Leveraging Worksheets to Enhance Classroom Learning

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In the intermittent periods during the pandemic, when teachers were able to reach their students for short periods, priority was given to L1 (first language) and maths, and, as a result, the loss of learning of L2 (second language) was greater and the gap between lessons wider. Here are some learnings from how different teachers successfully used worksheets to help their students cope with these difficulties.

In one school, teacher A, an English teacher, found that due to a six-month gap, her class III students had forgotten all the basics that they had learnt, including the alphabet. For some students, recognising the letters was a problem, for others, writing in English was difficult. At the time, the Department of Education, Karnataka, had provided teachers with a whole range of worksheets to help them support their students in bridging the learning gap. However, teacher A faced a dilemma: with students forgetting even the alphabet, how were they supposed to complete the worksheets? Her solution to this was to use guided reading and writing lessons combined with the worksheets to help her students learn all that was taught in class prior to the closing of the school again.

Guided reading/writing worksheets

Guided reading and writing can be a useful tool to help students bridge the gap between what they now remember and what they once knew. The students are expected to complete the worksheets based on the guided reading and writing lessons not independently, but with the teacher's guidance and support. These worksheets can be post-reading activities to enhance the students' learning and understanding of the lesson being taught.

Teacher A's plan to help her students was quite similar to a guided reading and writing lesson. She made a concerted effort to allow students to read without prompts and planned a small writing activity based on the day's lesson. Since many of the learners were struggling to keep up with the class and particularly with the writing tasks, teacher A grouped the students based on their current levels and went around to each group offering them the support they needed to complete the worksheets. The worksheets given to the students were the same, however, the level of support each group of learners received varied and teacher A guided them accordingly.

For students who have forgotten how to read the alphabet, the teacher can provide a dotted pattern of the alphabet to trace and then practise writing the alphabet. For others, who have trouble with decoding or understanding some words, she can ask pointed questions to help them understand the word. For a third group, teacher A's support is not required at all; she simply needs to check the accuracy of their responses.

Through trial and error, teacher A learnt that a worksheet with only text was harder for a majority of her students to complete. Instead, worksheets that combine pictures and text were received more favourably by her students, more so if they could colour the pictures after completing the worksheet. Teacher A attributed this change in her learners to their forgetting letters and words in their time away from school. Even though the worksheets were based on the contents of her day's class, she assumed that her students needed more time to familiarise themselves with the contents before reproducing or applying their relearnt knowledge to complete the worksheets.

