

Introduction

The year 2021 was one where schools across the country witnessed multiple phases of partial re-openings. After the state-wide lockdown of two months ended, government schools in Bangalore District officially resumed classes for middle school and high school students first. In the following months, primary as well as pre-primary schools also underwent a similar manner of phased reopening.

Children were back in classrooms, and teachers bore the huge responsibility of bringing them back on track with learning and finding pedagogical strategies to bridge the gaps in basic competencies without causing anxiety and fear among students.

Worksheets became a widely used medium to engage children, during this crucial period across schools in the district. Children were not entirely unfamiliar with worksheets as these were handed out during school closure as part of some initiatives by the Education Department as well as by other educational organisations.

On working closely with English language teaching with a focus on foundational literacy, I was more interested in understanding how, in classes I to III, worksheets for English provide support for student learning, and when used along with the textbooks, whether they are sufficient and effective for teaching a second language. The article tries to explore these questions and is based on my observations of language classrooms and takeaways from co-teaching in a few government schools in Bengaluru after the schools reopened.

While working with young children, it is important to remember that no child can learn a concept from worksheets alone and hence, worksheets should not be disconnected from meaningful learning experiences. These are to be employed alongside other activities and games that are relatable and arouse the interest of children. Otherwise, they might fall short of the objective they are meant to achieve.

How do worksheets support learning?

Across grades, mainly in classes IV and above, it

could be generally noted that worksheets play a useful role in revising and reinforcing the topics and themes covered in class, through repetition. Worksheets are also less instructional in nature. The role of the teacher is minimal once she gives instructions at the start on how to work on the questions. These instructions then help children in using their own understanding for finding solutions to problems. For instance, it was observed that for those children who were not new to reading, worksheet exercises allowed them to spend more time with keywords, such as names of characters, action words and sight words appearing in a story and in turn, get more familiar with their usage.

Getting opportunities to recollect and retell what was learnt previously is important for internalising a new idea. Along with this, worksheets also contribute to the objective of facilitating independent learning.

Shortcomings of worksheets

However, when it comes to teaching the early grades, this need not always be the case and some shortcomings of worksheets could be seen, which are explained here. The limitations of using worksheets in classrooms have little to do with the worksheets themselves but more to do with *how* they are used. The major challenge is that worksheet exercises are mostly carried out in isolation; in classes I-III, when they were employed for independent work or as merely practice sheets, they were shown to be not quite as effective as in the higher classes, and more and more children showed signs of inattention while doing worksheets and resorted to copying answers from classmates with the motive of somehow getting done with the exercise. This is particularly true of children who are either new to school and have no prior exposure to print in a formal manner or may have had some level of introduction to print which is still not sufficient for them to read and write with an attempt for meaning-making. For the same reasons, none of the advantages mentioned above, except that of repetition, takes place here, and repetition without understanding or building associations

hardly ever contributes to learning. It, therefore, becomes necessary to use other teaching-learning tools that can supplement worksheets in helping children internalise a concept better.

In the context of second language teaching where we see a similar practice of using worksheets in isolation, there could be other challenges. Factoring in the foreign language element of English, we see that it is different from a known, regional language, like Kannada, for instance, with regard to its language structure and general non-phonetic nature. Banking on worksheets need not ensure effective learning in this case and meaning-making would still be a distant goal.

Keeping this in mind, I tried an intervention for a month with the help of the teachers, in some of the English classrooms. The aim was to approach worksheets along with other teaching aids, with the objective of improving learner interest and

understanding of basic concepts in the English language.





With the idea of introducing the names and sounds of letters, simple worksheets were developed for each letter, with a focus on vocabulary building and letter identification. Following the *Nali-Kali* approach, wherein letters of the alphabet are introduced in groups progressively, five letters, (both vowels and consonants) C, O, A, P and T were included.

