

Teaching Primary Level English to First Generation Learners in Rural Rajasthan

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Madhopur has a forest E, I, E, I, O; a tiger here...a tiger there...tiger, tiger everywhere.

No, don't panic! Spotting tigers is not so commonplace, even in the Ranthambhore National Park.

This is children singing in one of the classrooms of Uday Community School, where they have been working on the theme of the animals and birds. The rhyme follows the tune of the popular song *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, but changed to suit the location. These are children who live in villages on the periphery of the Ranthambhore National Park in Sawai Madhopur district of east Rajasthan.

In another month, with winter afternoon sunlight fading, the class is reading aloud a story, but not from a prescribed textbook.

"It was the month of December. Anwar enjoyed playing in the sun with his friends. He liked to walk in the mustard fields".

The story was written keeping in mind children's reading levels, context as well as experiences. This would be hard, though not impossible, to come by, in a standardised textbook. The children are listening to a familiar scene in an unfamiliar language. They are deeply familiar with this change in landscape with the season as most farmers in these villages grow mustard during the winters. As most of the children would be helping their families or playing in the fields everyday, this story draws from experiences of children.

The rhyme and the story are an example of the texts that needed to be developed as the textbooks prescribed for the class level were found insufficient to fulfil their learning needs.

Background

*Gramin Shiksha Kendra (GSK)*¹ was set up to address community concerns on education and functions in over seventy villages around the Ranthambhore National Park. GSK runs three Uday Community



Schools, recognised by the Government of Rajasthan and works with around seventy government schools all following the government curriculum. At the core of the organisation is the belief that communities cannot be passive recipients of education provided by the government and must play an active role in demanding more and better services from the government. Through the three schools we reach out to the much wider community to bring about change in the way education is understood.

The need to focus specifically on English arose when students consistently doing well in all other subjects struggled only in the English class and the teachers, in turn, struggled to teach English. The English language programme began with the aim of addressing the needs of English teaching-learning amongst the first generation learners. GSK's approach to teaching language is based on the whole language approach. There is evidence that when a child comes to school she already has acquired a certain level of proficiency in her spoken home language. English is, however, not part of the environment of the child, before coming to school she has not had the opportunity to hear, much less practise, the language. A combination of comprehensible, input-rich environments and more explicit language instruction becomes important for learning English, with classroom transactions being crucial to the process. The GSK curriculum implements this approach while remaining sensitive to available resources and the varying needs and skill levels of students (as well as of the teachers). All efforts are made to represent language as an

¹[www.http://graminshiksha.org.in/](http://graminshiksha.org.in/)

important basis of human understanding and communication, rather than considering it to be just a set of grammatical rules and vocabulary to be memorised. We believe that language is best acquired through meaningful interaction and use in varied situations.

GSK's approach

Briefly, GSK's primary objective in working on English is to develop functional competency in English for comprehension of ideas expressed by others and is achieved through:

listening and reading

expressing own ideas (including emotions, attitudes, opinions, and observations) in both speaking and writing

using English to organise thoughts and ideas

using language in context

The goal being overall functional competency, special emphasis is placed on content that is especially rewarding to students. In addition, the GSK English curriculum aims to develop students' knowledge of language learning. The curriculum is designed to help students learn skills and techniques² to continue to study language independently and become autonomous learners.

The GSK English curriculum is thematically organised to give the teacher and the learners a context within which the teaching and learning of English happens. It also provides teachers with a wide array of resources to draw from within a framework while giving them the autonomy to plan their classes.

In the classroom, the teacher picks a theme relevant to the time of the year. GSK schools have multi-level classrooms. The teacher organises the class according to their level of learning instead of age. Each child draws upon her experiences of the world and builds on it through the process with the help of the teacher building on her pre-existing knowledge. Hence a theme starts, builds on and connects with what children bring with them from their lives. These themes have rhymes, poems, texts, stories and the words in the text are a mix of both everyday words and unusual words. The texts are sometimes from the textbook, sometimes a storybook and sometimes generated to fulfil

a particular need. Hence, the textbooks do not determine the course of a child's learning but are used as a resource to supplement the process. This helps in unpacking what children know and what they need to know to make sense of unfamiliar text(s) at a later stage. Learning of vocabulary is also contextualised through themes. Teachers are provided with a suggested list of words which relate to the theme and are encouraged to add to the list. Throughout the course of teaching a theme, these words are used in multiple ways. Through thematic learning we try to improve the language comprehension which other strategies may not support. Here, culture and context play a major role in language acquisition.

The classroom environment encourages expression among children, providing them the space to think, argue and conceptualise. The space provided in a class allows children to relate what they learn to their own lives. This personal nature of learning also gives confidence to children as they have gradually been encouraged to voice their thoughts.

Conversation (in home language) interrupted between two eight year olds using the word 'intelligent' correctly

Child: Who is intelligent?

Teacher: What do you mean by intelligent?

Child: Both of us can read a book in Hindi so we are equally intelligent in Hindi.

