

# VOICE OF A TEACHER

## Reading and Learning My Experiments in my Village School

*Hemraj Bhatt*



The Uttarakhand Education Department, in November 2006, decided to create new textbooks for primary school based on the guidelines of the National Curriculum Framework 2005. I was included in the team of twelve teachers and authors who were given the responsibility of developing the book for Class 1. “*Hasee-Khushi*,” our book, was to be a combined textbook for Hindi, Mathematics and Environmental Studies. Our team had teachers with a background in Mathematics and Hindi but we were going to write a “combined” Class 1 textbook and that made the task challenging.

Our new textbook was also going to break new ground - to introduce children directly to words/sentences, rather than beginning with the alphabet and making them “mug up” the letters. No importance was to be given to writing in Class 1. Instead, children were to be given adequate opportunities to listen to and speak the language, followed by picture description and thereafter by word reading. Once the children learnt reading words/sentences, they could be taught to identify letters using these words/sentences.

Previously, the Class 1 textbook would dedicate the initial six to eight pages to the alphabet along with related pictures. This tradition of beginning with the alphabet was thus to be broken in the new book. Instead, letters of the alphabet were to be written right at the end of the book.

As a conventional teacher, I found it hard to imagine how children would be able to read words directly. I would like to explain in detail how I came around to accept this. Was it going to be possible to introduce students of Class 1 directly to words? There was a lot of churning in my mind on this issue for several days.

*Clarifying the Principles in my Mind*

Firstly, I understood that a child learns to speak a

language on his/her own, without being ‘taught.’ He/she doesn’t require a teacher to learn how to speak and neither does he/she need to be taught by family members. They pick up a language from the people around them very quickly by themselves and within two or three years, they exercise a good command over the language. So much so, that they are able to express their emotions to others and can also understand other people’s emotions. However, even after years of hard work at school, we are unsuccessful in bringing children to the required level in the understanding of a particular language.

Secondly, it is only by learning words that one learns how to speak. In any community, a child does not have to struggle by learning meaningless letters of the alphabet while learning how to speak words and sentences.

Thirdly, there are four basic language skills that must be acquired - listening, speaking, reading and writing. These are also the roots of learning a language. Thus, when a language is taught, children must be given adequate opportunity initially for listening and speaking, followed by reading and finally by writing. However, writing is taught first in all our schools. These young children, whose fingers are not even strong enough to hold a pencil properly, have to struggle to write letters which have no meaning for them and of which they have no image in their mind.

These thoughts helped me to develop the understanding that children must learn to read words rather than struggle with the alphabet. Several articles published in teachers’ journals also helped me understand this and I was thankful for my habit of reading. In the orientation programme held before we commenced our task of writing the textbook, we tried to understand how children as well as adults can go from aggregate to parts, specifically words to the

alphabet. It is easy to create an image for words in one's mind and the alphabet can then be understood subtly. For this, picture identification or description is very useful. When any child or adult identifies the picture of a cow, sparrow or a bus, they form the image of the word in their minds, and can therefore understand the specific letters more easily. In contrast, if we introduce separate parts such as horns, legs, ears, nose, etc. it will be difficult to form an image of a cow as a whole. In such a case, a child will take months to identify a cow. Instead, if a child is able to identify a cow, he/she will also be able to identify its parts with ease.

We all know that while reading, we do not read the entire word, and no matter how long the word is we cannot read every part. We read the first few letters of every word, infer the complete word and pronounce it. The more we use certain words, in thought or speech or the more we've heard it, the easier we find them to read. However, we have to struggle with letters when we read new words and several times we have to read the entire word in separate parts. We find it easier to read words in other languages when we adopt this practice.

It was with this experience that I decided the children must be taught to read words that were familiar to them. Thus, I first made a list of words. Along with Hindi words, those words that were used in a similar fashion in Hindi as well as Garhwali were also included. All these words were nouns. *(The list was as shown at the end of this article)*

I typed these words in font size 28 on an A4 sheet and took a printout on both sides of the paper. In my school, there were a maximum of 20 children in Class 3. I took 20 copies of this list and laminated each one of them so that they wouldn't get spoilt.

To conduct this experiment, I divided the students into two groups. In one group there were those students from Classes 3, 4 and 5 who could not read properly. In this group there were children who couldn't identify letters despite being in Class 5. These students could understand what was being said and even ask

questions. However, when it came to reading or writing, they tended to experience inadequacy.

In the second group, I included the older children of Class 1 and all the students of Class 2. Most of the students of Class 1 were four years and a few months old. Out of all the children with whom I repeated this exercise, only a few could recognize some letters of the alphabet. No one could read the words. However, all these children could write all the letters. They were able to read the letters when written in order but were unable to identify them separately.

