

Teaching English Language in Early Grades

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Abstract

Language learning is very important for children since it provides the foundation for all later learning. This paper supports children learning English as a second language in early years. It has a particular focus on children in three to six years age group and supports children's transition in school. This paper is an outcome of learning that happened during the three months of field visit in rural Anganwadi centres and government primary school of Haryana State, India. The study provides information about second language learning among young children from three to six years and children in early grades. It was found that children can learn new language easily say English with support, encouragement and by providing the print rich and spoken environment.

Language plays an important role in communication, exchange of information, development of reading skills, reading with comprehension, and, in later years, academic success.

“Language and other forms of expression provide the basis for meaning making, and sharing with others. They create possibilities of development of understanding and knowledge, providing the ability to symbolise, codify, and to remember and record. Development of language for a child is synonymous with development

of understanding and identity, and also the capability of relating with others. It is not only verbal languages with scripts, but also languages without scripts, sign languages, scripts such as Braille and the performing arts, that provide the bases for making meaning and the expression.” – National Curriculum Framework-2005.

The foundations for meaningful reading and writing are laid in the first few years of life

The Emergent Literacy perspective emphasises that it is through exposure

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to a variety of informal reading and writing experiences at home that young children begin to experience and make meaningful relationships with different forms of reading and writing much before they enter school (Teale and Sulzby 1986). These experiences may take the form of imitating a grown up reading a newspaper or book; recognising some familiar written words or alphabets on hoardings, labels or television; pretending to read or write letters or messages; making pretend lists or listening to read aloud stories and so on. Experiences of this nature help very young children to make natural and meaningful connections with written words while participating in daily life social interactions (Jayaram, 2010).

Research shows that children, who have had exposure to reading and writing in their early childhood years, come better equipped with the knowledge and skills required to deal with school learning, than their other counterparts who interact with print for the first time when they enter school classrooms. Yet little attention is being paid to language activities and experiences at early childhood and primary stage.

Language Teaching in Multilingual Country

Teaching through the child's first language, or mother tongue, is internationally recognised as the most appropriate way of working with children in the early years of concept formation.

'Children who attend preschool programmes conducted in their own mother tongue face fewer problems of comprehension as compared to children whose mother tongue is different from the medium of instruction.'

– (Position paper on ECCE, NCERT)

Language teaching is a complex issue in a multilingual country like ours, where teachers may be required to cope with a number of languages at the same time in a classroom. Any Indian language used as a medium of instruction in preschools, especially in towns and cities, poses problems for children coming from different language backgrounds and dialects. To these children, it is like learning a foreign language, and it is also a challenge for the ECCE worker. Hence, the teacher's sensitivity and training are both essential to help the child overcome the gap between the home language/dialect and the school language.

On the other hand, it is well known that young children can learn new languages easily. Indeed, research shows that the years before age seven are probably the best to learn new languages, and observation supports the view that young children learn new languages much faster than adults.

The period 2–5 years may even be the best for learning multiple languages. India being a multilingual country, people are familiar with more than one languages, not including English. Much of this is learnt out of school, through informal learning of languages in the environment. So it

is obviously not difficult for ordinary people without much education to learn additional Indian languages. It can also be observed that large number of children comfortably study in schools in the 'regional-language' medium even though they use a different language at home.

Multilingualism and children's learning abilities are, therefore, not the issues here, but rather the ability of the educational system to address these issues and find the appropriate solutions.

Language Issue in Tribal Areas

Children in tribal areas enter directly into a primary school that uses the state language and face great difficulty resulting in their inability to read the state language with comprehension even after Class V.

The early childhood years before the child enters primary school are obviously the best time to familiarise him/her with the regional/school language. At preschool stage listening and speaking are the major activities in the classroom, along with rhymes, free play, storytelling etc. So it is easier at this stage to learn language. ECCE pedagogy may be helpful in introducing the new language through oral means alone (listening and speaking) at the preschool stage, before going on to reading and writing at the primary stage. If ECCE cannot be introduced in tribal areas, then the first year of primary school, should

be utilised for learning the regional language through such informal means like preschool methodology. A sympathetic attitude, some knowledge of the tribal language or dialect on the part of the teacher, or the employment of a teacher belonging to that language group, and orientation of the teacher would go a long way to help children learn language(s).