When she initially adopted this new way of teaching in her class, her worksheets had very basic tasks and exercises, like matching the items. She also found that lengthy worksheets were off-putting for the learners, perhaps because the long gap between the times they were in her class had negatively affected their attention span as well. The first few worksheets that teacher A provided to her class were single-task worksheets, and she gradually began increasing the number of items and tasks in the worksheets as her students became more comfortable with completing them.
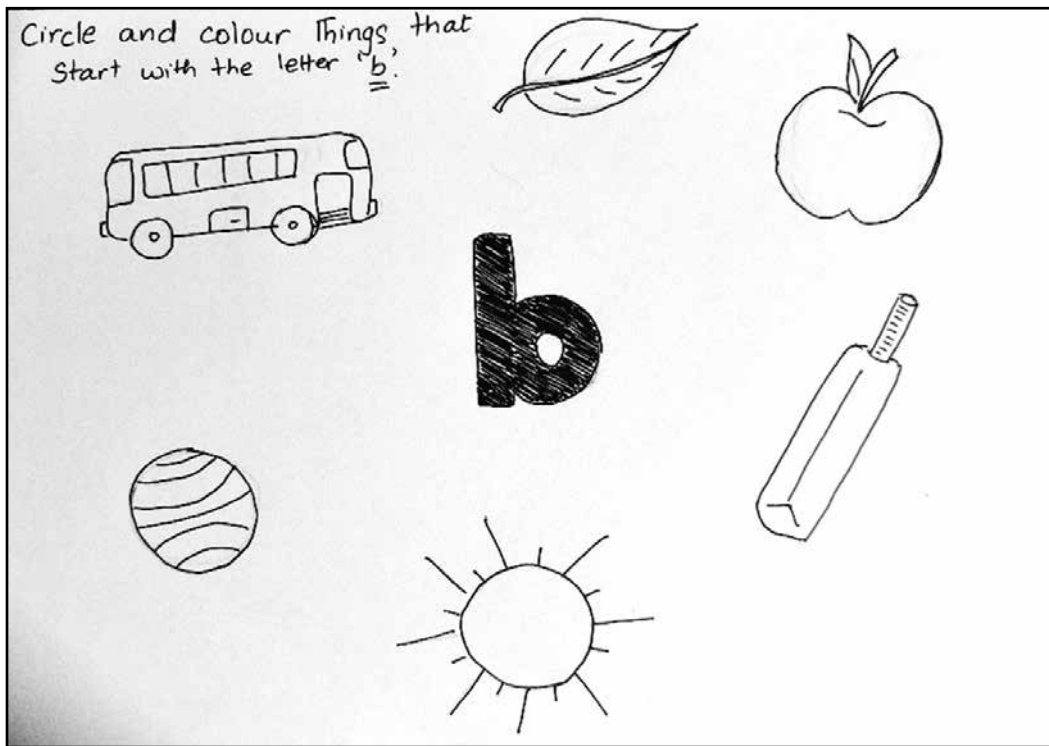
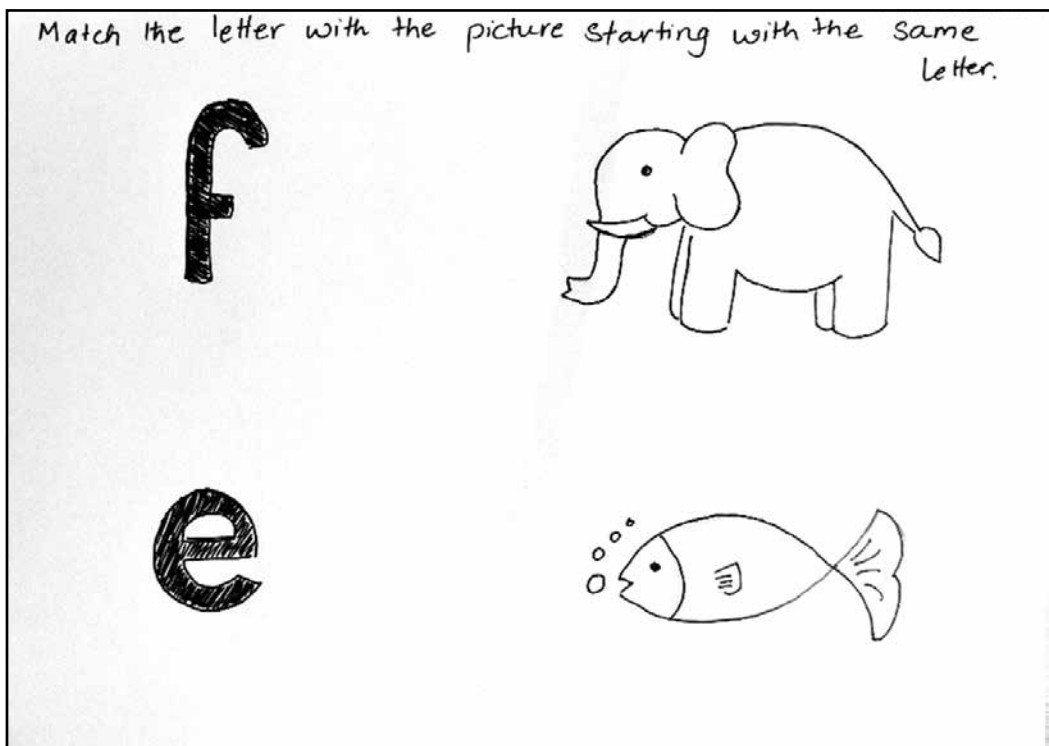*Figure 1. Identifying pictures that start with a particular letter*

