

## The Whole Language Approach: My Experience

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What is the best way to teach young children a language? This topic has been baffling and creating a lot of deliberations among teachers and educationists. Although a lot of experiments have been done to address this issue and many innovative techniques have also been developed, but language teaching, particularly, depends on environment and circumstances. Each child develops his own understanding of language. It is in this context that I want to share my teaching experience.

When I got the opportunity to teach primary classes, I was very excited and happy though, at the same time, I was a little concerned since I did not have any experience of teaching primary classes, especially grade one. I was happy because I love little children and was sure I would definitely learn new things from them. So when I started teaching grade one I used the traditional method but then I was completely confused as to what to do next. Though I was going to the class and teaching, something was amiss. I was not at peace with myself.

Then one day I had to teach a poem titled *Badal Aaya*. I read the poem and noticed some special features in it. It had only *aa ki matra* and very few letters. This triggered an idea and I wrote the first line of the poem on the blackboard and drew the picture of a cloud. I made an effort to see that the children should at least recognise one word though I wasn't sure this would work because these children did not know the alphabet and hence they would not be able to recognise the word. During the lunch break as I was talking to a boy standing next to me, I wrote the word '*badal*' on my hand and asked him what it was. He looked at it for some time, thought for a while and answered. I was surprised because I had not expected this. I tried the second word and he recognised that as well.

The next day I went to the class, wrote the words of that line on the blackboard and asked the children to recognise them. My enthusiasm knew no bounds when I got right answers from the children.

For the next few days I kept writing the lines of the

poem in an order and made children read them and then revised them. The children were able to recognise the lines and words and this enthused me further and I could see the way forward. I made flash cards with the words and introduced them to the children. Some students recognised the words quickly and were helping those who did not understand. Along with this I also wrote those very lines in their notebooks which the children had read in the class so that they could revise them at home as well.

Because of revising the poem every day, they learnt it by heart. Then I divided the children in groups and gave them strips of papers on which the lines from the poem were written and they were supposed to put them in order which they did easily and enjoying greatly since it was like a game for them. After the group work the students were given the strips of papers individually and were asked to arrange the lines in a proper order. Almost all the students could do this. Once they matched the lines, they were given the words of the lines separately and were asked to put them together in an order.

At this point I felt that the students were having difficulty because they were asked to arrange the whole poem. So the next day I gave them the words of only half the poem which they found easy to arrange as they were also able to recognise the words. Once they developed an understanding of the words, they were able to recognise them wherever they saw them. I had put up these words in the classroom also to help the children so that these words were always in front of their eyes. It took me about three weeks to complete this poem.

After this poem I created a new poem titled *Aaya Badal* using the words from this poem itself. The new poem had only four new words. I adopted the same method for this poem also as the earlier one. The children understood this poem really fast. Their self-confidence was also increasing faster than before. After working with this poem I also made changes related to the word *badal*. The next level was to not only separate the words but also

introduce the letters in them. Sometimes I would make simple new words with these letters or ask about rhyming words or give them worksheets. I worked like this for about four to five months. Not only did the self-confidence of the children increase, my enthusiasm was also at its peak though even now a great worry was whether the children would actually learn to read through this method. Would this method be appropriate? On the one hand I was grappling with this question while on the other hand my mind would encourage me by saying that I am working sincerely and so the result would be good.

In the meanwhile, something wonderful happened in my class. I found that all the students of my class were involved in some activity but two students were looking at *Batuni* magazine and were trying to read a poem connected with *badal*. I stood quietly behind them watching as both the girls were helping each other and trying to read the poem by joining the letters and words. I was overwhelmed with joy and there were tears of happiness in my eyes. These were the two girls about whom I thought that perhaps they would learn to read only when they reach grade two.

After this I started teaching a story where the children were trying to catch the words but they lacked self-confidence and I also felt that perhaps I am doing something wrong. After much thinking I realised that the story/content I was using was far too advanced and most of the words there were big/difficult with many *matras* whereas I had not told them much about *matras*. So I thought of using lines where only one '*matra*' was used. After this I started using paragraphs having three or four lines, very difficult to do since I could use only one or two *matras* and the words also had to be simple and easy. However, I looked for such paragraphs from various sources and created some on my own and continued my work. In order to implement my work effectively I increased the use of worksheets. As a result, the children were able to read simple

and short paragraphs. I got books by NCERT and other publications where the pictures occupied almost the full page with very few simple and easy words as text. I also started giving them worksheets that had a small story of three to four lines along with very easy question. The children took my help for a few days then they started doing the work themselves. In this way by March, the children could read the texts at their level easily.

At the end of the session I was satisfied with my work and I also learnt a lot from it. I still think who is the real educator? I or the children? But with this method of language teaching my understanding has developed much. I am not saying that this is the only relevant/appropriate method and all the students can learn through this method. But on the basis of my experience I will definitely say that all children can learn easily because language is not just the order of letters and words. If the learning environment of the children is similar to the way they use the language then they learn faster.

Of course there were problems in following this method because we were working with the poems which had only a few words for many days and the parents felt that the same homework is being given every day. So it was necessary to take them into confidence and talk to them on a regular basis. I myself felt a sense of negativity creeping into my mind because it seemed that the children were unable to learn. The important thing is to remember that the pace of learning of each child is different: one may learn a particular thing quickly while another may learn something else. Hence a lot of patience is required.

Generally we depend on conventional methods to the extent that we tend to ignore child's mental state and his/her evolving understanding. Our children have to bear the brunt of our neutrality towards newly developed logical and relevant methods. Using these experiments and approaches in whole language teaching is very relevant.

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