

Using Worksheets to Facilitate Reading and Writing

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Key Words: Reading, Writing, Standard language, Local dialect, Facilitation, Worksheet, Traditional and meaning-making approaches to language teaching, Surpur Taluk

Abstract

This study demonstrates to school teachers the use of worksheets in facilitating reading and writing. It was conducted with Class One students across five Government Schools in Surpur Taluk of Yadgir district, Karnataka. The designing of the worksheets and its use have been outlined in the article. The children, however, were not very engaged with reading and writing when these worksheets were used. The reason for their disengagement was attributed to the gap between the Kannada dialect spoken at home and the standard Kannada used in textbooks. This learning was used to redesign the worksheet using words that are common to dialect and standard Kannada. The children were more responsive when the new version of the worksheet was used. It is concluded that the designing of the worksheet requires knowledge of the linguistic resources that children bring to the classroom.

This is a modified version of the paper presented at the seminar "Teachers in the Current Scenario of School Education" held at Mysore in April 2018.

Introduction

In Surpur Taluk of Yadgir district, many students struggle to learn reading and writing Kannada, even though they speak a dialect of Kannada at home. When children come to school, they come with the knowledge of the sounds of their language, which they combine to make words and sentences, and use language creatively. The rules of Kannada grammar are inherent in their utterances. Nevertheless, students find it difficult to read and write the standard Kannada used in textbooks.

The approach to teaching standard Kannada generally consists of introducing Kannada alphabets as isolated letters, joining vowels and consonants, clustering the letters (*ottakshara*), putting these together to make words, sentences and texts. Students taught in this way rarely achieve their expected grade-level competencies. For instance, when a picture of a monkey climbing a tree is shown to a child with the accompanying sentence, “ಕೋತಿಮರವಿರಾಕತ್ತೆತಿ” /kootimaraeraakataiti/ [a monkey is climbing a tree] children tend to pronounce “ಕೋ”/Ko/ as “ಕೈ”/Kai/, and say /kaiti/ instead of /kooti/[monkey]. Another fallout of the students learning the alphabet in an isolated manner is that some of them tend to use their fingers to spell out the alphabets. So “ಕೆ”/Ka/ is represented by the index finger, “ಕಾ”/Kaa/ the next finger, and so on. When these alphabets occur in words, the children try to recall the alphabets using their fingers. For example, in the word “ಮರ”/mara/ [tree], they try to recall the position of “ಮ” /ma/ on their finger and read it either as “ವ”/v/ or “ಯ”/y/. Hence this isolated approach to learning Kannada is not very useful for reading.

By Grades 6 or 7, students can decode the text, but they still have difficulties in using the language for tasks such as analysing, explaining, describing, arguing their views,

expressing their ideas, responding to news in the newspaper and reasoning. The point to be emphasized is that the conventional approach to teaching alphabets may not work with all children. When teachers are asked why students struggle to use language for expressing their ideas, typically one gets a response, ‘*we have done our duty. Children can read and write, if children are not able to think, we cannot help them.*’

Language learning is not merely to do with alphabets and words. Understanding what is read and expressing ideas through language is part of the competencies that children must acquire. The question then arises, how to facilitate reading and writing so that children acquire these competencies. The following section presents an approach to reading and writing based on meaning-making.

Using Meaning-Making as an Approach to Facilitate Reading and Writing

Reading and writing are not merely decoding and encoding skills; and they deal with meaning-making. From this viewpoint, the primary requirement of language learning is to help children make connections between the written language in school and their environment which includes names of shops, signboards, street names, picture posters, words on packing materials (tooth paste box, soap powder covers), to mention a few. All of these can be used to teach the written language. In addition, drawings, word pictures, sentences and sequential illustrations can be used for written language learning. With this as the basis, we developed worksheets to demonstrate to teachers on how reading and writing can be taught by using words familiar to

children. We worked in collaboration with the teachers of five schools in Surpur Taluk. Students of class one participated in the study.

Why Worksheet as an Approach?

According to Lesley & Labbo (2003), worksheets are the driving force of curriculum. Studies have shown the value of workbooks in teaching reading (Barry, 2005). Teachers use worksheets to support and encourage active learning. In the Indian school context, teachers are familiar with the concept of worksheets and workbooks. This study leverages on the familiarity and uses the worksheet approach to teach reading and writing. The design of the worksheet however has a role to play in the learning process. Sasmaz-Oren & Ormanci (2012) claim that a well-designed worksheet improves the achievement levels of students. Therefore, the design of our worksheet was carefully thought through. First, the principles guiding the design were discussed with the teachers and co-workers, and then detailed.

