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Raindrops — English Language Learning Kit

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Abstract

Various research studies suggest that children, particularly, in the early years, can learn best through environment and daily life activities in a stress-free atmosphere. When learning is seen as a fun activity through games and stories, children enjoy as they learn. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), an apex body that works for school education in India, specifically, developing textbooks, supplementary reading material and e-content, has brought out a number of educational kits over the years. 'Raindrops' is one such kit developed for English language learning at the primary stage. The Kit aims to improve English listening and speaking skills of children in their early years in a stress-free environment and encourage construction of meaning (no rote memorisation). It also tries to sensitise sighted children to the different way of learning being done by their visually challenged peers. The Kit, therefore, helps young learners overcome their phobia for English as a difficult language. The author highlights the need to make English language a comprehensive and engaging experience for children and that educators try to move away from the conventional textbook culture, in which only the receptive capacity of children's learning is observed and evaluated.

INTRODUCTION

Academic discussion on any aspect of education focuses on the best pedagogical practices. No pedagogical method

can be defined or identified as most suitable for the best possible result. That said, various research findings indicate that children, particularly, in their early years, can learn maximum

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through their environment and daily life activities in a stress-free atmosphere. When learning is seen as fun through activities, games and stories, children not only learn but also enjoy while learning.

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF)–2005, developed by the NCERT, recommends that children’s life at school must be linked to their life outside. This principle marks a departure from the legacy of conventional pedagogic practices, which overlook the efforts put in by children to learn by observing their natural and social environment and finding meaning in their everyday experiences. The NCF–2005 states, “Effective understanding and use of language(s) enable a child to make connections between ideas, people and things, and relate (to) the world around.”

The basic function of a language is to communicate. As the world has become a global village, the demand for communication is increasing by the day. Gone are the days when an educated person, whose discipline was language, was expected to know and quote stanzas, quotations and references. The focus today is on communication and not knowledge of classics. In the twenty-first century, communication skills in English are being viewed as the basic necessity for economic growth and social mobility in India. Even parents, living in rural India, understand the importance of English in their children’s lives as regards to employment opportunities.

However, English as a language of teaching and learning is a matter of concern for policy makers and educationists across the country. A number of English medium schools has mushroomed in metropolitan cities and also in rural areas but the quality of English taught in many of these is a matter of concern.

In India, English is a compulsory subject in schools at the primary stage. It is introduced in Class I in 28 out of 36 States and Union Territories (NCERT, 2004). The main aim of teaching English in schools should be to inculcate the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in students.

Children are natural learners. Right from birth, they are actively engaged in exploring and responding to the world around and making meaning. They have an innate ability to emulate pronunciation and come to terms with the rules of a language. Children’s linguistic ability, interests, knack for conceptual thinking, physical skill, and so on, develop over the span of schooling — right from pre-school to higher secondary. Usually, a child acquires the rules of one’s mother tongue at an early age without any formal instruction.

Our concern is to make the learning of English language a comprehensive and meaningful experience for children and move away from the conventional textbook culture, in which only the receptive capacity of children’s learning is developed. In our classrooms, the

only voice frequently heard is that of the teacher and this needs to change. The development of language skills depends, to a large extent, on stress-free atmosphere conducive to joyful learning. Along with textbooks, other inputs also contribute to such an atmosphere.

RAINDROPS — ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING KIT

The NCERT has been working to break the conventional notion of language learning only from textbooks since 2005. It advocates that various other inputs must be used to enrich the linguistic environment of children. The aim is to promote English learning in children through songs, poems, riddles and activities.

In order to encourage children to learn English in an effective manner, the NCERT has developed an English language learning kit titled *Raindrops*. It was introduced as one of the inputs for language learning. It is a useful teaching-learning aid for developing reading, writing, listening and speaking skills in children, as well as, developing their vocabulary and grammar.

Kit items — List and relevance

The Kit consists of different types of material and also a User's Manual.

The Kit aims to develop English language learning skills in children in a stress-free environment, encourage the construction of meaning in them and sensitise sighted children

with the problems faced by the visually challenged. It also aims to make English language learning an engaging and enriching experience.

Reading material

The Kit includes two short stories to develop the imagination of the children, link the stories with their mother tongue or home language, and appreciate writing and illustrations. Designed to be read by an emergent reader, it also includes laminated charts, containing poems, narratives, double letter words, missing words, etc., along with illustrations to stimulate the imagination, expression and creativity of the students.

Anagrams

This comes in a small blackboard, with English notebook pattern embossed on it and few examples of anagrams. The remaining space is left blank for children to form new words. This helps develop in children the ability to play with words and form new words.

Masks

Masks of various animals, such as lion, elephant and cat are part of this Kit. These can be used to introduce animal characters in a story or narrative, and later for role-play.

Card pairs

A set of cards, having pictures of many objects, is also a part of this Kit. There are 20 pairs of pictures — one card having one picture, the other having a word, as well as, a picture. All cards

are neatly arranged faced down. Each player has to select two cards and turn them up. If they match, the player keeps the pair. If they do not, then the next player gets the chance. This game addresses the learning outcome of associating words with pictures, as well as, sharpening the memory skills of children.

Pronunciation cards

There are 10 'Listen and Repeat' activity cards. These are based on the concept of minimal pairs. The Kit includes laminated cards, containing pair of words for pronunciation practice. It aims to familiarise children with the pronunciation of words, for example tail, bail, fail, sail, wail, etc.