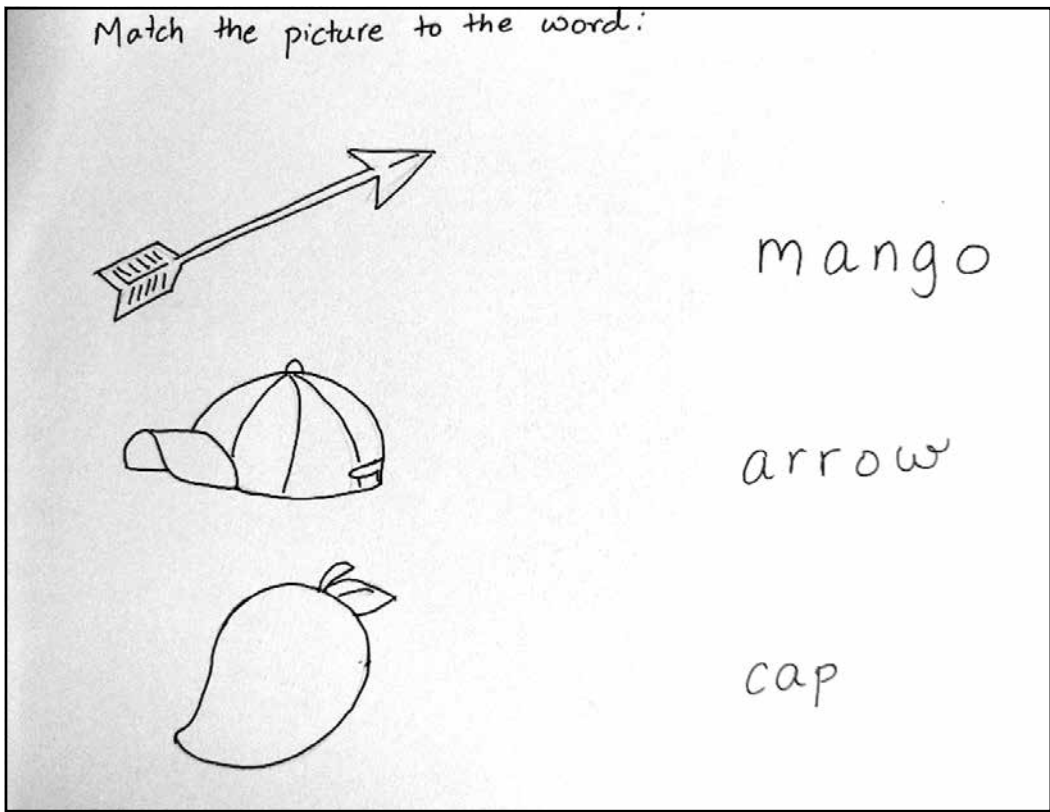*Figure 2. Matching the letters to the pictures starting with it*

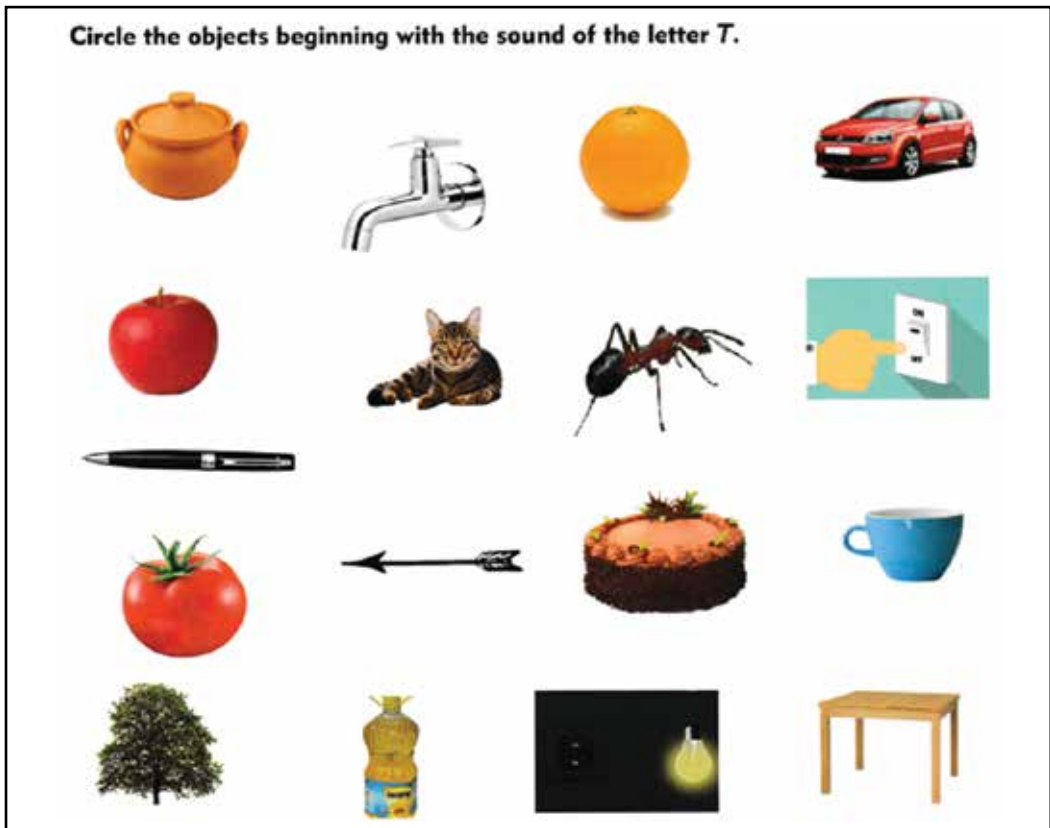*Figure 3. Matching pictures to the words*

