

Impressions from a Primary Classroom

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One morning at school, I entered my Class 3 as usual after the morning assembly. All my learners immediately surrounded me, trying to get my attention. They were saying something excitedly, but it was difficult to comprehend as they were speaking at the same time. Once they realised I was unable to respond, some smart learners took charge and asked each other to settle down and let me talk. After about five minutes they settled down and I got a chance to speak. Upon inquiring what was troubling them, they replied that the story books I had supplied in their classroom were limited, and they wanted more. I was surprised because I had recently supplied some thirty books in my class, intending that one could be used for each day for a small action research project. I had decided to do this as I did not want to use the prescribed textbook in the classroom — they

did not seem to help in achieving any language learning in the classroom.

The aim of the project was to understand how using good children's literature in the class helps to improve learners' English. Initially, the Class 3 children were given a small pre-test in which they were asked to read any small story from the Class 1 textbook. It was found that a majority of them could not read it. I then asked them to identify letters of the alphabet, which many of them were familiar with. However, they were not familiar with using them. I realised that memorising the letters of the alphabet and practising words were not helping them understand language or experience it. Further, the difficulty level and the content of the prescribed textbook was more of a hindrance than an aid.

These books that I gave them ranged from picture books to big

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books to one line/page stories and so on. The books which I used have been published by NCERT — “Go Green, Chandu’s Chaat”, the children’s magazine “*Firkee*”, etc., books by NBT — “Flitter, Flutter”, “A Helping Hand”, “The Mango birds”, “A Tale of Two Dogs” as well as books published by Eklavya such as ‘Chakmak’ and various other books. These books were all in English, though Hindi books were also kept in the classroom in case students wanted to read them and engage with them. Often, for a child, reading in a language he/she is comfortable with, leads on to a better understanding of a second language. However, bilingual books were avoided as mixing the two languages often takes away the fun from both the languages. We began with reading in groups and pairs. They would create the story or read out a story to each other. There were other activities as well which focused on vocabulary development and exposed them to writing. I had expected them to take some time to finish all the stories. To my surprise, almost all of them had finished all thirty books in about ten days. These books were read with or without me.

I promised that I would arrange for more books and asked them to re-read the books they wanted and liked. Then Jiya came up to me and asked me (in Hindi), “ma’am can you get better books for us?”. I was curious to know what ‘better’ meant as I had assumed that I was doing a good job of selecting reading material for my learners. So,

I asked her what she meant by better books. Her reply was interesting. She said, “I want to read books which have more story written on the page.” She meant that she wanted to read more content with a slightly more complex sentence structure. When I asked her if she understood all that she read, pat came the reply, “I understand the story. I understand with the help of pictures, but I also like to read what is written.” I checked, she could read like any other beginner reader: she could not comprehend each and every line in a story yet she understood the story. That was a moment of great insight for me.

I realised that my children had started to use non-verbal cues to make meaning. They wanted to look at the content as a whole and not fragments, which is why they could read thirty stories in about ten days as well as various others during the six months the project was on. They read them, talked about them and also enjoyed browsing through them.

These young children were reaffirming my belief in a constructivist approach towards teaching language. Though they did not remember the letters of the English alphabet and could not use English the way we do initially, these children had developed some literacy for the second language as well. They were engaging with books, were making conscious choices about what they would like to read, were developing an understanding about textual complexity, were using multiple

resources to arrive at conclusions, and improving their problem-solving skills. This was also a feedback system for me that children were learning to read. They were not quite accurate but they were becoming fluent. They had started to display all the skills of being a good reader. Initially they did imitate me and also memorised the little text in the books but gradually I saw that with the help of games they began to develop 'sight' vocabulary. I also observed that children stopped feeling shy or afraid in asking questions and seeking explanations. They were learning to learn from each other. So much was happening in the classroom through children's literature.

The project was for six months, but the results were far more satisfying than if I had taught the same class for two years. The main motivation among children was the sheer availability of novel material in an otherwise dull

school system. They had freedom to choose what they wanted to read and when. I discovered that each child wants to learn English for various reasons but when it is coupled with abundant resources, especially children's literature and freedom of choice, a feeling of trust between the teacher and the student is developed, and learning is enhanced manifold.

A child always looks at the world around with an unmatched curiosity. He/she continuously engages with things and people, trying to understand them. He/she approaches the school, the classroom and the text with curiosity and enthusiasm. Children's literature provides a primary teacher very powerful tools to build upon the child's learning. My classroom provided me with one such opportunity to understand this aspect of teaching-learning a language like none other.