Designing the Worksheet

The assumptions that guided the worksheet design are as follows:

- Children learn from the process of constructing language
- Children learn to read words using already known letters
- Children learn language in an arbitrary order and not linearly
- Children can begin writing with any random letter and not necessarily the first letter of the alphabet
- Children acquire alphabets in the process of reading pictures and through writing
- Words that are common to the dialect and standard Kannada should be used











in the worksheet. This was later added as a part of the guiding principles.

The worksheet consisted of two columns. The first column had pictures and the second column provided space for writing. The children had to identify the picture in the first column and write the corresponding word in the second column and then read what they had written. The instruction on the worksheet stated, 'See the picture, write the word and then read out the word'. Some examples of words used in the worksheet were: "ಆಡು"/aaDu/[goat], "ಕಾಡು"/kaaDu/[forest], "ಕಾಗೆ"/kaage/[crow], "ಹೊಗೆ"/hoge/[smoke], "ಹೊಲ"/hola/[field], "ಮೊಲ"/mola/[rabbit], and so on (Table 1).

Table 1
Sample Worksheet

See the pictures, write the words and read

ಚಿತ್ರಗಳನ್ನು ನೋಡುತ್ತಾ ಪದಗಳನ್ನು ಬರೆ ಮತ್ತು ಓದು

ಚಿತ್ರಗಳು	ಪದಗಳು	ಚಿತ್ರಗಳು	ಪದಗಳು
	ಆ ಡು		ಕಾ _ _
	_ ಗೆ		ಯೊ _ _
	_ ಲ		ಮೊ _ _
	_ ಸ ರು		ಕೆ _ _ _
	ಕ _		_ ಳು

Since the children did not engage much with this worksheet, version two of the worksheet was designed in which the differences between the local Kannada dialect and standard Kannada were bridged. This second worksheet contained words that were common to the local dialect and standard Kannada.

Using the Worksheet

The process of using the worksheet was as follows:

(Teachers use the word 'sound' to refer to a 'syllable')

Teacher: (points to the first picture and asks), 'what do you see in this picture?'

Children: 'ಆಡು' /aaDu/[goat].'

Teacher: 'How many sounds (syllables) are there in the word 'ಆಡು' /aaDu/[goat]? What are they?'

Children: 'Two sounds, 'ಆ' /aa/ and 'ಡು' /Du/.'

Teacher: 'Which sound comes first, and which comes next?'

Children: 'First comes the 'ಆ' /aa/ sound, followed by the 'ಡು' /Du/sound.'

Teacher: Shows the written form given as an illustration and asks, 'Show me, which letter stands for the 'ಆ' /aa/ sound and the letter for the 'ಡು' /Du/sound?'

Children: Point to the letters that represent these two syllables.

In this way, children first learn two letters and further learning then is built on these two letters. The next picture is that of a forest "ಕಾಡು" /kaaDu/, and the second column has the letter "ಕಾ" /kaa/ followed by a blank. Children have already learnt the syllable "ಡು" /Du/ from the first word. With this prior knowledge, they complete the word "ಕಾಡು" /kaaDu/[forest], following the process outlined above. The third picture is that of a "ಕಾಗೆ" /kaage/[crow]. This word builds on the knowledge of the syllable /ka/ taught in the previous picture and anew syllable /ge/ is introduced. The worksheet builds a word chain, taking the children from the known to the unknown by introducing anew set of syllables at each stage, and helping them apply the knowledge of these syllables to the next picture. Such an approach triggers the curiosity of children as it encourages them to wonder which syllable they will learn next. Further, the children are initiated into reading and writing naturally and not as sequential processes.

The same process is followed for learning how to read and write sentences. For example:

The teacher shows the picture of a monkey climbing a tree and asks the children, 'what is the monkey doing?' The children answer "ಕೋಟಿಮರವರಾಕತ್ತೈತಿ" /kotimaraeerkataiti/ [The monkey is climbing a tree]. The teacher writes this sentence on the board and asks, 'now tell me, which is the first word in this sentence?' The children respond, "ಕೋಟಿ" /koti/[monkey]. The teacher then asks, 'Which is the second word?' In this way, the children read the entire sentence and then write it down, using their tacit knowledge of the rules of grammar.

