds the national trends, which were 64.7% computers and 63.5% internet access, respectively, as of 2024.

B. Comparative UDISE+ Data: Punjab, Haryana, India

Table III below contains the trends in institutional infrastructure in Punjab, Haryana, and India as a whole.

TABLE III. UDISE+ INSTITUTIONAL INDICATORS (2024–25)

Indicator	Punjab	Haryana	India
Computer Access	99.0%	~65–70%	64.7%
Internet Connectivity	88.9%	~58–65%	63.5%
Female Teacher Share	76.6%	~45–48%	54.2%
Secondary PTR	9:1	~15–18:1	21:1
English-Medium Govt. Schools	150+ SoE	Limited	PM SHRI
Pre-Primary Enrolment Growth	+11.2 pp	Moderate	Nat. avg.

PTR = Pupil-Teacher Ratio; SoE = Schools of Eminence. Source: UDISE+ 2024–25 [4][5].

The most notable differences between Punjab and other states concern computer access, female teacher share, PTR, and preprimary enrolment growth. As the data demonstrates, Punjab leads on several critical indicators.

C. The Infrastructure–Pedagogy Gap

Punjab's teacher pool is of significantly higher quality. First of all, female teachers comprise 76.6% of all teachers in Punjab, compared to 54.2% nationwide. Secondly, Punjab has a particularly high number of trained teachers, particularly at the secondary and higher secondary levels. Thirdly, Punjab's PTR (pupil-teacher ratio) at the secondary level is 9:1, compared to 21:1 nationwide and 15–18:1 in Haryana. Thus, Punjab has the institutional capacity to support English-medium instruction in government schools.

However, the ASER data indicates that the superior infrastructure has not translated into superior learning outcomes. This, in essence, is the infrastructure-pedagogy gap that is the overarching theme of Punjab's English language learning outcomes. In other words, access to English-medium instruction, if it is to be implemented, would require extensive training of teachers in communicative pedagogy, particularly as far as language-specific teaching methodology is concerned. Additionally, the infrastructure gap is significant: while the SoE programme provides students with excellent language learning opportunities, such opportunities must also be provided at the school level. For now, it appears that the promise of the SoE initiative has not been fulfilled at the level of the overall system.

While Haryana fares far worse than Punjab on most infrastructure indicators, it is implementing a different strategy to English language learning. For Haryana, English is a foreign language that is taught as a subject beginning from Class 1, except for the handful of PM SHRI schools, which follow the English-medium instruction approach. Compared to the rest of India, Haryana's infrastructure is comparable: the availability of computers for students is 65–70% for Haryana and 64.7% nationally, while internet access is 58–65% and 63.5%, respectively. This suggests that if Haryana were to adopt the SoE approach, it would achieve similar improvements across all key English language learning indicators.

v. COMPARATIVE SUMMARY

Table IV below contains a snapshot summary of the most salient findings. TABLE IV. THREE-WAY COMPARATIVE SUMMARY

Dimension	Punjab	Haryana	India Avg.
Cl.5 Reading Govt. 2024	66.0% (Leader)	~48%	44.8%
Cl.3 Recovery 2022→24	Recovered	+10pp (Best)	16.3%→23.4%
Cl.8 Reading Trend	Declining	Recoverin	Slow
		g	recovery
Eng. Reading Cl.5 (2022)	Above avg.	Above avg.	24.5% stagnant
Digital Infrastructure	Exceptional	Average	64.7% comp.
Eng. Medium Govt. Schools	150+ SoE	Limited	PM SHRI

Core Challenge	Cl.8 decline despite infra.	English infra. gap	Eng. stagnant
----------------	-----------------------------	--------------------	---------------

Sources: ASER 2022 [2], ASER 2024 [3], UDISE+ 2024–25 [4]/[5].

VI. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Key Findings

The comparative analysis yields five principal findings.

Finding 1: Punjab performs best in India around foundational reading at the Class 5 level while experiencing a large decline at the Class 8 level. These data are critical for the discussion of English language learning since they highlight Punjab's 'Punjab Paradox,' wherein English language learning suffers from discontinuity between the primary and upper primary levels.

Finding 2: Nationally, English reading at the Class 5 level has been stagnant around 24.5% since 2016 [2]. This is a particularly concerning trend since it suggests that only 1 in 4 rural Indian children can read an English sentence at the age of 10. Furthermore, of those who could decode English sentences, only 55.3% of children in Class 3 and 68.5% in Class 8 could understand them [2]. Thus, the challenge of developing English language proficiency in India is one of transitioning from decoding to actual comprehension.

