Learning the Script

Khushi studies in grade 2 of a government school. In one of our library sessions, I asked her to try reading a book that she liked listening to. This is how this bright and eager child attempted to read the first two words ' एक दिन ':

"ए...से एडी ...क...कबूतर...एक... द..."

(*a long pause where she seemed to be going through the entire* varnamala *in this way till she arrived at* द)

"द दवा ...न..न नल..."(*she did not try to put the word together*)

What do you think about Khushi's attempts at reading? I am sure Khushi is not alone; you must have come across several children trying to read like this.

In Indian classrooms, the *varnamala* is commonly taught by associating an *akshara* with a word that starts with that *akshara*. Teachers also ask students to trace and copy-write the *aksharas* repeatedly or chant the *varnamala*. We spend a lot of time on these rote exercises in the early years. But do you think they are effective? Are these children learning to read, or do they understand what they're reading? Khushi definitely could not.

In fact, in a study of classrooms like these, fewer than 20% (or one-fifth) of the students in grade 3 could read a list of words from their own grade level (Subramaniam et al., 2017)!

Many believe that Indian scripts are easier to learn to read than English, because in Indian scripts we write the symbols exactly as we say them. That is, there is a very close match between symbols and sounds. But consider this – English has only 26 letters, and if we count uppercase and lowercase letters separately (as we should), it would have only 52 different

symbols for all the sounds in the language. How many do most Indian scripts have? Let's take the case of Marathi. It has 49 *aksharas* in the *varnamala*, 12-14 *maatras*, and many more *jodaksharas*. If you combine each of the *maatras* with each *akshara* (the *baarakhadi*), it yields a staggering number of symbols for young children to master!

Further, the way we write the script is visually complex. Think of the ways in which we attach *maatras* to an *akshara* – it could be to the right or left of the *akshara,* or above or below it. As adults, we may not realise that learning these features is actually an amazing accomplishment and that children need a lot of time and opportunities throughout primary school to learn and practise the script.

So what should teachers do? How else should we help our students learn the script? In this handout, we attempt to answer these questions. We start by sharing some key principles to keep in mind as you help students to learn the script. Then, we describe specific activities and games you could use in your classroom to apply these principles.

Key Principles of Teaching the Script

Build Understanding of Sound-Symbol Relationships Clearly and Systematically

As we said, teachers usually focus either on teaching the *aksharas* (the symbols of the script) or the sounds of the symbols in the manner described in the example (*k* se *kabootar*, etc.). But children need to focus on symbols and their sounds *at the same time*. For this, we need to use activities that draw upon knowledge of sound and symbol simultaneously.

Indian scripts have a large number of written symbols. But there is no need to teach them all at one go. You could start by introducing students to carefully selected groupings of *aksharas* (alphasyllables) and *maatras* (secondary vowel signs) that will give students the chance to read and write words they know and find meaningful, from the very beginning. Figure 1 shows one such grouping (*varna samooha)* the Organization for Early Literacy Promotion (OELP, Ajmer) uses in its literacy programme (Jayaram, 2018).

OELP teaches *maatras* with *aksharas* as one unit *('*की*' instead of* क + ई*).* This makes it easier for children to learn *maatras*, as well as to form meaningful words from the beginning. In

traditional teaching methods, students are first introduced to the entire *varnamala* before being introduced to the *maatras*. As a result, for many months, they make words without any *maatras*. Most words used in oral language require *maatras* to be written down. For example, "माँ" (mother) has the "aa" *maatra*, "रोटी" (*chapati*) has two *maatras*. When we remove *maatras* from words, children are left constructing words that they may or may not use in their daily speech. Words like "जल" (water) and "गज" (elephant) have little meaning for most young children in the Hindi speaking belt. Therefore, organisations like OELP introduce students to *maatras* from the beginning, and help students to make words that they use in their daily lives.

