

## Language Teaching – An Experience

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Talking about teaching of languages raises a lot of questions in our mind such as what is language, how is it learnt etc. And as we try to understand these questions, the main point which emerges is that language is usually considered to be a medium of expression or is a means of exchanging ideas. When we look at the language in such a limited sense, then our perspective on language teaching also narrows down. And if our thinking about the nature of the subject is limited, then it would certainly impact the way we teach that subject. This article deliberates on this very basic discussion which is going on since many years. It also talks about the methodology of language teaching and the issues connected with it. We will also share the experiences we had with children while teaching language.

The attempt here is to give a glimpse of the efforts that are generally made to achieve the objectives of language development skills and which appear as not only the obstructions but also as something that discourages the smooth process of language learning.

### Preparation for reading and teaching methods

Usually when children come to pre-primary classes or class one, they are taught alphabet so that they can read. This is because the understanding behind adopting the above method is that only after learning alphabet, can children develop the ability to read, whereas when a three year old child sees a picture book, she starts acting as if she is reading it. But very few people give importance to such efforts of a child.

### Preparation for writing

It is assumed that when a child knows the alphabet and *matras*, he can read fluently and only after that we can work on her writing skills. However, most of us adults do not consider drawing pictures as preparation for writing though it is an integral part of writing.

### Development of ability to speak and listen

Adults also feel that when children go to upper primary, secondary schools and college level, then

they will develop the ability to speak and listen naturally. So there is no need to specifically work on these capabilities as far as small children are concerned. This kind of perception about language development causes an academic gap, which neither provides the ability to learn in the right way nor builds the basis for logical understanding for thinking. To see the development of language skills in such a deconstructive or as a 'part of whole' manner and then trying to work for their development impacts the process negatively. When we do not see the development of language as a whole then we do not consider the need to work on all the skills of language and feel that skills of listening and speaking can be developed automatically over the time. In this scenario, it appears that there are some basic problems with the way language is taught and learnt. We need to work on them in order to move towards the desired goals of language teaching.

All the above factors have been taken care of in Azim Premji School, Tonk. In addition to this, the theoretical dimension of language learning has also been asserted while working with children and this, in turn, inspires the teacher and encourages him or her to further deepen his or her efforts. Let us look at it like this – we believe that language is not a mere medium of expression. We think, argue, conceptualise and know things only through language. We also identify ourselves with the things, people and organisms present in nature. Looking at language from this perspective gives us an understanding that if we want to engage with children then we cannot start with something as monotonous as teaching them alphabet.

### Experiences of working with the children of class 1 in Hindi language and the level of language development in them

Activities undertaken for the development of listening and speaking skills among the children of class 1 to work on their listening and speaking skills –  
Compilation of 15-20 nursery rhymes and working on them –

The class began by sitting in a circle and singing

nursery rhymes. The teacher performed them with gestures. The children repeated. After two or three days when the children learnt the rhymes a little, they were written on a chart and arranged within the reach of children. Now we made them repeat the rhyme a few times by sliding a finger or a stick under the words while reading.

After a few children learnt the rhyme, they were given the opportunity to slide their finger or stick under the words and make the class repeat the rhyme. When the children recited the rhymes with rhythm and linguistic flow by sliding their fingers under the words, they also understand the nuances of reading. For example, they were reading the entire line together with focus on left to right word sounds, pronouncing the words correctly and moving from top line to bottom line in a systematic way.

Simultaneously, discussing the words with them, familiarising them with those words and thus taking them through the initial process of reading is also helpful. When the children go through reading experience in the early years of their life, their level of confidence increases and the teachers can also see the flow with which the child is progressing. We find this approach to be almost miraculous because we can see a six-year-old child beginning to read within three months with the help of nursery rhymes.

Along with nursery rhymes, 18-20 stories were selected and the children were asked to work on them. In the beginning the children were trained to listen to these stories and we then worked with them on picture stories. During this process, we talked to them about their surroundings and experiences, facilitating their spoken accounts.

When the children really began to listen to the stories, we started talking to them about them. Here I would like to mention a conversation I had with them. The title of the story was 'Meeta Ke Jadui Jootey' or 'Meeta's Magical Shoes'. Some of the questions asked were –

- How did you like the story?
- It was nice.
- Who did you like most?
- Meeta.
- Who else did you like in the story?
- The shoes with the wings.
- If you get the flying shoes, where would you like to go?

All the children came up with interesting answers. Some wanted to go to the places where their father was working such as Delhi, Jaipur, Saudi Arabia or Kota. Some wanted to go to their grandmother, aunt's or sister's mother-in-law's place. When we enter the emotional world of children and give them the freedom to express their feelings, they share numerous things. It is not correct to say that we cannot work with the children of six years on their listening and speaking skills. We believe that listening and speaking, and reading and writing with the kids needs to be done at this level itself, otherwise, as they grow, they get into a world of silence which, many a time, pushes them to state of permanent silence.

The process that was followed consisted of telling the stories and rhymes to the children, enacting them, drawing pictures, and reading by sliding finger under the words, reading the important words of the stories and rhymes differently etc. What emerged from this experience was that by adopting this method about two-thirds of the children learnt to read fluently by the end of the year which was required for their class level test. The good thing about this experience was that these children were not breaking the words into parts or letters while reading but were reading the entire word and sentence together which is basic requirement for reading with understanding. Besides, developing skills to read through stories and poems not only provides an opportunity to read with understanding but it also opens the possibility of reading more books and become a good reader.

Apart from this, talking about a good collection of 30-35 nursery rhymes and 15-20 short stories helped children to narrate the same in their own language and style. They were able to enact them as well.

Now, after two years, when I talk to some of them, I can see a certain level of linguistic depth in them. It does not mean that all this achievement is the result of work done in class one only. But I do feel that the exposure given to the children in class one has definitely offered a rich linguistic experience to them.

The children of class two, who are already exposed to 15-20 story books and have worked with them, automatically get attracted to reading more books as we practically saw in case of some children.

## Challenges and achievements

A few children were unable learn to read because of various reasons, but their ability to listen and speak, which is essential for learning any language, developed remarkably. This does not mean that they did not learn anything. They have acquired

those basic skills of language with which the children of even upper primary classes usually struggle and which are very important for learning any language.

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