Demand for English

There is a growing demand for English in the society. Majority of parents of all classes, occupations and regions like their children to know English. It is seen as the path to upward mobility. Unfortunately, most people confuse learning English with the so-called 'English medium', and hence the growing popularity of so-called 'English-medium' schools has become closely linked to the rapidly increasing privatisation of education at the primary and preschool levels. English has become the line dividing the privileged from the rest, and the base of the continuing dual track in our educational system. These are issues of class, power, and social inclusion rather than of pedagogy, and hence are required to be paid attention to.

Whatever is the ideal age for the introduction of a second language from an academic standpoint, from the point of view of socio-political realities it has to be introduced early, either in Class I, as several states have already done, or at the preschool level. Academicians then

have to find the best methodologies for teaching it.

Position Paper on ECCE, Focus Group report of NCERT 2006, raised two important Questions

The Questions are

How can we teach English to children through teachers who do not know English, especially if it involves teaching children from homes where the parents do not know it either?

How can the methodology of ECCE be applied to the learning of English?

Field Experience

The investigator works in area of ECCE at NCERT. All the faculty members of NCERT were required to go for field visit in rural areas and teach for three months in any one of the government schools. This paper is an outcome of learning happened out of experience in NCERT in the area of ECCE and exposure to field visit in an Anganwadi centre and in Class I of government primary school, Sikanderpur ghosi village, Haryana. Cooperation of Anganwadi centre and primary school is duly acknowledged. During the field visit the investigator helped children in learning simple English vocabulary through picture cards, picture books, English rhymes and provided them ample opportunities to listen to simple English words during free and guided conversation.

For Class I children and others there was a provision of viewing T.V. programme in English (action songs,

rhymes, stories, art and craft work etc.), especially telecasted for primary students between 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. The programme was well designed – class wise, it was according to the age of the children and themes of the programme were very simple. It included simple English conversation, introduction of body parts in English, activities on different themes, some simple rhymes, language games, stories, role play, dramatisation etc. After viewing the programme for one hour the investigator used to repeat these simple activities again in class whenever there was time by giving chance to children to recall what they had observed, listened and used to encourage them to speak without hesitation.

Sound recognition, associating sound with Alphabets, making words from sound, taking up project on water, fruits, vegetables, colours, shapes etc. were common activities of Class I.

In anganwadi centre children from four to five years age group were encouraged by the investigator to say ‘thank you’, ‘please’, ‘may I come in’, ‘may I go out’, ‘colours name in English’, ‘body parts name’, ‘fruits name’, ‘vegetable name’ etc., in both Hindi and English language simultaneously.

Investigator adopted play-way, activity-based methodology as used in preschools. Theme-based approach was used. Activities related to themes were organised incorporating activities for developing listening skill, speaking skill, reading and writing skill. Activities for listening skill included activities

such as conversation; rhymes, stories etc. For speaking skills activities like 'show and tell', reciting poem, building words etc., were conducted. For reading, readiness activities such as match sound with picture, identification of alphabets, words with sound and letters etc., were organised and for developing writing skill fine motor development activities along with making simple patterns, writing alphabets, words etc., were organised.

Investigator used the teaching learning material available in school with Class I teacher, whereas some of the items like dominoes, picture cards, picture reading chart etc., were also developed by the investigator.

It was found that children had started understanding spoken English. They had started reading by joining letters. They were able to draw face with eye, nose, ear, mouth, hair etc., and label. They were able to speak two to three lines on selected object of their choice like pen, pencil, chalk, table, chair, teacher, blackboard etc., with little support. It was heartening to see them using words like thank you, please, come, go, I want, take, give, call, bell, water, food, tiffin, mother, father, friend, etc., while talking to their classmates.

Answers to above questions are

Using ECCE pedagogy, teaching of English is possible

ECCE perspective, or a developmental pedagogy, suggests that language may be learnt by processes in the following

order: 'Listen–speak–read–write.' This is the exact opposite of what is observed in most schools, where language in the early years (whether English or any Indian language) is taught by first requiring children to write, then read, sometimes to listen, and almost never to talk! In the early years, the focus is on listening and speaking as the major activities in the classroom. Speech and listening, reading and writing, are all generalised skills, and children's mastery over them becomes the key factor affecting success at school. All of these skills need to be used together recommends NCF-2005. Input-rich communicational environments are a pre-requisite for language learning, whether Hindi or English or any language. All teachers who teach English should have basic proficiency in English. A variety of materials should be available to provide an input-rich curriculum, which focuses on meaning.

