

There is a puzzling problem in Indian classrooms. It is this: curious, alert, socially capable children come into our classrooms year after year and somehow we manage to teach them in a way that a significant percentage of them lose their interest to learn within the first three years of school education. Is it surprising, then, that every large-scale assessment conducted in the last dozen years in our country shows that many children cannot even read or write at a basic level, even though they have progressed to higher grades? The noted psycholinguist, Jim Gee, pointed to this absurdity that also happens regularly in American classrooms: children who spend years struggling to acquire a comfortable knowledge of, say, the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet (and the rules to apply them to reading), can miraculously learn hundreds of abstract symbols and rules in a matter of weeks when you give them video games to play!

This makes me think of Geetaⁱ, a 9-year old girl we met while conducting the Literacy Research in Indian Languages (LiRIL) studyⁱⁱ. Geeta belongs to the Warli tribe and lives in a tribal belt in Maharashtra. At the time we met her, she attended fourth grade in the village school and could understand and communicate in basic Marathi, the language of her school. Bright, alert and capable, Geeta took charge of her home and the two younger siblings while her parents were away at work. She was curious and inquiring, asking many, many questions of the researcher and explaining so many things -- who lived where, which was the shortest route to get to someplace, which fruits and roots were safe to eat when food ran out, how to filter water to make it drinkable and more! She was full of questions and information, a keen observer, a hard worker, helping her mother to cook, clean, wash and so on. Not lazy. Not indifferent. Not dull. Yet, after three-and-a-half years of formal schooling, Geeta could not read or write very well.

I have met so many boys and girls like Geeta during my work in classrooms across the country – why is this happening?

What are we doing wrong?

It is clear that we are disconnecting from the natural intelligence, curiosity and engagement with which young children enter our classrooms and making learning not very relevant or accessible to them. Keeping children like Geeta at the centre of our collective attention, in this article, I propose three concrete things we could do differently in early language classrooms:

1. Create a multilingual environment
2. Encourage children's emergent attempts at language learning
3. Keep meaning-making at the heart of the language classroom

Create a multilingual environment

Young children come to school with an amazing resource for the language classroom – their home languages, in which they have been thinking, reasoning, exploring, arguing, describing and communicating prior to coming to school. This is the language of their relationships, the language of their emotions. They know the basic grammar of this language and have also developed a fair amount of vocabulary in it.

Yet, in many cases, when they arrive at school, we ask them to remove their home languages outside of our classrooms, along with their chappals! Ideally, the child's mother tongue should be the medium of instruction (Cummins, 2001). This will help her not only to understand what is being taught but also to communicate her thoughts and to take pride in her cultural identity and heritage. Teaching in the mother tongue does not mean that children need to be restricted to their mother tongues! Even while the child's home language is accepted, she can be introduced to other languages – the language of the school, English and other relevant languages of the environment.

But children are not taught in their mother tongues in many schools all over India due to a variety of reasons. Jhingran (2009) has estimated that one in four children in Indian schools faces a moderate

to severe learning problem due to a mismatch between the home and school languages. Decisions about the medium of instruction may not be in the hands of individual teachers and there could be multiple mother tongues being used within a single classroom. Even in a school where students speak several languages, different from the official medium of instruction, there are very simple ways in which they can be made to feel more comfortable. A few are listed hereⁱⁱⁱ.

Use multilingual print in the classroom

Ensure that there is print displayed in multiple languages in the classroom. This print could include labels on different parts of the classroom, books, stories, poems, and so on. In addition to helping children understand better, it would also help them feel that their language is accepted and valued in the classroom. If the local language does not have a script, stories, songs and poems can be dictated to the teacher in the home language but written down in the script of the regional language (medium of instruction) and displayed in the classroom.

Encourage speech and expression in the home language

Young children will engage and say so much more if they are permitted to speak in their home languages. If the teacher understands the child's home language, she could respond to the child in this language; if not, a language mediator can be identified (an older student, a community member, or classmate) who can help the teacher communicate with the child.

Permit children to mix languages in speech and writing

This will help them to express their thinking fully using, largely, the grammar and vocabulary of comfort to them, even while they experiment with mixing a few words or sentence constructions of the new languages. Garcia & Wei (2014) have argued that most bilingual and multilingual speakers mix and use languages fluidly and this could be a way to support young children in learning a new language. Figure 1 shows how a fourth-grader used her knowledge of her mother tongue, Marathi, to learn the new school language, English^{iv}.

Encourage children's emergent attempts at reading and writing

When young children like Geeta come to school, in addition to transitioning from their home to school languages, they are also expected to learn

to read and write. Many schools take young children through a sequence of first learning to read and write *aksharas* (alphabets), then words, then sentences and finally passage reading. Oral activities are restricted, by and large, to reciting rhymes. These methods of introducing children to language in schools are counter-productive because they do not use the strengths of speaking, listening, thinking and expressing that children bring to the classroom.

How else can we introduce young children to language learning?