Alphabet cubes

Twenty-six 1×1 inch colourful alphabet cubes in ABS plastic is also a part of the Kit. These familiarise children with the letters of the alphabet and speaking these letters aloud, thereby, encouraging finger-tracing.

Alphabet tiles

There is an entire set of tiles, having capital and small letters of the alphabet, and numbers from 0 to 9. The students can join the tiles and form words.

Initial medial and final sounds

There are three mini white boards, focusing on initial, medial and final sounds. For instance, the first two letters of a word are given, and the children may be encouraged to make as many words as possible. A number

of activities are given for practice, so that the learners develop vocabulary and phonemic awareness, and improve their pronunciation skills. The activities will also help them appreciate the sounds that they hear.

How to draw

For Classes I and II, the focus may be on drawing and speaking the words aloud. For Classes III and IV, the Kit may help children notice the words whenever they occur in textbooks or storybooks, etc. For Class V, it may be used as an essential part of paragraph writing, particularly, to describe a process.

Braille chart and measuring scale

The Kit contains a laminated chart, containing Braille alphabet for visually challenged children and those having weak eyesight. It aims to help such children read and recognise the letters of the English alphabet. A scale is embossed at every inch and centimetre to help the children in measuring or counting. The Kit also aims to sensitise sighted children about the problems faced by the differently abled.

Emoticons

The Kit contains nine emoticons to familiarise the children with various emotions and feelings.

Slate to write and draw

The Kit includes a slate that contains pictures in a continuous pattern. The children have to identify the pictures and continue writing or drawing in the same pattern.

Four riddle cards

Cards, containing riddles, is also present in the Kit. These cards stimulate the imagination and creativity of the children while learning as riddles require them to think out of the box. The children can also be encouraged to relate with the riddles in their mother tongue.

Word circle

The Kit also contains a circle with various letters. This helps the students to form words with the given letters.

The 'User's Manual', facilitates the endeavour through various strategies that focus on different aspects of the teaching-learning process, such as pronunciation, identification, association, imagination and creativity, with a learner-centric approach (NCERT, 2018). The Kit also includes different type of charts, such as alphabet chart, anagrams, sentence connectors, vocabulary, poems, short stories, and so on. It also includes material for language games for children studying in Classes I to V.

Effort has also been made to develop English language skills in differently abled learners. The Kit provides a Braille chart for visually impaired children and those with weak eyesight. It consists of English alphabet and numerals in Braille. The Braille chart can be displayed in the class. All children will naturally look at it with curiosity. The teacher can then explain that just like English, Braille, too, is a language. The teacher can point out at the arrangement

of dots that represent each letter of the alphabet and numerals (0–9). The teacher may further encourage the children to write simple words, such as 'cat' or 'book' in Braille, and may simultaneously mention that few textbooks and storybooks are available in Braille.

RAINDROPS KITS PROCURED

Initially, many States and Union Territories procured the *Raindrops* Kit as sample but later procured it in large numbers. For instance, Kasturba Gandhi Bal Vidyalaya in Andhra Pradesh, initially, expressed willingness to buy only one kit per school but ended up buying three per school. A Delhi school bought 5,000 kits. As of now, Jharkhand and Haryana have procured the maximum number of kits. Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Daman and Diu have also purchased the Kit.

SAFETY ISSUES

The *Raindrops* Kit is, primarily, for young children so that they can learn while they do various activities or play games. Care was taken to ensure that the items in the Kit are child and user friendly. For instance, the edges of the charts and cards are rounded, and each of them is covered with micron pouch lamination so that no injury is caused to the tender hands of the children. The animal masks are made of soft flexible material. They are not stiff like cardboard and plastic masks, generally, available in market. In the

process of developing the Kit, it was ensured that all items are anti-allergic and non-hazardous. The emoticons have a safety pin at the back, which the children cannot unpin easily. They, too, do not have sharp edges. An elastic band, with rivets on both sides, is attached in such a manner that it fits comfortably. The slates for anagrams will not break even if children drop them on the floor.

CONCLUSION

The *Raindrops* Kit, developed by the Department of Educational Kits, NCERT, reflects a child-centric approach, and will help facilitate easy and interesting ways of learning English. It is intended to improve the overall language performance of children — oral communication, reading and fluency skills, and use of comprehensive strategies by teachers. The activities in the Kit are suggestive in nature. This implies that the teachers are welcome to design their own activities with the material provided in the Kit.

The NCERT developed the Kit after four years of research, which included workshops for the development of content, as well as, concretising ideas and concepts into practical material.

The trial of the Kit was planned in three States — Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh. These States were not chosen

randomly. Arunachal Pradesh is a tribal dominated State. It has 15 major and 13 minor tribes. These tribes speak different languages, which are different in terms of vocabulary and syntax. They use either Hindi or English to communicate with each other and with people, who have come here from other parts of India. The Arunachalee acceptance of English is, therefore, based on the need of various tribes to communicate. Karnataka has, by and large, accepted English along with the regional language. English is perceived as a *Lingua Franca*, which leads to better job opportunities. Himachal Pradesh is a State in the Hindi speaking belt but English is yet to find a place in the actual learning set-up, in terms of acceptance. Hindi and local dialects are dominant here. Thus, the three States represent varying acceptance levels of English in the country.

Thus, after piloting, the Kit was launched and mass produced, which got acceptance in a short span. The main objective is to reach out to students at the primary level across India so that each child can learn through fun activities and strengthen one's language skills.

In the near future, NCERT hopes to reach out to the maximum number of students and help them improve their communication skills in English.

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