Punjab govt schools say hello to 'tough' English

One of the highest failure rates in subject, activity-based initiative is now changing conversations in classrooms

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IT'S THE morning assembly at the government secondary school on Ladhowali road in Jalandhar, and 13-year-old Prabhleen, a student of Class 9, steps up to deliver an eloquent speech in English on "social media". "It can make or break a person," she says. "I appeal to all my dear friends to use it with cau-

Students of Ladhowali school, Jalandhar. *Anju Agnihotri Chaba*

tion or it may have a devastating effect on your life. Thank you," she winds up.

Minutes later, Prabhleen, whose father is an autorickshaw driver, makes a startling confession. "I had trouble speaking a word in English till a few months ago. Now all of us try our best to converse in English, we have lost our fear of this language," she says, smiling.

What has changed, say officials, teachers and students in Jalandhar, is Padho Punjab — a new activity-based learning initiative launched eight months ago by the state government.

"English is a weakness for most of the 25 lakh students studying in around 20,000 government schools of Punjab. But we are determined to turn this weakness into their strength," says Krishan Kumar, education secretary.

Experts describe this initiative as a case of better late then never, especially because "English is the language of science and technology".

According to government figures, one of the highest failure

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rates among compulsory subjects in the Class 10 state board exams over the last five years was in English, except in 2016 when 26-30 grace marks were awarded to improve results.

The data shows that 89,789 students failed in English in 2018 — they formed 60% of all those who failed in a compulsory subject that year; 70,436 failed in 2017 (50%); 56,628 in 2016 (59%); 80,278 (72%) in 2015; and 66,546 (63%) in 2014.

"This initiative was needed long back but it is good that they

are moving in this direction," says Dr Satish Kapoor, a retired principal of Khalsa College in Jalandhar.

"However, a multi-level approach should be adopted. First, an adequate number of well-qualified teachers must be appointed. For several years, there were no English teachers in many schools and the subject was being taught by teachers from other disciplines. Second, the fear of English must be removed. Finally, at least one period a day should be kept aside for group discussions in English about current topics, which will also enhance knowledge, expression and confidence," says Kapoor.

The government's move, officials say, includes training for teachers under the Interactive English Language Teaching for Students (IELTS) to prepare students for competitive exams and better job opportunities.

"This programme was rolled out late last year in all senior secondary schools and the response was very encouraging. From the next session, it will extended from Class 9 to 12. Under the programme, English teachers are being given tips on soft skills and phonetics and language skills," says Bindu Gulati, assistant director, State Council For Education and Research training (SCERT).

The change is visible across villages in Jalandhar and Patiala, where schools hold sessions in public speaking, daily news-reading, singing and poetry recitation, apart from skits and quizzes — all in English. Most importantly, say teachers, many students can complete a conversation in English.

"We have given students a 2,000-word vocabulary and now some of them are making little dictionaries of their own, which is incredible," says Harpreet Kaur, state co-ordinator, Padho Punjab.

"Our students are eager to learn English but were not able to grasp it due to lack of a proper methodology. This used to impact our overall results. We started by training teachers in such a way

that they make students learn better English than in any private English-medium school," says Chander Shekhar, schools mentor for English in Jalandhar.

About 15 km from Jalandhar, Pooja and Poonam of the girls' school at Mand village say they have started conversing with each other in English — "general chats about each others' interests".

At the high school in Thuhi, Patiala, students listen intently to English audio clips. Arshdeep Kaur, a Class 6 student, smoothens her hair before she gets up to speak on the subject, 'Air is present everywhere'.

A few kilometres ahead, students in Dheypur are belting out the popular number "If you are happy and you know it" under the supervision of their teacher Baljit Singh. "I got this song from the Internet. Teachers are encouraged to come up with innovative ways to improve fluency," says Singh.

In Jalandhar's Patara village, students are presenting the play, 'Happy Prince', which is part of their syllabus. "Even good students used to be scared of English, they would treat it like a *'bhoot'* (ghost)," laughs Satinder Kaur, the English teacher.

Ankush Singh, a Class 10 student in Mand who hails from a family of farmers, says he could not complete a sentence in English till a few months ago. "But now, I can give you directions to reach my village in English."

MNREGA

vote on. Pointing to the ditch she has dug for conserving whatever little rainwater the region receives, she says in Mewari, *"Mandir ne khade me nako, mane toh raasan ka gehu do* (Temple can go to that pit. I am more concerned about getting my ration)."

Women account for a high 65 percent of the MGNREGA workforce in Rajasthan, and like Pista, many are vocal about benefiting from the recent revival the scheme has seen. In a state where