Connecting with what matters

Decades of scholarship have shown us that children learn language through observation, experimentation and trial-and-error in contexts that are meaningful and interesting to them. Hence, they are able to master video games in a few weeks, but not the letters of the alphabet over years! We need to connect children with what matters to them in the language classroom. How can teachers do this?

Provide opportunities for oral expression

Children can be asked to share something of interest to them during sharing time. They can be read to or told a story, followed by a discussion. They can be taken on a field trip, that can be followed by a discussion or someone from the community can be invited to the classroom to talk to the children. The point of all these exercises should be that children are thinking, communicating, listening to each other and expressing themselves. The children should be encouraged, as described earlier, to speak in their home languages or to mix languages and speak. This will support cognition, vocabulary development, increasing knowledge of new languages as well as about the world around them. Asking children how they feel about things – a book, a story, an experience – will help the teacher to understand points of disconnect, as well as give the children, an opportunity to express both thoughts and feelings.

Provide opportunities to experiment with reading and writing

If children are permitted to browse through picture-books every day, even if they cannot read all the *aksharas* or words, they will still turn the pages, look at the pictures, discuss with each other (if this activity is conducted in pairs) and try to make meaning of it. Some children may 'pretend-read'

the book or may be able to recognise some words in the book. Over time, they will slowly become more and more accurate in their reading.

Similarly, if space is made in the classroom for children to write or draw in response to what is discussed as a class, they will begin to experiment with writing. They may draw a picture, or they may write some *aksharas* or words they know and, if you ask them what they have written, they may tell you something quite elaborate and beautiful! At this point, instead of correcting their spellings, what they have said could be written below their own writing and it could be read back to them. Display children's emergent writing all around the classroom and give them time to share and admire each other's work.

Create a print-rich classroom

A print-rich classroom is one that is full of meaningful print for and by the children. Children's attempts at writing or drawing can be put up and different areas of the classroom can be labelled in multiple languages. Words, poems and other information that is of interest to the children, or relevant to the teaching, can all be displayed and used during lessons and activities.

Meaning-making: The heart of language classroom

As emphasised throughout this article, children are natural meaning-makers. When we teach in a way that helps them make meaning, they learn more naturally and easily. When we teach in boring, disconnected ways, children either lose interest, or struggle to learn what could otherwise have been learnt faster.

In the previous sections, I have discussed the importance of permitting children to express themselves in their home languages, to discuss ideas and to experiment freely with emergent reading and writing. All these will help them to find language learning meaningful. In addition, here are some things we can do to keep meaning-making at the heart of our interactions with children:

Expressing thinking comfortably

While children are still developing comfort with learning language(s), our focus should be on helping them to make meaning. For this, the exact language of the textbook need not be used when they respond. For example, Geeta, the little girl introduced at the beginning of the article, was listening to the poem Paus (Rain) being read aloud from the Balbharati textbook (Maharashtra). After

reading the poem aloud, the teacher began to ask questions about it. Geeta could not read the text by herself, but she was attending carefully to what was going on and was trying to make meaning through listening. We saw many attempts where Geeta tried to participate in the conversations but was ignored by the teacher because she was not saying exactly what the text said. For example:

Teacher: What happens in the sky when it rains?

Geeta: (animated quickest response): Chakan chamakta (shining streaks)

Other children: Veej (word from the poem for lightning)

Teacher: Right, veej!

Geeta was expressing herself creatively and aesthetically and showing that she understood what was being discussed but may have lacked the vocabulary that native Marathi-speaking children bring to the classroom. Repeatedly being ignored by the teacher (and her classmates) could lead children like Geeta to believe that their thinking is incorrect and not worthy, and, over time, they may feel a disconnect with school learning.

Permitting children to read and write words that are meaningful to them

We focus so much on teaching young children to read and write *aksharas* in a particular order, that we keep children away from the words of their spoken vocabulary because many of these words contain secondary diacritic vowel signs (*matras*) and conjunct consonants (*samyuktaksharas*). For example, a child would know the word *paani*, but is more likely to be taught the word *jal* in her Hindi textbook, because it has no *matras*. During the LiRIL study, we observed one set of lessons in Karnataka, where children learned words for: king (*arasa*), saw (*garagasa*), necklace (*sara*), a rumbling sound (*garagara*) and a festival (Dussehra) – because they shared the same set of *aksharas*. These words were then strung together artificially into a passage that most children were completely disinterested in because there is no organic connection between these words or between the words and the children's lives and interests.

Noted educator Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) who worked with Maori children in New Zealand argued that children learn to read and write more quickly if they are given words that they are interested in learning. She would write down the key vocabulary for each child, culled from her own interests, without worrying about a particular order in which

to introduce these words. Borrowing this idea from Ashton-Warner, key vocabulary could be written on word cards for individual children, or on a class chart – if some words are of common interest to the class. Children could be encouraged to use these words in their emergent reading and writing. That way, they will be reading something of interest, and also writing about things that mean something to them.