The first few groupings might take some time for children to acquire, but once they understand the logic, they move through the remaining groupings more quickly.
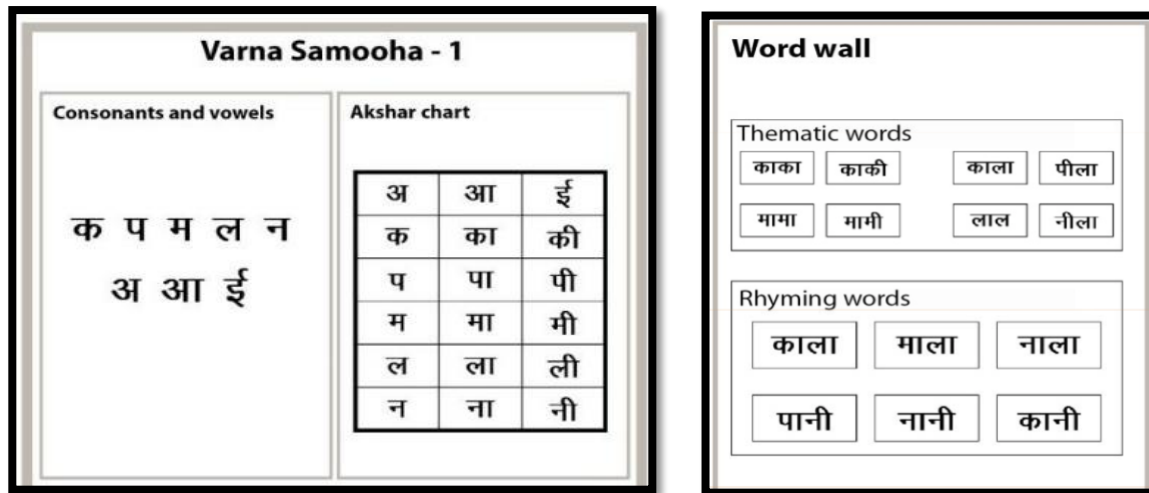

Figure 1. The first *akshara-maatra* grouping (or *varna samooha)* used at OELP, Ajmer

Encourage Students to Become Word Constructors and Word Solvers

Children need a lot of practice in using the script before they are able to master it. When we say 'practice', we don't mean simply copying words over and over again from the board. With only this experience, they may not learn how to read and write unfamiliar words. What works well is to help children learn *how to* make and break words. Building and solving words helps children think critically about what they are doing, how words are formed, how

some words are related to others, and so on. They can then use this learning widely – to read and write words that they have not seen before. Naturally, they will make mistakes in this process but these mistakes are not random; they show children's growing ability to use the script correctly. You will find some engaging word-building and word-solving activities later in the handout.

Encourage Word Study While Reading and Writing

Building and solving words in isolation is an important way to practise using the script. To provide more meaningful context for this practice, encourage your students to read words in stories and to write for communication and expression. As they write words that they have not been taught, students will be forced to use their knowledge of sounds and symbols for meaningful communication. Initially, they may spell words incorrectly; but, with practice, they will become adept word solvers. With this kind of practice, your students will become flexible and efficient in using the script. Later in the handout, we will show some ways of encouraging word study while reading and writing.

Activities to Help Students Learn and Use the Script

In this section, we share ideas for designing activities and games based on the principles shared earlier. You could adapt them to suit the needs and context of your students. For each activity, demonstrate what you want the students to do and think about.

(Please note that by *aksharas*, we mean using *aksharas* paired with and without *maatras*, both, like प, मि, बा, ली).

Building Understanding of Symbol-Sound Relationships

Let's look at activities that help children identify *aksharas* or letters and connect them to their sounds.

- Initially, you could ask students to run around the classroom and touch as many objects as they can find starting with a sound, say "muh". Keep changing the sounds you call out. Over time, you could start pairing these sounds with the corresponding *aksharas* (for example, 'म').

- Encourage students to give word suggestions beginning with the sound or *akshara* they are learning. You could make word and picture cards with these suggestions, involving students in this process. Display them in the classroom, maybe on the "word wall" and use them as needed in students' reading and writing.

- Use letter-sorts to help students attend to important features of letters and *aksharas*. Give them *akshara* cutouts or cards with *aksharas* printed on them. Ask them to group these separately according to various characteristics, such as *aksharas* in their names, *aksharas* in the grouping (*varna samooha)* they are studying, or cards with the same *maatra*. Students say the corresponding sounds as they sort the cards so they practise pairing the symbol with its sound.

