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Enhancing Language Acquisition in Vernacular Medium Schools through 'Anubandh': A Study of Positive Reinforcement and Holistic Pedagogy

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Abstract:

In the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, the Indian education system is undergoing a paradigm shift from rote memorization to holistic, competency-based learning. This paper presents a case study of an intra-institutional intervention implemented in a vernacular medium school in Thane, Maharashtra. The project, titled "Anubandh" (Connection) aimed to address the critical gap in English language proficiency among primary and secondary students. By integrating teacher empowerment workshops with student-centric pedagogical tools, specifically positive reinforcement mechanisms like "Green Cards" and a "School Growth Box", the intervention sought to alter the school's learning culture. The study utilized a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) assessments with qualitative observations. Results indicate a significant improvement, with 70% of students advancing by two proficiency levels within the academic year. The findings suggest that when pedagogical strategies prioritize emotional safety and value-based reinforcement over punitive measures, student capability and mindfulness in learning are substantially enhanced.

Keywords:
NEP 2020, Anubandh, positive reinforcement, holistic pedagogy, English language teaching (ELT)

1. Introduction:

The acquisition of English as a second language remains one of the most significant challenges for students in vernacular medium schools in India. The disparity in language proficiency often translates into a disparity in future academic and professional opportunities. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges this challenge and advocates for "pedagogies that are experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centred, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable" (NEP 2020, p. 12).

However, the transition from policy to practice requires tangible interventions. Teachers in vernacular schools often grapple with large class sizes, limited resources, and a historical reliance on rote learning. Furthermore, students often harbor a deep-seated fear of English, viewing it as a barrier rather than a skill.

This paper documents a collaborative initiative undertaken during the academic year 2024-25. The project focused on a dual-pronged strategy: equipping teachers with modern pedagogical tools and simultaneously creating a student culture rooted in "Anubandh"- a Sanskrit/Marathi term implying a deep, continuous connection. The objective was to foster a learning environment where "Values" (compassion, collaboration) and "Pedagogies" (experiential learning) intersected to produce measurable academic outcomes.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:

The Project Anubandh intervention was not designed in isolation; it draws inspiration from established global educational theories and successful implementations of behavioral psychology in classroom settings.

2.1 The Affective Filter Hypothesis: Moving from Fear to Safety

Stephen Krashen's *Affective Filter Hypothesis* (1982) is a cornerstone of second language acquisition theory. It posits that a learner's ability to acquire language is constrained by negative emotional variables such as anxiety, lack of self-confidence, and fear of punishment. In many ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts globally, educators have observed that when the "filter" is high, for instance, in strict classrooms where grammar errors are mocked, learning halts completely (Krashen, 1982).

Drawing inspiration from this, the project identified that the primary barrier for the students in Thane was not cognitive ability, but the "fear of English." Consequently, the intervention was designed to lower this filter. By ensuring that no student was corrected or punished while speaking, we aimed to keep the "filter" low, allowing language input to be processed effectively.

Case Reference: This approach has been successfully validated in Total Physical Response (TPR) classrooms globally, where instructors focus on meaning rather than grammar correction. A study by Asher (1969) demonstrated that students in low-anxiety TPR environments learned languages up to three times faster than those in traditional, high-stress drill classrooms.

2.2 Behaviorism and Token Economies:

The Science of Rewards - The use of "Green Cards" is rooted in B.F. Skinner's theory of *Operant Conditioning*, specifically the principle of positive reinforcement. Skinner (1953) demonstrated that behavior followed by a pleasant consequence is likely to be repeated. This principle has been successfully applied in "Token Economies" in special education and progressive schools worldwide, where students earn tokens for positive behavior which can be exchanged for privileges.

While traditional token economies often focus on discipline (sitting still), our inspiration was to pivot this mechanism toward academic risk-taking. We adapted this theory to create a micro-economy of validation. The "Green Card" served as an immediate, tangible reinforcement for the act of speaking, conditioning the students to associate English speaking with reward rather than embarrassment.