I made the students sit in groups and gave everyone a word list. I would read out the word and the students would repeat the word with me by keeping their finger on that particular word. In between we would discuss the words. We used to discuss goats, trees, frogs, buffaloes, etc. as these words appeared. After two or three months, when the students were given an opportunity to read the word list, it seemed like the students had memorised the order of the list. But I slowly realised that they had in fact remembered the words in the form of pictures. If I showed them a picture and asked them to find the word in the list they would be able to find it after some effort. The students of Classes 3 to 5 who couldn't even identify letters properly were able to read all the words on this list in three to four months. I had to work for a longer time with the students of Class 1 and 2. When I used to make them read the words, I would also give importance to letters. Often, I would emphasise on certain syllables and make them repeat them. I did this so that the students could understand the way letters are used to make a word.



*Hemraj with a child during an informal oral assessment*

Along with this, I conducted another exercise with the children. I made chits that had every child's name. All the students would wear their chits on their chest and read each other's names. We would do this every day. One day I wrote all their names on chits and put them in a box. Every child had to find his name in this box. I was surprised to see that children who couldn't identify letters a few months ago were able to find their chits almost immediately. This exercise gave me the reassurance that we were headed in the right direction.

What else did I do? I would distribute some old newspapers and children's magazines among the children. I would write some word on the blackboard and then break it up into letters. Consider that a particular student's name was Jaipal. I wrote his name on the blackboard and broke it up into two parts - Jai + Pal. Jai has J, A and I, while Pal has P, A and L. Now, Jaipal would have to find the letters J, A, I, P, A and L in the newspaper given to him and circle them. Similarly, all students would look for and circle all the letters that appeared in their names in the newspaper given to them. The children would have a lot of fun doing this activity as they liked finding the letters that appeared in their names. They would be very amused when they saw their entire name in the paper and would circle the entire word. This exercise was meant to take the children from words to letters and I was successful in doing so.

During the newspaper activity, the students were also familiarised with the use of *matras* and how they change the pronunciation of the consonant. For example, "प + अ = पा", "ल + अ = ला" and similarly, "के", "से", "मे", etc. I conducted these verbal and written

exercises after a six month evaluation which revealed that 60 - 80 per cent of the students had learnt how to read words and find specific words in newspapers and magazines. The reason for some students being unable to read at the right pace was their absence in class and not their lack of ability.

Writing was not too difficult as most of the students had learnt how to write. They were unable to identify the characters which often happens at school. Students are taught how to write letters from the first day and are made to repeat them for a couple of months. But this is merely rote learning and hence they are only able to reproduce them in the same order.

I realised through these exercises that reading can be made fun for students and once they can read, writing is extremely easy. It doesn't take too much time. Once they have learnt how to read, they pick up any reading material that they have and enjoy it. They also read the boards on shops, the tag lines in advertisements etc. They try and read the sentences written on posters and try to uncover their meaning and later they enjoy reading stories and poetry.

This article is a translated excerpt from the original that was written in Hindi, by the late author, in his diary.

*Late Hemraj Bhatt (Balsakha) was Assistant Teacher at the government school in Dunda, Uttarkashi. He was a prolific writer too. Many excerpts from his writings, of experiences as a government primary school teacher, are featured online on the National Portal for Teachers<sup>1</sup>.*

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<sup>1</sup> The National Portal for Teachers has been revamped with interactive features and contains a variety of resources in eight languages. Visit [www.teachersofindia.org](http://www.teachersofindia.org) to share your thoughts with teachers all over the country.

माँ	जंगल	नाना	टमाटर	नानी	नमकीन	दादा	चूली
चाचा	चाची	बडा	बडी	फूफू	दीदी	भैजी	भुली
पापा	मम्मी	दोस्त	दगडूया	साथी	बै	खेत	पानी
भात	दाल	चावल	रोटी	नमक	चटनी	कद्दू	पिताजी
मूली	माल्टा	आम	केला	संतरी	आडू	मिर्च	खटाई
बोरी	मामी	रजाई	बिस्तर	चारपाई	तकिया	सिरवाण	किताब
चाय	चीनी	दादी	मीठा	खट्टा	बिस्कुट	टॉफी	मिट्टी
पत्थर	चूल्हा	लकड़ी	लड़की	कुर्सी	मेज	दरी	चटाई
पेटी	पिठाई	शादी	बारात	खाना	प्रसाद	सूजी	मिठाई
स्वांला	पकोड़ी	जलेबी	ऐरसे	फूल	पेड़	त्रिपाल	दांई
भैंस	बकरी	बैल	गाय	गोबर	घास	घण्टी	रास्ता
बाटु	पैंट	पजामा	दरवाजा	कील	कुण्डी	बराण्डा	घर
सड़क	होटल	मट्ठा	तौलिया	छत	खिड़की	दरी	पटाल
बिजली	ऊन	भैंस	मेंढक	धान	झंगोरा	कोदा	मारछा
कौणी	टीवी	सीडी	आइना	कंधी	बाल	शैंपू	तेल
क्रीम	मसाला	हल्दी	धनिया	दूध	दही	गाड़ी	कार
दवाई	फोटो	कापी	पेन	पेंसिल	रबड़	नदी	गदेरा
धारा	पन्यारा	साबुन	तेल	उड़द	गहत	कंगन	छिपकली