Our informal conversations with the teachers of the Surpur government schools suggested that they felt motivated when they saw the demonstration of these worksheets and its impact on the learning of the children. One question that most of them asked was 'how many such worksheets should one prepare?' We used this question as an opportunity to deepen the teacher's knowledge of language learning. The discussion with the teachers went into the meaning of constructing knowledge of a language and what it entails. In the process of learning to read and write, the children are engaged in the cognitive processes of observing, comparing, predicting, identifying patterns, interpreting rules, and generalizing rules. In fact, the worksheet was prepared keeping all these processes in mind, so that children could learn to read and write on their own. As children acquire competencies in reading and writing, they move to a more abstract level of reading—reading without pictures. The role of a teacher is to create such learning opportunities. The worksheet is an example of such an opportunity. It is not necessary to use worksheets for all the alphabets. Instead, one can leverage on the cognitive processes that children use in reading and writing. Despite the success of the worksheet,

there was nevertheless a challenge in using it. The worksheet consisted of words in standard Kannada. When the children were asked to name the picture and words, they used the names from their dialect (Table 2)

Table 2
Dialect Words Used by Children in Place of Words in Standard Kannada

Words in standard Kannada	Words in the dialect used at home
ಆಡು[goat]/aaDu/	ಆಡ/aaDa/
ಕಾಡು[Forest]/kaaDu/	ಕಾಡ/kaaDa/
ಕಾಣಿ[Crow]/kaage/	ಕಾಣಿ/kaagi/

Discussing their answers with the teachers gave us an insight into the process of bridging the gap between standard Kannada and the local dialect.

Process of Bridging Standard Kannada with the Local Dialect

The insight we gained from discussions with the teachers was that the worksheet should reflect the words used in the local dialect rather than standard language. In collaboration with the teachers, the textbooks were examined once again and a list of words that were common to the local dialect and standard Kannada was prepared, for example, "ಕೋತಿ"/kooti/ [monkey], "ಕುರಿ"/kuri/[goat], "ಕೋಳಿ"/kooLi/ [chicken], "ನರಿ"/nari/[fox], and so on. These words were used to redesign the worksheet. The process of using the worksheet remained the same. We found that worksheets that use words common to dialect and standard Kannada made it easier for the children to acquire Kannada words and alphabets. Once they had acquired a few alphabets and words, the children used them to learn other words and alphabets in the standard Kannada. The children were able to identify, read

and write these alphabets even when they occurred in other words. In our view, there is no need to introduce all the alphabets one by one. The ability to analyze sounds or syllables or alphabets based on patterns and analogy makes it easier for children to learn new words.

The teachers felt that that the worksheet approach to reading and writing helped the children acquire language more effectively. To sum up, in the words of one of the teachers of a Surpur school, 'We struggle to teach these competencies to children of Class three. But you have succeeded in teaching these competencies to Class one students, and that too within a time frame of two months, helping them move to reading simple sentences.'

Disseminating Meaning-Based Approach to Reading and Writing

We worked with teachers of five primary schools across Surpur Taluk. The worksheets were used to teach standard Kannada. These were designed in collaboration with teachers to familiarize them with the processes involved in designing and using worksheets. The teachers saw the influence of the worksheet approach on the language competencies of students. Once the teachers were reasonably convinced of the effectiveness of this approach, we then shared and discussed it with a larger group of about 60 other teachers who came to the Kekkera Teacher Learning Centre (TLC) for their evening discussions. The teachers of the five schools, who used this approach led the discussion, and talked of its effectiveness, challenges, time duration, and their preparation. The TLC discussion prompted several teachers to see the value in the worksheet approach. The other primary school teachers (who were not a part of

the study) also began to use and design worksheets to teach competencies related to reading and writing.

Conclusion

The role of the teacher is critical in facilitating learning opportunities for students. For this, they must appreciate

the linguistic resources that children bring to the classroom, value them and plan and facilitate learning around these resources. This approach to developing literacy is more effective since it connects to the environment of the children (including their linguistic environment) and enhances the meaningfulness of reading and writing.

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