Case Reference: A notable global application of this is the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework widely adopted in U.S. schools. PBIS schools utilize "behavior tickets" or tokens to reward positive actions. Longitudinal studies (Horner et al., 2009) have shown that schools implementing such token economies see a significant reduction in disciplinary referrals and an increase in academic instructional time.

2.3 Socio-Cultural Theory of Learning as a Community

Lev Vygotsky's *Socio-Cultural Theory* (1978) emphasizes that learning is inherently a social process. Vygotsky argued that higher psychological processes develop first between people (interpsychological) and then within the individual (intrapsychological). Educational interventions in Finland and Japan often utilize this by emphasizing group identity over individual ranking.

Inspired by these communal learning models, the "Project Anubandh" introduced the "School Growth Box." Instead of individual students hoarding Green Cards for personal glory, the act of depositing them into a common box socialized the achievement. It utilized the Vygotskian approach to turn the classroom into a

collaborative "Zone of Proximal Development," where the stronger students encouraged the weaker ones to speak so that the class could collectively fill the box.

Case Reference: This principle is evident in the "Jigsaw Classroom" model developed by Aronson (1971), where students are divided into groups and must rely on each other to succeed. Research on Jigsaw classrooms has consistently shown that when individual success is tied to group success, student engagement and empathy increase significantly compared to competitive classrooms.

3. Methodology:

The study was conducted at a partner school in Thane, involving students from primary (Std 1-4) and secondary (Std 5-8) levels. The methodology followed a structured action-research cycle: Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect.

3.1 Phase I - Teacher Empowerment (Capacity Building):

Recognizing that teachers are the primary agents of change, the program began with an intensive training module in April 2024.

Participants: The cohort included educators from the partner school and a neighboring girls' school.

Curriculum: The training moved beyond syllabus completion to cover:

1. Integration of Technology: Utilizing digital tools for audio-visual language exposure.
2. Classroom Management: Strategies to manage large classes without corporal punishment.
3. Culture Building: Exercises to help teachers view themselves as a cohesive "US" team rather than isolated subject instructors.

Outcome: Teachers co-created the implementation plan, ensuring they had ownership of the new pedagogy.

3.2 Phase II - The 'Anubandh' Implementation:

The student-facing intervention was rolled out in five distinct stages:

Step 1: Affinity (Identity Building): To foster a sense of belonging, each class was guided to adopt a unique identity. This "Class Heritage" helped students feel they were part of a team, increasing peer motivation.
Class profiles were created to create a sense of belonging.

Class oath taking ceremony.

Step 2: Expectations (Clarity): Ambiguity breeds anxiety. Clear guidelines on English usage were displayed physically in classrooms, ensuring students knew exactly what was expected of them.

