



Lack of Foundational English Skills, Limited Exposure, and Inhibition: Challenges Faced by Higher Secondary Learners

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Abstract- At the Higher Secondary level, English functions both as a subject and as a crucial medium for learning, assessment, and communication. However, a significant number of learners struggle to meet the academic demands of this stage due to weak foundational language skills, limited exposure to English, and strong language inhibition. These factors act as major barriers to comprehension, classroom interaction, and academic performance. This paper presents a classroom-based reflective study that examines how the lack of basic English proficiency affects teaching and learning at the Higher Secondary level. The study is based on sustained classroom observation and teacher–student interaction in a government school context in Kerala. It analyses the major challenges faced by learners and proposes practical, classroom-level strategies to support them. The study argues that addressing foundational gaps and affective barriers is essential for meaningful English language learning at the Higher Secondary level.

Keywords- foundational English skills, language exposure, language inhibition, higher secondary learners, English language teaching.

I. Introduction

English occupies a central position in Higher Secondary education, functioning both as an academic subject and as a medium through which knowledge in other disciplines is accessed. At this stage, learners are expected to read complex texts, comprehend abstract ideas, articulate responses clearly, and engage in analytical and critical writing. For many students, particularly those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, this transition poses serious challenges.

These difficulties do not arise suddenly at the Higher Secondary level; rather, they are rooted in earlier stages of schooling where learners fail to develop basic language competence. Classroom experience reveals that many students possess conceptual understanding but lack the linguistic ability to express it in English. This gap results in learner frustration and poses pedagogical challenges for teachers.

This paper examines three interrelated factors—lack of foundational English skills, limited exposure to English, and language inhibition—and analyses how they collectively hinder effective teaching and learning at the Higher Secondary level.



II. Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, classroom-based reflective research design, drawing primarily on the teacher-researcher's continuous classroom observation and interaction with learners. Reflective practice was employed to analyse recurring language-related challenges faced by students in real instructional contexts.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a government Higher Secondary School in Kerala, where English is taught as a compulsory subject. The participants included Higher Secondary students from diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds, most of whom use their mother tongue as the primary language of communication outside the classroom.

III. Data Collection

Data were collected through:

Sustained classroom observation across regular teaching sessions

Informal interactions with students during classroom activities

Analysis of students' oral responses, written work, and classroom participation

The observations focused on learners' reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities, as well as their willingness to use English in classroom situations.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to language proficiency, exposure, and affective factors such as fear and inhibition. The analysis was guided by established principles of second language acquisition and English language teaching.

Ethical Considerations

The study maintains confidentiality and anonymity of students. As a reflective classroom-based study, no personal identifiers were recorded, and observations were used solely for academic and pedagogical analysis.

Lack of Foundational English Skills

Foundational English skills, including vocabulary knowledge, sentence construction, reading comprehension, and grammatical awareness, are essential for academic success. However, many Higher Secondary students lack adequate mastery of these core skills. They struggle to frame simple sentences, comprehend textbook language, and follow classroom instructions delivered in English.

This deficiency affects all four language skills. Learners often find it difficult to read prescribed texts independently, resulting in excessive dependence on teachers for explanation. Writing tasks frequently become exercises in memorisation rather than meaningful expression. Listening and speaking skills remain underdeveloped, leading to limited classroom interaction. Consequently, English becomes a source of anxiety rather than a functional tool for learning.



Limited Exposure to English

Exposure to a language plays a crucial role in language acquisition. For many Higher Secondary learners, exposure to English is largely restricted to the classroom. At home and in the wider social environment, the mother tongue dominates communication, and opportunities to hear or use English are minimal. Even within schools, English teaching often remains textbook-centred with limited scope for authentic language use.

This restricted exposure prevents learners from developing familiarity with the sound patterns, rhythm, and everyday usage of English. Without sustained exposure, students struggle to internalise the language, resulting in low fluency and confidence. English thus remains an examination-oriented subject rather than a living means of communication.

Language Inhibition and Fear of Using English

Language inhibition is a prominent challenge in Higher Secondary classrooms. Many learners hesitate to speak in English due to fear of making mistakes, peer ridicule, or negative correction. This fear is often the result of limited practice and an overemphasis on accuracy rather than communication.

Additionally, many students develop a psychological fear of English as a subject. Repeated experiences of failure, rigid evaluation practices, and comparison with more fluent peers contribute to a belief that English is difficult and unattainable. Over time, this leads to disengagement and resistance towards learning the language. Unless such affective barriers are addressed, improvement in proficiency remains limited.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations reveal that students with weak English foundations struggle to cope with curricular demands. Many depend heavily on translated explanations and prepared notes. Participation is often limited to a small group of confident learners, while the majority remain passive.

Teachers frequently spend substantial instructional time revisiting basic language elements, leaving limited scope for higher-order learning objectives. This gap between syllabus expectations and classroom reality highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that are sensitive to learners' linguistic needs.

Pedagogical Suggestions

To address these challenges, teachers need to adopt supportive and learner-centred strategies. Revisiting basic language structures through short, focused activities can strengthen foundational skills. Low-risk speaking activities such as pair work, group discussions, and guided dialogues can reduce inhibition.

Creating a non-threatening classroom environment where errors are treated as part of learning is essential. Increased exposure can be facilitated through listening activities, storytelling, role-play, and guided reading. Gradual transition from the mother tongue to English, using familiar contexts, can further support learners.



IV. Conclusion

The lack of foundational English skills, limited exposure to the language, and strong language inhibition collectively act as major barriers to effective learning at the Higher Secondary level. These challenges negatively affect learners' confidence, academic performance, and engagement. Addressing them requires awareness, patience, and context-sensitive pedagogical practices.

By strengthening foundational skills and creating an encouraging learning environment, teachers can help learners overcome linguistic and psychological barriers, enabling more meaningful engagement with English at the Higher Secondary level.

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