

Language Learning Beyond the Textbooks: A Reflection on Teaching Language to Children

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Formal education begins with the main focus on three aspects—Numeracy, Literacy and Environment. Out of the three, language is the first thing that a child becomes aware of and starts using at an early age. Making sense of numbers and understanding the relationship with the environment is introduced later, but language is present right from the beginning. This paper details out the importance of learning beyond the textbooks and understanding language as a part of their everyday usage. Language is the most intrinsic part of human existence, and hence, it is best learned in a asocial environment.

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When children enter school, they meet language in the form of subjects. Language which has been there since birth suddenly becomes something restricted to their textbooks and notebooks. The creativity which a child is supposed to show with language often gets side-lined by the need to rote learn to get good grades.

During my internship days, I got the opportunity to work with young learners. In a classroom of 40 students, there were learners of different learning levels. Teaching language in such a setting had its own complications. While teaching internship is an opportunity to work with students it often puts a restraint on a trainee as an individual. They often strive for a balance between teaching as per the official syllabus and teaching according to the students' level of understanding.

Like every other teacher intern, we were advised to create a book corner. As someone who grew up with storybooks, I entered the classroom space with a perception of childhood solely based on my experience as a child. I brought some children's storybooks, some magazines, picture books, and cut-outs of comic strips, poems, and riddles from the kids' corner of newspapers to suffice for a class of forty.

It was quite difficult to make the class teacher understand the

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purpose behind creating a story corner or language corner, and why I wanted to give more time to engage with the books which were not a part of the syllabus. On the other hand, engagement with learners was easier. They too had similar perceptions about the books and the games, but for them, it was an opportunity to avoid their studies so they enjoyed the time allotted to the language corner/ book corner.

This lack of enthusiasm towards the textbooks can be attributed to the fact that the transaction of language content is still very much product-oriented. Students also know that the story or the poem given in the textbook has to be followed by some written exercise. NCF-2005 emphasises on child-centred learning but inside the classroom, learning is very much teacher-centred. The exercise of writing the answers is still very much directed by the teachers thus taking away another chance from the children of being creative while working with language. In a classroom, it is essential to give students time to think on their own, which is considered a time-consuming task by many teachers.

With storybooks, there were no time constraints on the children. They engaged with those books at their own pace. The storybooks weren't a part of the syllabus so they had the time to read the content.

With textbooks, there is rarely any time given for reading to young learners. It's the teacher who directs

the whole process. As an intern, I too could not create that space for my students where they could engage with the text before taking part in any kind of discussion. There was a demand for timely completion of the syllabus so the learners were given a Hindi translation of the text. Reading long texts in English (second language for most of the children) was a tedious task for many children. Most of the learners were not at the reading level that was expected of them in Class IV. Bringing in storybooks with simpler vocabulary and bilingual texts were some ways employed to encourage the learners to read English text on their own.

One of the interesting things I observed was that, even though not all the learners liked reading, many of them used to take the books from the language corner for the sake of activities given in them. They showed interest in different activities like finding the differences, spotting the listed items, etc. Jokes and comic strips were a hit among the learners who did not want to read a long story. Children's magazines were more popular than the storybooks. I think the reason for their popularity was the variety of content they provided. The enthusiasm and interest shown for the books which were not a part of the syllabus were always lacking when it came to their textbooks which were filled with stories, poems and activities, and provided much scope for them to work with the language.

By the time my internship ended, I had around 15–20 students who actively asked for storybooks and magazines in their free time. Even if some of them asked for a particular book which they had become fond of, was a sign of them engaging with them. There was a learner in the class who wanted me to be there when she reads aloud a story, and for the first few days, she struggled a bit in reading the words without splitting them into letters but she started reading them without breaking them after some time.

One of my fondest memories from that time is of the quietest child of the class asking some questions related to a storybook he had developed a liking to.

It'd be unfair to say that my ideas failed, but to say that I achieved what I had in my mind at the beginning of the internship about getting children into reading would be far-fetched as well.

LANGUAGE GAMES

Schools don't have much interactive material/games on language, and the same was true in my case. I decided to prepare some language games to transact/deliver the content in a fun way.

Some of the popular games were—
Eliminate and arrange.

This language game is an advanced version of arranging the story in sequence.

The more your students are familiar with different stories, the more challenging one can make the game to be. This was one of my favourite language games. The stories which I picked for this game were '*DOST KI POSHAK*' (*RIMJHIM*, Class-IV, NCERT), Hansel and Gretel (German fairy-tale with suitable changes for the young children).

There were some paper strips which had major events that happened in the story '*dost ki poshak*', but there were some other strips with lines which were taken from the story, Hansel and Gretel. It also included some mixing of characters and events to confuse the players. The learners had to remove the strips which contained elements from the other story, and then arrange them in order.

FUN WITH WORDS

Games to Enhance Vocabulary

The model/structure for these games was inspired by the movements of the hands of a clock. There were different versions and different levels, but all of them focused on the vocabulary.

One of the simplest versions of this game consisted of a circular disc made of cardboard with some paper strips pasted on its boundary. There were some strips on the circle attached to the centre by a pin. The students had to work in groups and move the strips in such a way that



the different words could be matched with their antonyms or synonyms. Another version of the game included aligning the words with their Hindi meaning and the picture (in case of nouns).

This structure was further modified for some learners. It was meant to confuse the learners at first so that they could work out the relation between the different levels. There were three circles of different sizes each placed over the other and each circle had some words. The word strips given on the topmost, and the smallest circle had their Hindi meaning given on the word strips of the middle circle and their antonyms on the third and the largest circles. The learners were asked to spin the

circles in such a way that the words, their meanings and their opposites were aligned.

The mentioned games didn't become an instant hit amongst the learners. Some learners enjoyed these games and led the group when it came to doing it right. Few learners observed all that was happening around them, and some learners weren't too keen about participating but more interested in selecting a magazine and doing some activity given in it.

The good thing was that no one they never sat idly when they saw their peers participating. The learners who played the games did discuss the possible right antonym/synonyms with their respective groups.

CONCLUSION

Language is ever-present, yet for various reasons it becomes one of the difficult subjects for children when they enter school. Not only English but first language also poses a difficulty for young learners. The transition from oral to written is quite instantaneous for many children who don't have access to print material at home.

The textbooks children have are a good source, but it's important to

go beyond the textbooks, to make them understand that one can work with the language even when the said language's textbook or notebook is not in front of them. Exposure to language in different forms and freedom to work with language is necessary. Plenty of material related to different languages available. All we need is to create a space where children can work with language without any restrictions and fear.