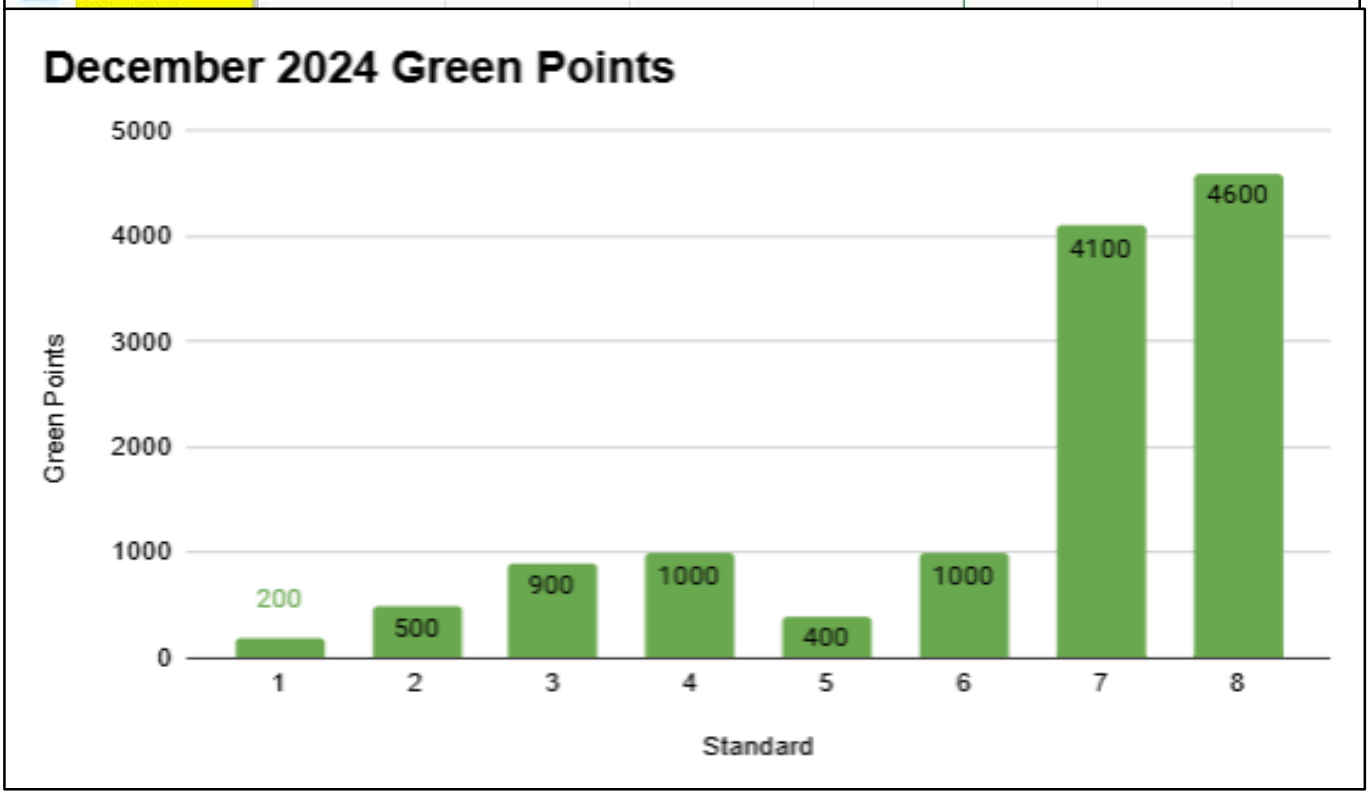
Step 3: Positive Reinforcement (The Green Card): This was the core pedagogical tool. Teachers were equipped with "Green Cards." Whenever a student attempted to speak in English, asked a question, or helped a peer, regardless of grammatical accuracy, they were awarded a card. This gamified the learning process and provided instant gratification

Green cards awarded to the students who try.

Step 4: The School Growth Box: A central repository box was placed in the school. Students deposited their earned Green Cards into this box. This transformed individual achievement into a collective school asset, visually demonstrating that every student's effort contributed to the school's "growth."

Step 5: Data-Driven Assessment: A "Class Wise Leaderboard" was maintained. This introduced healthy competition and allowed for the tracking of high-performing cohorts.

Std	Candidate	TEST BLS5S6W11 – 30 Marks | 9th Jan	TEST BLS7S8W13 – 18 Marks | 10th Jan	TEST BLS5S6W12 – 20 Marks | 11th Jan	TEST BLS3S4W13 – 12 Marks | 22, 23 Jan	TEST BLS7S8W14 – 12 Marks | 24, 25 Jan	TEST BLS5S6W13 – 12 Marks | 29 Jan	TEST BLS7S8W15 – 12 Marks | 31 Jan
3	Gauri Aadhav	22		18	4	8	11	
3	Devanand Sagat	11		5	2	6	6	
3	Ruksana Shaikh	12		9	4	9	8	
3	Lalita Waghe	15		6	1	9	5	
3	Chaitanya Yadav	11			3			
3	Abhi Pandey						6	
3	Yug Pandy							
3	Nandini Jadhav	9			5	5	5	
3	Aarti Singh	10		10		7	6	
3	Gauri Date	9		8	4	8	8	
3	Priyanshi Pawar	23		19	11	10	11	
4	Meghashri Dhebe	19		19	9	9	11	
4	Akriti Yadav	21		20	12	6	7	
3	Vanshika Chavan				4	7	7	
4	Khushi Guhagatkar	17			10		9	
4	Manasvi Anbhavane	20		17	9	8	8	
4	Shlok More	20				8	6	
4	Sarthak Mohite	24			12	9	9	
3	Avani Kadam							



