

The New Flavour of Language Textbooks - NCERT initiative

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Till some time back, language textbooks had a very set structure that emphasised on making children responsible citizens and inculcating respect for the country. Language was considered merely as means to communicate and not as a medium which helps children explore a variety of information, experiences and insights. Language was being taught in a pre-determined sequence that aimed at making children aware of the alphabet, words and sentences. The syllabus of the textbooks under this framework was thus restricted to a set pattern and the child made to remember facts in a very mechanical manner. This provided little scope for a child to think and write. The child's ability to learn language in a natural way was discouraged.

It is in this prevailing scenario that the language textbooks recently published by the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) seem like a breath of fresh air. This progressive approach can be felt only when one actually sees, reads and uses the books in the classroom with children.

These primary-level language textbooks are published by NCERT under the title 'Rim Jhim.' These books have been designed with a view to provide for a child's imagination, thoughts and descriptive ability. Classwork is also designed keeping this in mind. All chapters provide a lot of scope for the teacher to create or establish a situation where children can express their thoughts freely.

When we read these lines of a poem on the cover page of the Class 1 textbook, we go back to the days of our childhood ; we recall our village, our neighbourhood, playing under the trees, Indian summer, winters and the rainy season:

*"Hara samunder gehra paani
Bol meri machli kitna paani
Kamar kamar tak gehra paani*

Bol meri machli kitna paani"

Text books of the older era had lessons that were mostly translations of western stories like "Sleeping Beauty," "The Blind Prince," etc. To find this earthy Indian poem in a government text book of the 21st century is a joyful feeling - these lines that connect with the common man make the textbooks live and vibrant!

Reading Material Around Us

It needs to be emphasised here that for the lakhs of children in our country who are getting their first exposure to printed or published material, these kind of books give immense pleasure, by the mere fact that the things around them find a mention in the textbooks and the children actually can "feel" them. The pictures in the books provide children the opportunity to share their experience, converse, think, find, imagine, estimate and to find logic. However, it is important that teachers understand the reason for including these pictures in the textbook. They need to delve into questions like: What should we talk to the children about regarding these pictures? Why should we encourage discussion around them? Only then will the objective of including lively pictures in the textbook be realized.

These pictures depict the homes of the children and the world around them like their school, the railway station, the kitchen, the swing, the fields, the bus journey etc. The child is able to relate to these in thought as well as expression. The conversation amongst the children helps them to establish relationships with the surroundings and express themselves better.

A Place for Folk Art and Folk Stories

Indian culture and the rich variety of our folk stories have been specially used in the textbooks. Illustrations have beautifully depicted the folk art of various states like Madhubani of Bihar, Warli Art of

Maharashtra and the Patt paintings of Orissa. These illustrations help emphasise that school syllabi can include local culture in the textbooks and enrich them. The illustrations can also help develop an appreciation for aesthetics among children. This is indeed a new step in the re-designing of text books.

Opportunities for Expression

Consider this innovation: On Page 52 in 'Rim Jhim-3,' the oft repeated story of the crow and the fox is narrated. But on the very next page, based on the same pictures and characters, the children are given the task to create a new story. Thus, children are given a chance to think differently and come up with a story of their own. Teachers should not however expect that all children will make a new story. These exercises are only to suggest that children be given adequate opportunity to express themselves and to inspire them to do so.

These textbooks give a lot of opportunity for playing, brain-storming, craft work, etc. But care should be taken that teachers get all this done by children in the class, and they are not made to do the same as homework.

Some Stories

All the topics in the textbooks are skilfully arranged in a manner to help learn reading. Children can just experience the fun of reading, without the fear of having to answer any questions from the teacher.

Whereas some chapters are meant to encourage the inquisitive nature of children, some are illustrated in the comic format.

Traditional books are designed such that they teach children some letters of the alphabet and the child learns to read word by word. There is neither any meaningful reference nor pleasure for the child. With the new NCERT books, the effort is to ensure that as children read, they understand and think, make connections and analyse situations.

In the story 'The Boastful Bee,' there is a question 'What might have happened when the bee got caught in the spider's web? Complete the story.' Another question:

"Write a new title for the story." This is a different kind of challenge for children.

The point to be noted here is that the stories are not just meant to be read and the answers to the questions to be remembered. They are there so that the children understand the process of story formation/creation and try to write something new on their own. Most of the exercises encourage children to gather information from their surroundings so that they understand the functional use of language and are sensitive towards their environment.

The textbook becomes a linkage between our culture, our tradition, our surroundings, our imagination and our experiences to which we are attached - we make our new viewpoints, script them, learn from them and move forward.

Private schools and private publishers may perhaps learn from these text books that it is not essential to introduce a separate text book for art and craft. They only increase the burden of the school bags of the children and on the parents who spend money on them unnecessarily. All these aspects can be beautifully included in just one textbook. These textbooks facilitate reflection on our part as well - what we should keep in mind while teaching children; what are the aims of education; how knowledge is meaningfully constructed by children etc.

Those teachers who prefer following a set and predetermined structure will probably be disappointed with these books, as they are not designed only to teach the alphabet and these books do not emphasise on the correctness of grammar. The practice of grammar is in a manner that the children can learn by using words and sentences themselves with reference to a context.

We now have textbooks that view the teaching of language in a very broad perspective. These textbooks emphasise how a child's previous knowledge, local surroundings, diversity of the country, multi-linguism and Indian culture can be translated into textbooks. It is essential to orient and counsel teachers regarding

the approach of the text books so that they appreciate the spirit of these text books and work actively with the children in the class. Teachers will also need to rise above the obsession with tests and exams, to be able to give sufficient space to the children to think and express themselves. These text books are a step forward towards the achievement of milestones articulated in the National Curriculum Framework 2005. As the Chinese proverb says, "A long journey begins with one step."

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Dr. Manmohan Singh assured reporters that the nuclear deal would be signed soon.

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Dr. Manmohan Singh announced that the nuclear deal would be signed soon.

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