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English Teaching in Rural Government Schools of Karnataka — A Longitudinal Study

K. Vajjayanti*

Abstract

This paper is the outcome of an evaluation study of an English programme called Swalpa English, Thumba Fun (SETF), designed and implemented for three consecutive years — 2012–13, 2013–14 and 2014–15 — as a large-scale, multi-year initiative by Akshara Foundation, an NGO in Karnataka. The programme was implemented in 576 government primary schools of three most backward educational blocks in Karnataka. The programme’s goal was to empower teachers of grades I to IV with resourceful strategies to teach English to children. It sought to establish, in accordance with the suggestions of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF)–2005, an environment that facilitates English learning in classrooms through fun-filled, exploratory understanding. Akshara Foundation’s research team conducted a longitudinal study based on a controlled before-and-after research design to examine the impact of the intervention by analysing students.

CONTEXT

English as a compulsory subject was introduced from Class I in Karnataka government schools in 2007. A majority of government primary school teachers in the State have studied in Kannada medium and few seem to have opted for English as a major subject while

acquiring professional training in teaching. During informal interactions with teachers, teaching in Karnataka government schools around 2007, the Akshara Foundation found that teachers need to be provided more training in English teaching. Besides, they must be provided with sufficient teaching–learning material (TLM).

* Director, Research and Evaluation, Akshara Foundation, Karnataka

Keeping these in view, the Foundation designed and started *Swalpa English, Thumba Fun (SETF)* — meaning A Little English, A Lot of Fun — an English support programme for Classes I to IV. The programme, a multi-year initiative aimed at improving English competencies of government school primary teachers and children in the State, was designed to help them get acclimatised to interactive pedagogy in primary schools. The SETF aimed to provide children with a foundation in English language learning in their early years, starting with basic communication skills. It also aimed at enhancing the capacity of teachers, starting with building their confidence and motivating them to teach English.

The programme addressed elements of ‘listening, speaking, reading and writing’ (LSRW) with equal emphasis. It believed that ‘read and write’ components must closely follow ‘listen and speak’ as ‘listening’ and ‘speaking’ are the first in order of literacy skills that trigger the need to communicate. For reading and writing to be meaningful, learners must get a sense of style and register of the language. Therefore, SETF’s content focused on rhymes, conversation, storytelling, language activities and training modules to build the capacity of teachers.

The SETF’s capacity building of English teachers was structured as an introductory five-day training programme in cascade mode. A team of

teachers handpicked from government schools from the region were selected as resource persons. These resource persons were trained by Akshara’s Master Trainers. These resource persons, in turn, trained English teachers at cluster level. The sessions were highly interactive. The teachers were made to work in groups and make presentations on how to use TLMs and create activities around these.

The TLMs were developed with an objective of introducing students to basic vocabulary and teaching them to frame simple sentences so that they could start reading from English textbooks provided in the government schools in two to three years. The programme, therefore, designed a ‘teacher manual’ to help teachers navigate classroom transaction with a

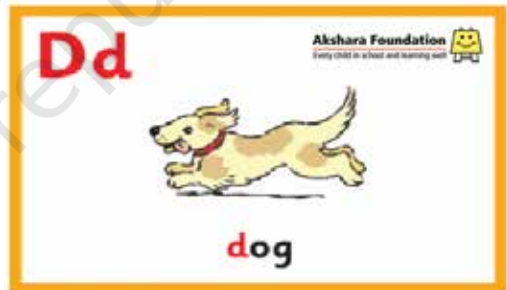


Figure 1: Flash card

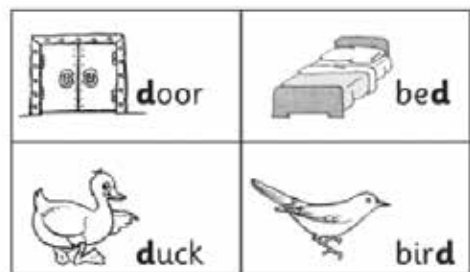



Figure 2: Phonic cards

FOR EARLY LEARNERS ENGLISH READING CARD - 5

Tommy



**I am a dog. My name is Tommy.
I like bread and milk.
I like to run after the cat.
But the cat runs very fast.**

Say-aloud words:

dog	bread	water	fast
fog	brick	after	last
log	brother	master	first
jog	bring	faster	


 **Akshara**
Foundation
HELPING CHILDREN TO LEARN AND GROW

Figure 3: Reading card

complete set of suggestive lesson plans and activities appropriate for different grades and topics, supported by charts, flash, phonic and reading cards as teaching aids, and workbooks for children. All these aids were to provide an opportunity to the children to listen and assist them in understanding English sounds (phonics), and thus, speak in English in class.