3.3 The Assessment Framework: Adopting the ASER Methodology

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the intervention moved away from traditional written examinations, which often induce anxiety and test rote memory. Instead, we adopted the assessment tools developed by Pratham for the *Annual Status of Education Report (ASER)*. ASER is the largest citizen-led survey in India and is widely regarded as the benchmark for measuring foundational literacy in rural and semi-urban contexts.

3.3.1 The Rationale for ASER

Standard school exams often suffer from a "floor effect," where a student who cannot read simply gets a zero, offering no diagnostic data on *what* they know. ASER, conversely, uses a "floor-level" test designed to assess foundational skills regardless of the student's age or grade. It answers the question: "Can the student read?" rather than "Did the student memorize the chapter?"

3.3.2 The Instrument and Testing Protocol

The assessment utilized the standard ASER English Reading Tool, which consists of a graduated scale of proficiency. The testing was conducted one-on-one in a non-threatening environment. The scale comprises five distinct levels:

1. Beginner: The student cannot identify letters.
2. Letter Level: The student can recognize capital and small letters but cannot read words.
3. Word Level: The student can read common, easy words (e.g., "cup," "mat") but cannot form sentences.
4. Paragraph Level: The student can read a simple sentence-based paragraph (Standard 1 difficulty).
5. Story Level: The student can read a longer text with fluency (Standard 2 difficulty).

3.3.3 Adaptive Testing Methodology

The testing followed the standard ASER adaptive protocol. Every student was initially asked to read a 'Paragraph'.

- If they read it fluently, they were asked to read the 'Story'. If successful, they were marked at Story Level.
- If they failed the 'Paragraph', they were asked to read 'Words'.
- If they failed 'Words', they were tested on 'Letters'.

This methodology ensured that every student was met at their current level of capability. The "70% improvement" metric cited in this paper refers to students moving up at least two of these rungs (e.g., a student moving from 'Letter Level' to 'Paragraph Level') over the course of the intervention.

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Comparing baseline data with end-line data collected after the intervention period, the results were statistically significant:

Significant Improvement (70%): A substantial majority of the student body improved by two ASER levels. For example, students who could previously only identify letters were able to read sentences or simple stories.

Moderate Improvement (25%): A quarter of the students improved by one ASER level, showing steady progress.

No Change (5%): A small minority showed limited progress. Analysis revealed this was primarily correlated with chronic absenteeism rather than the failure of the pedagogy itself.

4.2 Qualitative Observations

Reduced Inhibition: Teachers reported that students who were previously mute during English periods began volunteering answers to earn Green Cards.

Cultural Shift: The "School Growth Box" became a focal point of pride. The vandalism of school property decreased, and a sense of ownership increased, as students felt invested in the school's "score."

5. Conclusion

The Conclave seeks to explore how we can nurture "Mindfulness, Capability, and Compassion." The Anubandh model offers a blueprint for this. It demonstrates that Capability (English proficiency) is best nurtured through Compassion (Positive Reinforcement) and Mindfulness (Active, conscious participation in the School Growth Box).

The 70% improvement rate serves as empirical evidence that when schools invest in the emotional and cultural architecture of learning, the academic architecture strengthens automatically. Future iterations of this model could integrate AI-driven tools to personalize the "Green Card" challenges, further bridging the gap between technology and human values.

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