Teacher's sensitivity and training is required

Primary Teachers, especially Class I and II should be given training in usage of ECCE methodology in a mission mode. They should learn to come down to the level of children. They should sing, dance and play with young children. Drawing simple pictures with free hand drawing of common words used in English are helpful in learning English language. Example: kite, balloon, pencil, pen, eraser, pencil box, car, tree etc.

Important Principles to be followed while teaching English could be

- I.** It is important to create a non-threatening and encouraging environment for learning English. For this it is important to have a bilingual approach to facilitate transition from Hindi to English. Introduce English in a spontaneous and smooth manner and not adopt a formal structured approach since children should 'pick-up' the language rather than be taught. Do not force or penalise children but encourage them to speak in English along with Hindi. If children make mistakes they should not be immediately corrected because they do not like repeating the corrected form of sentences.
- II.** It is important to expose children to a lot of spoken English through activities, audio-video programmes, games etc., and provide them opportunity to use the language.

Curricular Objectives for Preschool Education

By the time the child is ready to go to K.G. Class (i.e., approx. 4-5 years), curricular expectations could be

- The child follows short and simple instructions in English e.g., 'sit down', 'come here', 'put away your toys', etc.

- The child communicates simple needs in English, such as 'may I go to toilet', 'may I go to drink water', etc.
- The child expresses her/his thoughts in simple short sentences.
- The child understands short stories and recites short rhymes with action.
- The child says 'good morning', 'thank you' etc.

Activities that can be Conducted at ECCE Centers During this period

- Simple instructions to be given with actions to facilitate children's comprehension
- Recitation of simple rhymes in English with actions, initially in groups and by end of session individually
- Role play
- Puppet play
- Story-telling with expression and actions
- Picture reading with short sentences
- Simple free conversation and informal instructions with children during free play, meal time etc.
- Exposure to print through labeling

By the Time the Child is Ready to go to Grade I (5-6 Years), Curricular Expectations could be

- The child follows more complex (two step) instructions in English, e.g., 'bring that toy and give it to your friend'; 'Who will help me

in distributing these plates raise your hand.' etc.

- The child communicates her/his needs and expresses her/his thoughts/ideas in simple English, e.g., what does she/he likes and why does she like it? What is she doing? What has she drawn?
- The child narrates incidents or tells stories in short and simple sentences.
- The child carries out simple conversation in English.
- The child recites longer rhymes with action, clear articulation and expression.
- The child uses words like please, thank you etc., and they should become a regular habit with children.
- The child recognises alphabets.

Activities that can be Conducted in the ECCE Centres

- Informal interaction and conversation with children or guided conversation
- Role-play and dramatisation
- Rhymes
- Story-telling by children and teachers with help of story cards/pictures, etc.
- Using English vocabulary to become a regular habit with children
- Aaz Ki Taza Khabar (Today's News, free conversation)
- Language games
- Rhyming games
- Alphabets/words matching

Teaching-Learning Materials

- Picture books in English
- Audio-Video Tapes for Rhymes and Stories in English
- Alphabets/Picture-word matching cards
- Action Words Picture Cards
- Dominoes
- Print rich environment

Do's

- Children should be allowed to express themselves in their home language while they gradually acquire the regional/school language or second language, say, English through exposure.
- Teachers should also attempt to learn a few words and phrases of the child's home language.
- In a multilingual classroom, children should be encouraged to express themselves in their own language and to pay attention to and learn from each other. This is a natural and easy process in play situations.
- Convince the public and parents that all education, both in the private and the public sectors, must be in the medium of the child's home language, or, failing that, in the most familiar language or regional language. This requires the cooperation of the private sector; there must be a kind of regulation.
- Introducing second language, which could be English, as early as may be in the early childhood years.

- Teaching of English through the Mass Media
A massive public campaign to teach English to teachers (or indeed to all adults) is needed, which would involve spoken English classes on:
 - Radio (AIR, community and FM);
 - Television (Doordarshan, satellite channels);
 - Distance education (open universities and schools);
 - New educational satellite networks; and
 - All other possible media.
 - Involving cooperation between the educational sector and the mass media and ICT, and requiring a new use of educational technology.
- Extending ECCE Methodology to Early Grades.
- ECCE methodology can make major contribution to the learning of language, particularly in the early years of primary school.
- Lessons from the experiences of other countries can also be studied.

Don'ts

- Do not expect the children to sit quietly and listen to teacher all the time.
- Do not snub or correct a child abruptly if he/she speaks incorrectly. Just repeat the correct form back to him/her.
- Do not compare children.

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