Teacher: But what is the meaning of the word intelligent?

Child: The one who has more knowledge in any subject!

The organisation and the physical environment of the classroom, including displays, have an important role as well. For instance, stories that need to be worked on are written and displayed in the classroom for children to become familiar with - these may or may not be from the 'prescribed' textbook. This also reduces dependence on children reading from just a textbook, which may be more daunting, especially for early readers. Display of the children's work - current and previous - is displayed to encourage learning and helps them to engage with their own work.

²We are differentiating between skills and techniques here. A technique is defined as a procedure used to accomplish a task and a skill is a learned capacity to carry out pre-determined results often with the minimum outlay of time, energy, or both. e.g. learning idioms would be a technique but using them in the right context would be skill; acquiring knowledge of punctuation would be a technique but using it correctly is a skill.



Winter Theme Classrooms

Classroom organisation

The classrooms are organised in different levels to leverage the distinct advantage provided by peer learning. In addition, the teacher has the autonomy to decide her lesson plan and the material she wants to use - which could be from the textbook or from other books³ or from material generated according to GSK developed guidelines. These guidelines focus on gender parity, scientific temper, social stratification as well as learning levels. In some instances, textbooks having images such as women sitting at men's feet⁴ may be the reality, but can be used as catalyst for dialogue on these practices.

The class has three forms of activities: large group activities (involving entire the class), small group activities and individual activities. Rhymes, storytelling and games are usually carried out in the beginning of the class.

Each day, the class starts with rhymes, some familiar and some unfamiliar. Typically this is followed by a story telling or a text reading session, whichever has been planned for the day. Teachers are encouraged to make storytelling sessions interesting for students, sometimes props such as masks or puppets may be used. Modulating voice and action to convey meaning of spoken word plays an important role. They can talk about a *biiiiig* elephant or a *scaaaaaary* lion with gestures which do not require constant translation. Word-for-word translations are avoided, rather, teachers communicate a chunk of information from the text to students. For instance, the meaning of the phrase *on a hot summer day* would be communicated

as a whole. The teacher is encouraged to read out/ tell the story in English a couple of times before explaining the meaning. She ascertains from children how much they have understood. Reading the text again, she draws attention to the different aspects of the text. For instance, Anwar, who enjoyed playing in the mustard fields, would *sit close to the fire at night*. The teacher uses this moment to reinforce, close to. Students can use this phrase to then make statements such as 'My house is close to the temple' or 'My house is close to the railway station' and so on.

Children draw from their observations and experiences to make sentences from chunks of information. This is sometimes done by teachers in a group activity, where children may make sentences and teacher writes them on the board. Children at a different level may be able to write these sentences on their own. In a class, children made statements such as *I walk with my grandfather to the_____* with so much enthusiasm that they spent better part of the class coming up with different alternatives, asking the teacher for English words which they didn't know.

Story reading/telling also has other follow up activities. Younger children are encouraged to draw what they understood/felt/remembered from the story. Older children are encouraged to make word maps, storyboards, role play or summaries, depending on the level and inclination with the support from the teacher. During the initial period of language learning, stories with repetitions provide opportunity to children for language practice. A story entitled *Chotu*, about a mouse running away, from a supplementary reader *Raindrop*, published by NCERT⁵ was used in the classroom in different ways. Children used simple statements such as *Come back Chotu, come back now!* in a role play which was presented in the morning school assembly. The teacher then turned this into a game in which the children would stand in a line and one of the children would call out to her friends. Some of the activities which are at the end of the chapter are also used by teachers, but they do not become the central part of the class. Activities which require active participation have been found to be more useful.

³story books from publishers such as Tulika, Katha, Pratham, CBT, NBT and others

⁴An actual image from the current State board textbook, Rimjhim

⁵The book is not part of Rajasthan curriculum. Shared by an advisor from NCERT, this book has been helpful.

Group work is an important part of teaching learning process. This is where students are most able to draw advantage from multi-level classroom. Sometimes children at more or less similar levels are put in a group and sometimes children of varying levels form a group. These groups are dynamic, changing according to the subject. Activities such as group reading, word maps, question making are done so that children have access to collective understanding. Children often sit in a group and read out text to each other. They discuss the meaning of the story and, when required, reach out to the teacher. Reading with meaning is a challenging task. It is often observed that children are able to read the entire text, but have little idea of what it means. Through various large and small group activities, teachers encourage children to read with meaning. Children who have difficulty in reading can listen to the text being read a couple of times before attempting to read the text themselves. Children also complete worksheets in a group. *The idea is of learning as collaborative rather than competitive.*

While the classrooms are multilevel, there are some guidelines that are followed. The *first level* mostly comprises children at the preschool level. Since the children are interacting with the second language for the first time, they are exposed to language orally, mostly through rhymes and songs and some simple stories. Typically classroom displays consist of bilingual material. Children are rarely asked to read by themselves or produce comprehensible units. At this level, the concern is with exposure and increasing familiarity with the language. Children sing a lot of action rhymes and speak small sentences such as *My name is Rani and I ate chappati*. During the primary years, strengthening the home language is crucial. Research has constantly linked proficiency in the second language to proficiency in the home language. Hence the medium of instruction is the home language.