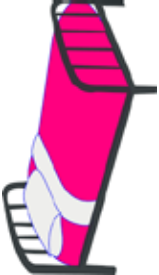
In the following worksheets, the exercises include matching picture-to-word (words are given on both sides), identifying the symbol of the letter in day-to-day objects and finally, filling in the missing letters. The final exercise is not given much emphasis, the intention here is to only check whether children, with a lot of oral exposure, are able to gradually make better sense of the sounds and letters.

Name:

Class:

Match the pictures in column A with the words in column B


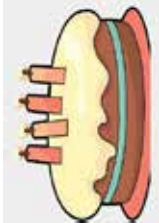
 <p>cap</p>	<p>car</p>
 <p>cake</p>	<p>cow</p>
 <p>car</p>	<p>Cap</p>
 <p>cow</p>	<p>cake</p>





	cat	coffee
	coat	cot
	coffee	cat
	cot	coat

Circle the objects in which you can see the letter "C"



Fill in the blanks with the correct spelling:

	__ a p
	c __ k e

	<p>__ a __</p>
	<p>c o __</p>
	<p>__ a t</p>
	<p>c __ a t</p>

The worksheet also consists of many pictures to help children relate to the words better. A drawback is that due to using colour pictures, this worksheet lacks clarity when printed in black and white.

Word games to pave the way

Instead of directly using these worksheets after introducing letters in the class through stories and explicit instruction, some more activities were included in the process, such as the use of TLMs and language games, with the intention of making the process of letter-sound recognition more tangible, engaging and clear.

Language games are an interesting way to stir up children's interest. The benefit is that games provide an opportunity for children to learn without being aware of it. A game called the 'sound-game' or 'phonics-game' was played regularly to enable children to pay more active attention to what they hear and to make a connection between the letter and the sound through the process of playing and experimenting. This game requires no materials and can be played using speech alone. Students

were first asked to watch and listen to a set of words uttered; here, words starting with the /k/ sound of the letter C, such as *coffee*, *cap*, *cake* etc. were used along with the flashcards. These were also words that were familiar to children.

Following this, children were instructed to close their eyes and listen carefully to the same words, once again. These words were uttered slowly and repeated a few times. Students were then asked to open their eyes and repeat the words they had heard. Some of them got all the words right, while others hardly managed a couple. Questions specific to the sounds uttered were asked, for instance: Did you hear the sound /k/ in *coffee*? Does it come at the beginning or end? In *cake*, how many times can you hear the sound /k/?

One such TLM used for letter recognition was cut-outs of shapes of letters. For this, we require cut-outs of some basic shapes in different sizes which can be easily prepared with any recycled, day-to-day cardboard material or hard paper. We know that the letters of the English alphabet are mostly made up of commonly seen shapes, such as curves and



Class I children playing with cut-outs of letters.

lines. The objective here is to provide children with a concrete experience of physically constructing letters through shapes they can touch, feel, and play with. This gives them a stronger understanding of how letters are represented symbolically and this eventually, acts as a foundation when they start writing. The cut-outs were first laid out in front of the children. It must be ensured that each child gets a mix of all shapes in many sizes. They were initially asked to make anything they like using these shapes and then were slowly channelled towards forming letters of the specific sounds used in the sound game.

It was after introducing children to these two activities, along with using flashcards regularly, that the worksheets were given to the children for individual work. In most cases, it could be seen that the tendency to copy answers mindlessly was less



Class I children using cut-outs to make words with the help of flashcards.

when other learning opportunities were provided. At the end of this, another game of *Pictionary* was usually played whenever possible. This game helps to cement the meaning of newly introduced vocabulary in children's minds as there is an attempt to express a meaning using one's own imagination and prior knowledge.

Worksheets are rarely treated as a medium which falls in the continuum of teaching-learning. As teachers and practitioners in education, we need to look at them as another resource that enables learning and not as the only one available and in turn, design worksheets that are engaging, relevant to the needs of our learners and provide scope for children to make both mistakes and predictions.

Endnotes

- i *Nali-Kali* (joyful learning) is a teaching-learning approach that started as a UNICEF assisted project to address the challenges posed by multi-grade, multi-level classrooms in primary grades.



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