Reading aloud every day

Instead of relying only on the textbook, be sure to bring rich, interesting children's literature into the classroom, and read those aloud to the children. You can read storybooks, or poems, or even good non-fiction books on topics that children are curious about. Discuss the ideas with the children and welcome their responses. Support them in their thinking and interests. Through this process, children will slowly be introduced to the world of books and ideas, without leaving their own ideas and interests behind. They will learn new vocabulary, new ways of expressing themselves, and new thoughts and ideas beyond their own experience.

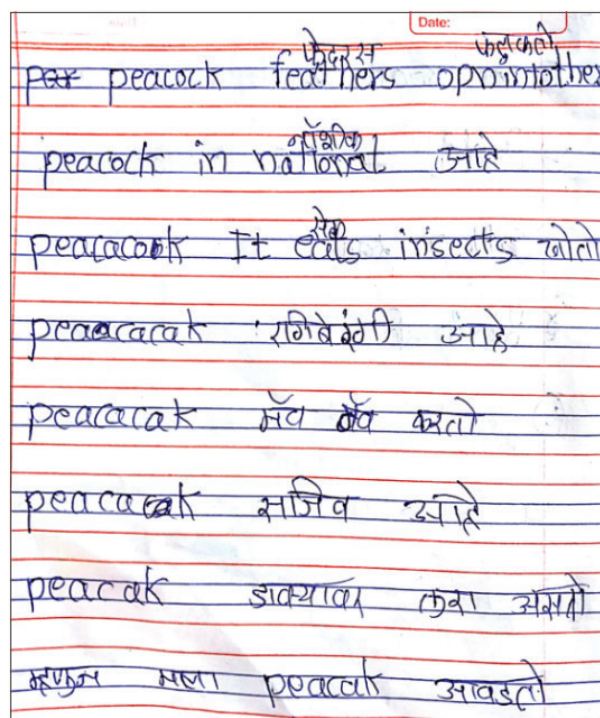
Make writing a central part of the curriculum

As discussed earlier, even if children cannot write *aksharas* or spell correctly, they can be encouraged to express themselves through emergent writing attempts. You can support their efforts in several ways. For example, after a field-visit and a rich

discussion about it, you could ask children to help you compose a few lines about the visit. You could model for them how to write down those lines and put this chart up for children to re-read later.

Or, you could ask children to draw or write about their favourite part of a story you have read aloud to them. You could help them compose letters to someone important to them – a friend or parent who has migrated, a grandparent in a different village, or someone else they are interested in staying connected with. You could also help them to write down an oral story or song from their community. Over time, you could gradually introduce them to different kinds of writing that they would enjoy (poems, stories, etc.) all very different from what they typically get to do in school!

I started this article with this puzzle: why do highly intelligent, capable children like Geeta fail to learn in early language classrooms? The answer to this question may be more complex than indicated in this piece, but I strongly suspect that making learning more relevant to young learners could go a long way towards solving this problem. Every child can - and will - learn if taught in imaginative ways! I have suggested only three key ideas for doing so – welcoming children's home languages, encouraging their emergent attempts at language learning, and keeping meaning-making at the heart of the language classroom. I am sure teachers will be able to think of other ideas as they try to solve the problem of creating relevance for learners!



- i Name has been changed to protect identity.
- ii The Literacy Research in Indian Languages was a longitudinal research project that tracked over 700 students in Palghar district, Maharashtra, and Yadgir district, Karnataka as they moved from Grades 1-3. See Menon, S. et al. (2017). *Literacy research in Indian languages (LiRIL): Report of a three year longitudinal study on early reading and writing in Marathi and Kannada*. Bangalore: Azim Premji University and New Delhi: Tata Trusts.
- iii For more ideas, please refer to Sinha, S. (2018). Creating spaces for the child's language within classrooms. Retrieved from: <http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI-Handout-2-Multilingualism-.pdf>; and to Menon, S., Sinha, S., Das, H., & Pydah, A. (Eds.) (2019). *Multilingual education in India*. Hyderabad: Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences.
- iv See, Parikh, R., & Menon, S. (2019). Using mother tongue to facilitate English language learning in low exposure setting. Retrieved from: http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI-Practitioner-Brief-18_Using-MT-to-Support-English-Language.pdf
- v For a more complete discussion of this topic, see Sinha, S., Pydah, A., & Menon, S. (2019). Emergent literacy. Retrieved from: http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI-Practitioner-Brief-16_Emergent-Literacy.pdf
- vi More ideas about creating a print-rich classroom can be found at: Pydah, A. (2019). Creating a print-rich environment in the classroom. Retrieved: http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/ELI-Practitioner-Brief_8_Print-rich-Environment-in-Classroom-1.pdf
- vii From: Noronha, S. (2016). *Failing Meena* (Unpublished M.Phil dissertation). Hyderabad: Tata Institute of Social Sciences.
- viii For more ideas on supporting children's writing, see Sinha, S., & Menon, S. (2019). Supporting children's writing in early grades. Retrieved: http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Supporting-Childrens-Writing-in-Early-Grades_Practitioner-Brief_11.pdf; and Pydah, A. (2019). Children's writing: Creating books in the classroom. Retrieved: http://eli.tiss.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Creating_Books_in_the_Classroom_ELI_Handout_7.pdf

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