- You could make charts with students' names and use them in different ways: ask them to recognise written forms of their names; to find names with particular features (e.g. beginning or ending with specific sounds); to write their or their friends' names using the chart; or making names with letter cutouts; and so on. Figure 2 shows a student finding a name on the chart from a name card.

Figure 2. Child matching a name card with corresponding name on the name chart (OELP)

Figure 3. Object sort by beginning sound at OELP, Ajmer

- Encourage young students to write stories with drawings, labels and invented spellings. Display their writing or drawings in your classroom. Trying to write their own words (instead of copying "taught" words) will help them attend to the sounds of the *aksharas* they are learning. Please expect incorrect spellings for a long time, as they learn. Your job is not to

correct spellings at this point. Keep up the motivation to write by responding to the *meaning* that the child is trying to convey. You might notice the pattern of spelling errors that a child consistently makes and, at a later point, you could take up one or two of these patterns of errors and teach a small-group lesson on it. For example, if a child constantly leaves out *maatras* while writing, you could group her with students with similar needs, and do a lesson on that.

- To review *akshara* learning, or to help students differentiate between similar *aksharas* (e.g. ಠ [/th/] and ರ [/r/] in Kannada), you could use object sorts. Label different sections on the ground with the *aksharas* you want to review. Give your students a set of daily objects or toys that begin with these sounds. As you see in Figure 3, students have to sort the objects into the circles on the ground. You could ask them why they chose a particular circle. Letting them explore for themselves is more effective than simply telling them that there is a difference between the *aksharas*.

Encourage Students to Build and Solve Words

These activities help children think actively as they work with words.

- **Word Making.** Divide students into groups and give each group 10 *aksharas* (*maatras* are paired with *an akshara*, for example: मि, बा, ली). Tell them to come up with as many meaningful words as they can. You could also give them several *akshara* cards and ask

Figure 4. Word Making (OELP, Ajmer)

them to make words in a particular category, say names for family relations (e.g. 'मामा',

'नानी'); words of things that they see around them; words with two, three or four *aksharas*;

and words that start with a consonant or a vowel; and so on. You could have many categories,
and expand them as the students learn more *aksharas*. Children will enjoy this activity and
might start building sentences too! Figure 4 shows a glimpse of the word-making activity at
OELP, Ajmer.

Later, they can write these words down in their notebooks and make drawings for them. You
could display these lists in class or add cards with these words to a "word wall". As a fun
follow-up, you could ask students to run around the classroom and touch the words you read
out. You could also use this print in other ways (e.g. as a reference for spelling during writing
time).

This activity is a great way to connect the script to oral language because children make
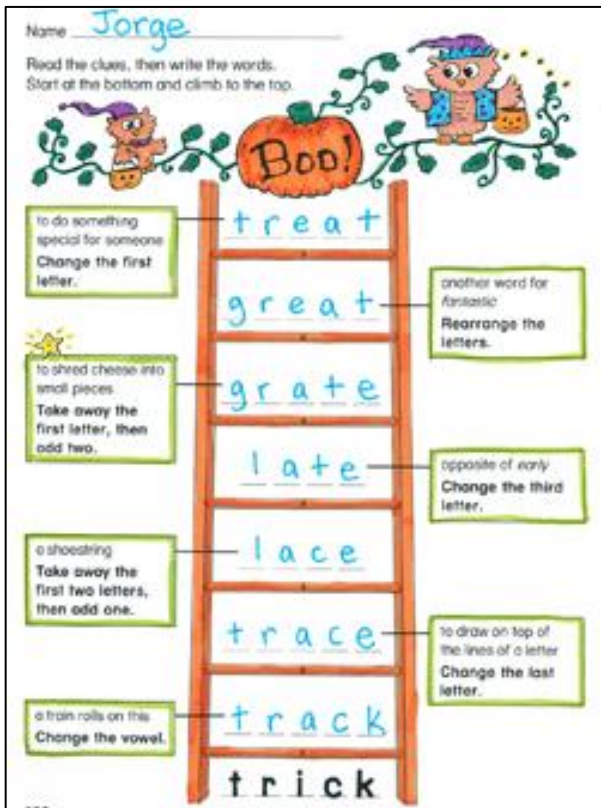meaningful words that they are familiar with in their oral language.
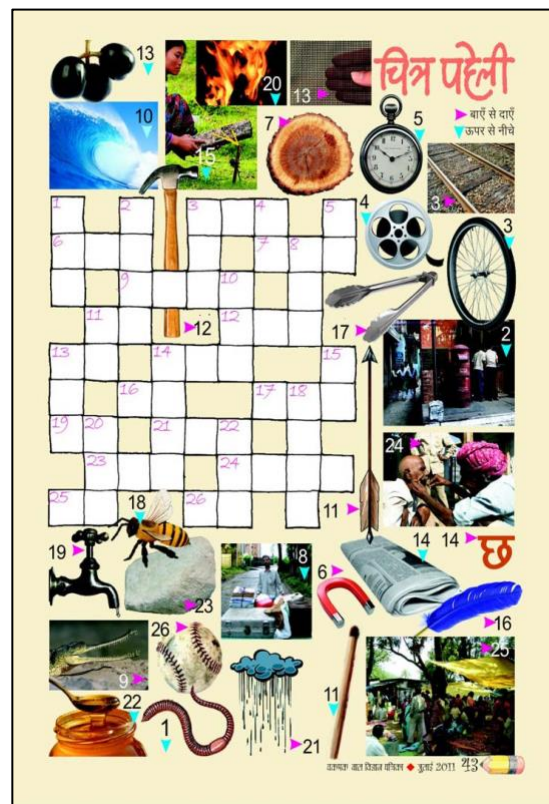