Finding 3: Haryana suffered one of the largest pandemic-related learning losses at the primary level, but is also among the fastest-recovering states. In 2018, Haryana's reading proficiency in government schools in Class 3 was 46.4% [2], while Punjab was above the national average. By 2022, Haryana's figure had dropped to 31.5% [2]. However, Haryana is recovering strongly: ASER 2024 names the state as one of those that have seen over a 10 percentage point increase in reading proficiency at the Class 3 level [3]. This, in part, is the result of the state's increased focus on foundational reading and learning under NIPUN Bharat.

Finding 4: Punjab's exemplary infrastructure has not translated into reading proficiency in English. This suggests the presence of an infrastructure-pedagogy gap that is detrimental to the quality of education.

Finding 5: The difference between introducing English medium instruction (Punjab) and learning English as a foreign language (Haryana) is reflected in the performance of the states. One of the major distinguishing factors between the pedagogical approaches in Punjab and Haryana is the former's focus on SoE. According to the data, SoE has the potential to transform the pedagogical landscape around English language learning in government schools in Punjab.

B. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Punjab should create an upper-primary English reinforcement programme within the SoE to address the Class 8 decline. The potential of SoE to address the issue of discontinuity between the primary and upper primary levels of English language learning should be fully utilised. The infrastructure in SoE schools can be leveraged to provide students with comprehensive, graded English reading material so that they can learn to read English for both communicative and informative purposes. Punjab should also examine the reasons for the increase in the dropout rate: according to ASER 2024, the figure is 2.5% (compared to 0.3% nationwide).

Recommendation 2: Haryana should focus on foundational reading recovery and consider adopting a similar approach to SoE to improve English language learning. Haryana's experience with the pandemic has been largely negative in terms of learning losses; however, it is recovering at an impressive pace, thanks in part to its focus on foundational literacy. This provides Haryana with an opportunity to build momentum and address the gaps in English language learning by examining SoE and adopting a similar approach to build upon its own PM SHRI initiative.

Recommendation 3: Punjab and Haryana should invest significantly in Communicative Language Teaching and Reading Instruction to ensure that children's language learning is not stuck at the level of decoding. The most pressing challenge in English language learning in India, as per ASER, is the transition from decoding to comprehension. The solution would be to invest significantly in Communicative Language Teaching and Reading Instruction courses for teachers, ensuring that children receive appropriate exposure to the language beyond simply learning to read English sentences.

Recommendation 4: The nation needs to re-establish ASER's annual English language assessment to improve policy design and ensure that no state is left behind. Punjab's experience demonstrates that policy design plays a major role in learning outcomes. The discontinuity between the primary and upper primary levels in English language learning has undermined the progress that Punjab made at the foundational level. Re-establishing the annual English language literacy module as it existed previously in ASER would provide data points vital for policy design and implementation for all states.

VII. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrated that Punjab and Haryana are substantially different in terms of English language acquisition policy, even though they are geographically contiguous. Punjab has a wide range of initiatives aimed at improving students' literacy, including the Schools of Eminence, near-universal access to technology, and the second-highest reading proficiency in the country at Class 5. The Punjab Paradox, however, is the result of a lack of continuity between the primary and upper primary education levels. In the case of Haryana, the investment in the FLN programme has served as a critical foundation for students to build competencies in their mother tongue and develop English language skills further.

Considering the current stagnation in English reading outcomes, it is essential to prioritise measurable learning gains in both states. As shown by the data, English reading proficiency accounts for approximately a quarter of the Class 5 population nationwide, unchanged from 2016. It is therefore necessary to reorient attention from the provision of education to actual learning outcomes. In particular, the current agenda for both states should comprise developing strategies to improve English instruction at the upper primary level, training teachers in communicative pedagogy rather than purely grammatical approaches, and establishing consistent national English assessments. Without measurement there is no evaluation, and without evaluation there can be no sustained improvement in English language learning outcomes.

REFERENCES.

- [1] J. Cummins, "Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children," *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 222–251, 1979.
- [2] ASER Centre, *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2022*. New Delhi: Pratham Education Foundation, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://asercentre.org>
- [3] ASER Centre, *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2024: National Findings*. New Delhi: Pratham Education Foundation, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://asercentre.org>
- [4] Ministry of Education, Government of India, "UDISE+ 2024–25: Key Statistics on School Education," Press Information Bureau, New Delhi, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://pib.gov.in>
- [5] A. C. Mehta, "School Education in Punjab: UDISE+ Analysis 2021–22 to 2024–25," *Education for All in India*, 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://educationforallinindia.com>
- [6] B. B. Kachru, *The Indianization of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- [7] Ministry of Education, Government of India, *National Education Policy 2020*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020.
- [8] ASER Centre, *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2016*. New Delhi: Pratham Education Foundation, 2016. [Online]. Available: <https://asercentre.org>