The *second level* often consists of children who have had initial one to two years of exposure to English. They are able to follow simple instructions and understand commonly used words. At this level children begin reading and engaging with the written word. The reproduction of language, in verbal and written forms, is encouraged without an overwhelming emphasis on spellings or grammar. Teachers do correct when needed. They observe their surroundings and form phrases. For example,

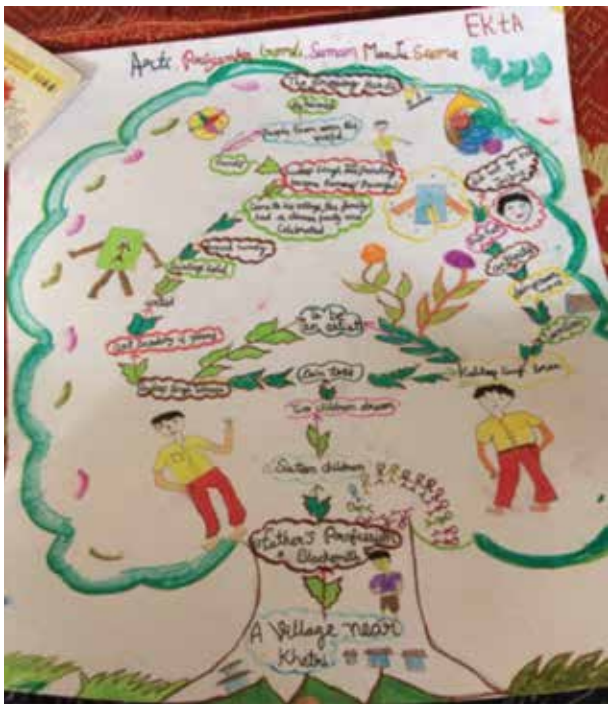
while teaching colour names to children, a teacher asked them to step out of the class and see what the colours of different things were. They came back to the class and reported seeing *white* clouds, *brown* stones, *green* tree, *green* grass, *white* tank, *blue* sky, *red* classroom and so on. Children make simple sentences from their experiences such as *I saw a white cloud*. At this level, children start making sense of the structure of the language. At this level (as with every level) the teacher exposes children to different stories and texts. This level corresponds to children in grades 1 and 2.

The *third level* corresponds to children in grades 3, 4 and 5. At this level, the children have a wider range of vocabulary and hence they are able to understand text with more complex ideas. They respond to questions in English and are able to describe experiences in greater detail.

Since these levels are not fixed as per age, a child in the class 2 can be at level 1 and might benefit more from the activities at level 1. The teacher needs to be skilful in identifying the level of language acquisition amongst children. This is done through day-to-day observations in the classroom. Teachers create portfolios for each child which also help chart their progress.



Reading, talking and meaning-making



Picture Story

Pedagogical Challenges

Some of the challenges faced in teaching English are linked to the lack of prior exposure to the language, especially in rural areas. Most of the teachers have themselves been taught in a way which encouraged rote learning of grammar rules. They could identify nouns/pronouns/adjectives, but to string a thought or an idea together and present it in English was challenging for most. People who can speak in English are difficult to come by in rural area and those who can, look for jobs in cities/towns. Consequently, the need to work with teachers on their language proficiency was deeply felt. The teachers went through language learning process themselves to enhance their own capacities. In the workshops, they spent a part of time engaging with activities such as creating role play, having debates, writing recipes, making stories and so on. However, much needs to be done to improve the learning levels further.

Another major challenge is the lack of contextualised material for language learning. The textbooks

provided, especially for English, are much above children's levels. The state policy in Rajasthan is board exams for Class 5, which have to be passed. The problem is not just with the level, but also with the content of the textbooks. Depictions are rarely of village life. The content of textbooks has been widely criticised in the recent times. Textbooks need to facilitate self-learning amongst student but they rarely engage students.

There are other pedagogical challenges too, but none as major as the ones mentioned above.

The way forward

GSK has been working with this approach, refining it over time since the academic year of 2016. Even with some changes in the original team.

The methodology of training teachers followed by the teachers working with children independently or with support and being periodically observed has worked.

The *whole language* teaching approach seems to be working with almost all the children writing the grade 5 board exam getting an A or B grade in English. As mentioned earlier, the material used for this approach is not restricted to the prescribed textbooks and the teacher is free to develop her lesson plans based on a variety of texts that have been suggested through trainings and activity bank. The activity bank as teacher support material is one of the major outcomes of this programme. This activity bank acts as a resource for a people who are interested in teaching English to first generation learners. This has led to a greater use of English that is contextualised, both inside and outside the classroom.

The areas that need attention include strengthening the module (including approach paper, activity bank and resources) for English teaching and learning that is peer reviewed. This will enable us to share our learning with wider audiences who are interested in teaching English to first generation learners.

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