Figure 4. Recognising objects starting with a particular letter

Another thing teacher A discovered was that it was easier to jog the memories of her learners when she used the class I textbook for her lessons. Since the class had already engaged with most of the lessons and poems, they found it easier to understand and, later, complete the worksheets when they were based on the familiar text. However, she made sure to use content simpler than that (in the textbook) in her worksheets. Students in higher-level groups would be assigned the task of attempting to complete some of the exercises in the textbook after completing their worksheets.

Evaluation worksheets

Another teacher, teacher S, found another way to get her students used to writing again. She designed worksheets based on the level 1 English *Nali Kali* (ENK) cards. The tasks in these cards include strokes, letter-tracing and reproduction, and identifying objects which start with a particular letter (from a range of familiar pictures). Some of her worksheets included an activity: to colour objects starting with a specific letter in a colour (like objects that start with the letter 'c' in red, or those starting with the letter 'a' in blue). Each of her worksheets reintroduced the letters of the alphabet in chunks and had several simple tasks to help learners regain the skills of letter recognition and letter reproduction. The worksheets in teacher S's class were also distributed after she made the students 'echo read' and engage in oral activities that focussed on the specific set of letters she was teaching them. Once her students were comfortable with completing letter-related worksheets, she began to re-introduce basic concepts, such as in-out, up-down, etc. in worksheets.

Worksheets, when given at the end of every class, ensure that the students are comfortable with writing tasks and also gives the teacher an idea about how well each student has understood the concept or content taught. They are a useful tool that help learners practise what they have learnt and remember it for a longer time. Another useful (and perhaps more common) purpose to using worksheets is for evaluation. However, the problem arises when the worksheets are too lengthy (to cover all the aspects of the unit taught) and contain more text. The problems faced by teachers when providing worksheets at the end of each lesson (mentioned above) also hold true in this, and the teacher will have to consider the current levels of her students when deciding the number of exercises and length of the worksheet.

Evaluation worksheets do not necessarily have to be given at the end of teaching the entire unit. Rather, these can be provided on a weekly basis to introduce learners to the idea of *applying* their knowledge, rather than solely the content (which is advisable for daily worksheets). Periodic-assessment worksheets should also include unfamiliar words and texts that the learners can decode and then understand. Most often, the worksheets given to students contain only the content and exercises that the students have worked on in their classroom. The problem with this lies in the fact that many students often memorise the required answers and simply reproduce them from memory, but when it comes to applying their skills in other areas to read or write new words, they often struggle. After all, the point of teaching a language is not just to build knowledge but enhance language skills of the learner.

Worksheets along with oral work

Many learners do not perform well on worksheets since they have difficulty in reproducing their knowledge on paper. Therefore, using only the worksheet to gauge the students' learning is also not a very accurate indicator of their actual learning. Understanding this issue, teacher M, another English teacher, sought a solution to get a better understanding of the level of each of her students. After she had corrected the worksheets, teacher M would call each student to her desk while the others were given a task to work on independently. She would orally rephrase the items the student had responded to wrongly and check if he/she could answer the question. Though this was a time-consuming task, teacher M was able to not only understand each student's level, but she could also get a clear picture of which of them required more instruction or support and could identify those who had difficulty in writing (reproducing).

All in all, worksheets are an accurate tool that can help teachers re-familiarise their students with writing (especially in the current circumstances), help them practise writing tasks by providing support, and also understand their students' learning. For optimal results, teachers not only need to understand their learners' current levels and when to use worksheets, but also on what kind of exercises can help draw learners' interests

back to writing and reproducing their knowledge on paper. Shorter, more frequent worksheets with a wide array of tasks can be completed with the teacher's guidance to enhance students' learning and help them recall knowledge and skills that have been unused, thereby, bridging the learning gap.

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