Figure 5. Word Ladder (Rasinski, 2005)

Figure 6. *Chitra Paheli* from *Chakmak*
magazine

In fact, as we mentioned earlier, organisations like OELP carefully select their initial *akshara—maatra* groups such that students can start building the most commonly used words in their home languages right from the start.

- **Word Puzzles — Word Ladders and Crossword Puzzles.** Figure 5 shows a word ladder. Here, we start with one word ('*trick*' in this example). Then, at each step, we give students clues about the spelling and meaning of the next word. Accordingly, they add, remove or rearrange the letters of the given word to get to the correct answer (e.g. '*track*' in response to the clue '*A train rolls on this; change the vowel in trick*'). Children love solving these clues! Without even realizing it, they are thinking about sound-symbol relationships as well as word meanings to get to the correct answer. Crossword puzzles and picture crosswords (shown in Figure 6) also work the same way. You could also encourage students to create ladders and crosswords on their own to share with their classmates.

- **Word *Antakshari.*** Give your students all the *akshara* cards in the grouping that they are working on, and have previously worked on. One child builds a word with the cards. The next child builds the next word that begins with the ending *akshara* of the first child's word, and so on. In addition to locating words orally, when children are asked to spell words with the cards, it helps them build strong sound-symbol relationships.

- **Word Sorts.** In a word sort, students compare and sort word cards according to specific features. You could use this activity to introduce patterns as well as to help students consolidate or review their learning of a concept.

Ensure that you demonstrate how to sort words, especially as you are helping children 'discover' a feature for the first time. For example, imagine you are trying to introduce students to short and long-e sound in English. You could start by reading the words (with the short and long-e sounds) and placing the cards randomly in front of the students. Then ask them if they notice anything about the words. As shown in Figure 7, you could show them the key category cards with pictures ('web' for the short-e sound and 'queen' for the long-e sound, in our example) and give them clues ('*Do they all have the same sound in the middle?')*. Once they understand the difference, sort the set together placing words under the two picture cards depending on their middle sound. As the sort continues, discuss any features that students point out (e.g. '*words under web all have a single e*'). You could also create a

group for words that don't fit into the other groups (e.g. 'been'). At the end, remove all the cards leaving only one key word for each category. Encourage students to do the sort themselves. In later rounds, you could further refine the long-e group by separating the cards with 'ee' and the 'ea' spelling patterns.
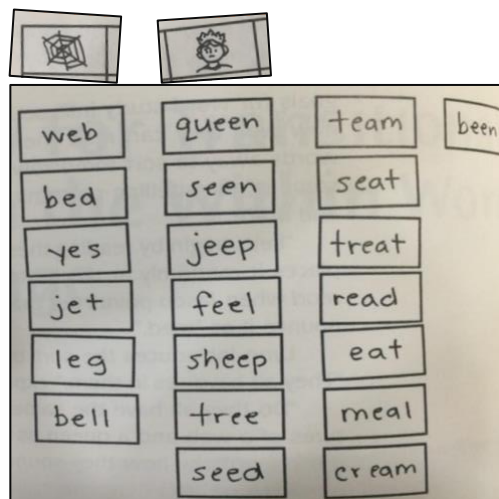
Figure 7. Word sort for short-e and long-e patterns (Bear et. al. 2004)