RESEARCH STUDY

A longitudinal research study was conducted by the in-house research team of Akshara Foundation, employing a controlled before-and-after research design¹ (similar to a random controlled trial) to compare the effectiveness of the programme in

¹ In this design, observations are made before and after the implementation of the intervention — both of the treatment group that receives the intervention and the control group that does not.



Figure 4: Children holding flash cards

terms of learning outcomes of children, classroom practices and aspects of teacher behaviour in all schools in ‘treatment’ and ‘control’ clusters. The programme was evaluated for three consecutive years — 2012–13, 2013–14 and 2014–15 from Classes I to IV.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Did the teachers adapt to the pedagogical strategy of the programme and use the TLMs it suggested?
- Did the programme contribute to improvement in English learning of children?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Beneficiaries of the programme were compared with non-beneficiaries by measuring outcome changes through tests administered by field investigators in the beginning, middle and end of each year in the treatment and control group. A sample of two clusters

was drawn from two educational blocks — Hoskote (treatment block²) and Devanahalli (control block³). All schools of the two clusters were considered as sample for the study.

The Akshara Foundation team developed tools to collect school and teacher information, and established classroom observation guidelines and testing principles. The overall evaluation structure was based on two dominant aspects — child assessment and classroom observation. Nine assessments were administered across three academic years, encompassing competencies included in the school curriculum taught with TLMs recommended for the programme. The test scores and qualitative data from the schools under the two groups were compared.

LITERATURE REVIEW

No language, barring one's native language, comes naturally and spontaneously to a person. Therefore, English, being a foreign language, has to be consistently learnt and taught (Behara and Behera, 2009). Krashen, an acquisition theorist, proposed an anti-structural view of learning and stressed that language learning occurs owing to the use of language in communication. In the Indian context, language learning becomes more complex due to the co-existence of multiple languages.

English is one of the three main languages in the learning formula in schools. While it was always a compulsory subject from Class V in Karnataka, it was introduced from Class I only in 2007. The approaches suggested by scholars like Prabhu advocate that a language is acquired when attention is paid not on the language form but on the meaning of messages. On the other hand, success in doing a task needs only a certain level of language proficiency, i.e., to comprehend task-related information.

According to the National Curriculum Framework (NCF)–2005, in the initial stages of schooling, English may be one of the languages used for teaching–learning activities that form an awareness of the world in a child. Further, the document says that input-rich communication environment is a prerequisite for language learning. These inputs comprise textbooks, learner chosen texts and class libraries that include a variety of genres — print (for example, Big Books for young learners) and material in more than one language. It recommends that language evaluation need not be tied to achievement with respect to a particular syllabus but must be re-oriented to the measurement of language proficiency.

Past research reveals unsatisfactory outcomes at the primary level across India. Children's ability to read English

² Block where *Swalpa* English, *Thumba* Fun was implemented.

³ Block where *Swalpa* English, *Thumba* Fun was not implemented.

has remained relatively unchanged in the lower primary class since 2007. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2014) observes that only 25 per cent children in Class V could read simple sentences in English. Of these, only 38 per cent could comprehend what they read. A literacy study conducted in 2015 by the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA), Goa, pointed out poor achievement in elementary English literacy skills in children of government and government-aided primary schools, who underwent a six-month reading intervention (Noronha, DeSouza and Ferus-Comela, SSG-Goa, 2015).

Researchers have cited multiple reasons for the slow progress, including teachers' subject incompatibility. Kurrien suggested measures, such as providing a wide range of both instructional and reading material instead of prescribed textbooks to children. Kurrien further suggested that enhancing the teachers' own proficiency in English would improve students' learning outcomes.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings are presented under three aspects of the investigation — realities of public schooling system to provide an overview of the context in which the programme was implemented, teaching-learning process and learning outcomes of children.

Public schooling system

The Akshara Foundation's research team found different scenarios across the sample schools as far as classroom structures and teachers are concerned. Most schools followed *Nali-Kali*⁴ pedagogy but there was no set pattern for Class IV being handled as a standalone class or as part of a multigrade arrangement. It varied from visit-to-visit over the nine cycles of observation, revealing difficulty in following a generalised method for teacher intervention.

Out of 21 schools from both the clusters, at least two in each had combined Classes I to V. This called for flexibility in programme design. It was found that there was a school, where students of Classes I to V were taught in a single classroom and the teacher lacked focus. The teacher spent 10 minutes with each class and failed to capture the attention of any group of children. While the teacher handled one group, the rest of the groups, scattered all over the class, were not involved in any meaningful activity.

The average pupil-teacher ratio (PTR) was less than 1:20 in both the groups as recorded during the last cycle. Out of 11 schools in the control group, 60 per cent had less than 30 children. Compared to this, 30 per cent of the treatment schools had a strength of less than 30 students.

⁴ *Nali-Kali* in Kannada means joyful learning. The *Nali-Kali* pedagogy is implemented by the Government of Karnataka in all government schools. This pedagogy acknowledges the primacy of multigrade, multi-level learning. Grades I, II and III come under the purview of *Nali-Kali*, each class consisting a mix of students from all three grades taught by one teacher.

The school scenario ranged from close to ideal to some 'not open to new ideas'. Some looked stage managed and some hardly bothered to care as regards to who visited the school. Often, it was suspected that the schools were pre-arranged by school staff to project a certain image.

Many studies conducted in the country show that teacher absenteeism rate is high. The PROBE survey of 1999 found no or very little teaching activity taking place in schools. A study of rural India, conducted by Kremer, et al., in 2005 found that on an average, 25 per cent of the teachers in government primary schools in India were absent on any given day.

The present study showed that on an average, the presence of teachers was 70 per cent in treatment schools as against 73 per cent in control schools for Classes I to IV. The disturbing factor that came to light was that in most schools, the teacher would ask: "When do you want me to take the class?" or "For how many minutes should I take the class?" This showed that despite the timetable being displayed in the classrooms, the teachers were ready to change their teaching plans.

The data on classroom processes highlight that schools in both the groups hovered around 50 per cent marks as regards to sharing learning objectives in all classes, i.e., I to IV. Surprisingly, the students were found to be less inquisitive during classroom interactions across all classes.

Another interesting finding of the three-year observation includes the

average transaction time. *Nali-Kali* in Karnataka allocates 40 minutes of the total teaching time for English as a compulsory subject everyday as against 80 minutes for all other subjects. However, it was also found that in most lower primary schools, the bell was not rung in between periods, and in some cases, the teacher exceeded the English transaction time.

Teaching-learning process

The NCF-2005 proposes that a teacher needs to be a facilitator of children's learning in a manner that helps each child to construct knowledge. It offers scope to the teacher to participate in the construction of syllabus, textbooks and teaching-learning material. Such a role demands that teachers be equipped with an understanding of the curriculum, subject content and pedagogy on one hand, and community, school structures and management on the other. It also suggests that learners always remain at the centre of all efforts undertaken to improve the quality of education. During the study, field investigators were asked to provide their impressions of teacher competencies at every cycle. The feedback revealed that teachers from both the groups had low English language speaking skills, while their comprehension skills were better. Overall, Class IV teachers were slightly better equipped. Especially, in treatment schools, some improvement in language proficiency of teachers was observed towards the end of the year (see Figure 5 and 6).

Teachers, who did not receive training, were, generally, slack in implementation, which affected the programme. Newly transferred teachers, not exposed to SETF, did not adhere to its methods and were not interested in implementing them.

Learning outcomes

A comparative performance of students across treatment and control schools

is important to establish the outcome of the programme. The study enabled to accurately track students' natural improvement in specific competencies over the cycles and identify areas where treatment had been, particularly, effective or ineffective. The data were analysed from different angles. The analysis examined the impact on learning outcomes across the three years and found that the mean

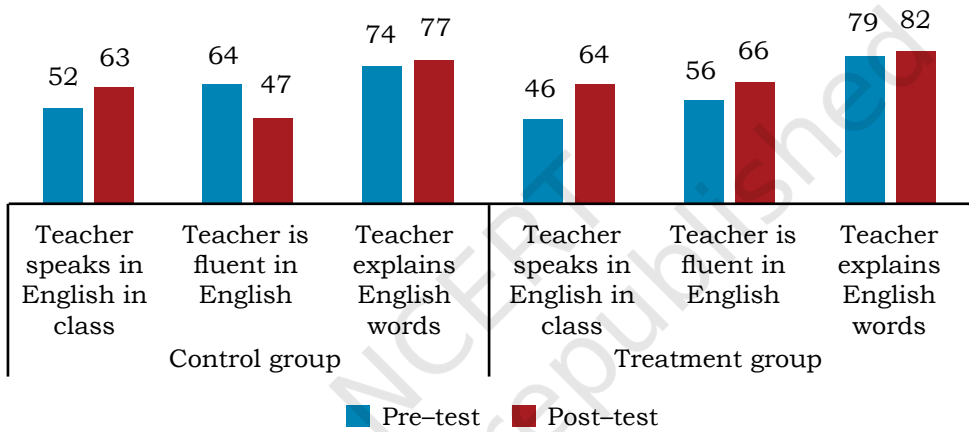


Figure 5: Average ranking of teacher competencies for Grade Nali-kali (in %)

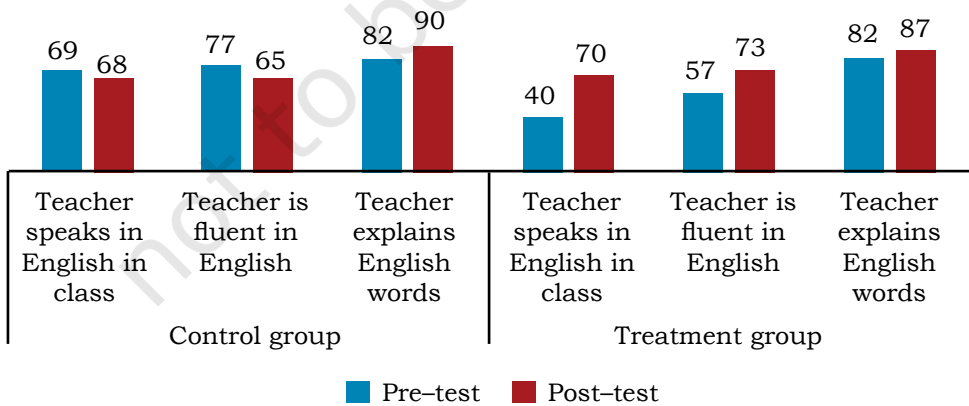


Figure 6: Average ranking of teacher competencies in Class IV (in %)

assessment scores of the treatment schools were higher than those of control schools across all classes.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

- Single-teacher schools are a challenge and multigrade teaching is inevitable. Therefore, teachers need to pay attention during pre-service and in-service training period. Strategies on managing a single-teacher school and multigrade teaching must be included in teacher capacity building programmes.
- The intervention had a positive impact on the English learning outcomes of students. The mean scores were almost always higher in the treatment schools than control schools, across all classes, in all three years of the study.
- Students of Class I performed well in three competencies — listening, speaking and reading. Class II and III students performed better in listening and writing competencies, whereas, those of Class IV scored satisfactory marks only in writing. The trend was similar in both treatment and control groups.
- The findings indicate that the situation is critical for Class IV learners, who, despite being exposed to English from Class I, could not translate it into improvement in scores. This calls for further research.
- The cohort analysis revealed that major improvements were observed in the treatment group. Additionally, it indicates that children exposed to intervention at the entry level had a greater advantage. This supports the suggestion made by NCF-2005 about the creation of an input-rich environment in language classroom.
- An interview of teachers in treatment schools revealed that they were satisfied with Akshara Foundation's TLM. They requested for more support in improving their English speaking skills and for material, such as audio and video cassettes.
- Along with enhancing the capacity of the teacher, trainings must also focus on implementing the skills as regards to English teaching. An analysis of the data on classroom observations shows that there are many factors at work that cannot be controlled. The success of a particular practice depends on the teachers' appreciation of the rationale for the practice and their skill in implementing it in the classroom. Some teachers of the treatment group appreciated this over a period of time. Teachers from the control group requested for Akshara Foundation's English kit.
- Teachers from the treatment schools appreciated Akshara

Foundation's training and found it useful. They wanted it to be extended in subsequent years and acknowledged their low English language proficiency. It is evident that teachers will benefit from regular and sustained exposure to language acquisition training programmes, starting with basic interpersonal communication skills.

To sum up, learning outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, but above all, teachers competency and students' learning capacity are important. It is imperative that for better results and larger impact, the Department of Education, Karnataka, must believe in and take ownership of programmes like *Swalpa English*, *Thumba Fun*.

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