Word sorts could also help students to review or consolidate their learning. For example, if you want to consolidate students' learning of "*aa*" and "*ee*" *maatras* in Hindi, you could give them a set of cards with words that end with these *maatras* (e.g. मामा, काला, गला, पीना for "*aa*" *maatra* and नानी, कापी, पानी, कली for "ee" *maatra*). After demonstrating one sort with these words where you show students how you are focusing on the final "*aa*" or "*ee*" *maatra* to differentiate between the words, you can ask them to try the sort themselves. Students could write these sorts in their notebooks or on interactive charts displayed in the class where they can keep adding more words later on.

Categories for word sorts could be many, like words that begin /end with particular consonants or consonant clusters, words that rhyme, words that mean the same / opposite, words that name people or describe things, singular / plural, different ways of forming plurals, words with same roots or word parts, and so on (Bear et al., 2004; Pinnell and Fountas, 1998).

What's important is that children talk about the words as they sort to promote understanding of the general principle they're using for the sort.

Encourage Word-solving Within Reading and Writing

Have you noticed how engaged children are when they are reading and writing something they like, something that is connected to their life and experiences? These are meaningful opportunities in which children can practice what they know about letters, sounds and words. But children may not be able to do so spontaneously. Show your students which information and cues to use and how. In this section we describe some ways of creating authentic reading and writing opportunities in the classroom, of which word solving becomes an important part.

- **Shared Reading.** Shared reading is a good way to invite beginning readers to participate in the reading process. Try to share texts that have repetitive or predictable sentence patterns and are available in large print. After reading aloud this text aloud a couple of times, invite students to read *along with* you (and *not* after you). Stop and show them specific features of print and words and how to problem-solve some words encountered in the text, depending on what they are ready for. For example, you might have them pick out the rhyming words. Or words starting with a particular *akshara* or *maatra.* Don't worry if you don't have access to Big Books for shared reading in your classroom. You could always write out rhymes on poster paper; or, you could even use the texts that you create together with students during Shared Writing (explained in a later section) for this purpose.

- **Guided Reading.** This activity helps students improve their fluency and strategies with reading. Start by dividing your class into 3-4 groups according to their reading ability and give passages/books roughly suited to reading levels. In each group, tell students what the text is about, what they can expect, and introduce the text to them. Introduce 2-3 words in the text that are new to the students or hard to read out. Students can then read the text by themselves. Observe each child for a few minutes and prompt or demonstrate how to read a word that they are struggling with as they read. If there is a word-solving aspect that might help the whole group, take it up in the discussion after the reading. In this discussion, also focus on what

students understood from their reading. In this way, guided reading provides many opportunities before, during and after reading to teach how words work in the context of reading passages and books.

- **Interactive / Shared Writing.** Provide regular opportunities to even very young students to write from the very beginning. It is here that they attempt to use written symbols to show what they're thinking and feeling. For very young children, this could just be scribbling, drawing and labelling.

In interactive/shared writing, the teacher and students compose a message or text *together* on a chart, or on the blackboard. The group could compose the ideas together, and the teacher could take the primary responsibility for writing it down, with some help from the students. It could be to list class rules, to write a child's story, a letter or a recipe, to record observations from a class trip, and so on. Invite students to come forward and add a letter, a word, or a punctuation mark, depending on the age and needs of the group. Retain this text as "meaningful print" in the classroom that could be used during Shared Reading the next day or week.

- **Guided Writing / Writing Workshop.** In addition to shared writing, young students also need time to write individually, with some teacher guidance. The emphasis here is on writing for communication and expression, or to learn about different kinds of writing (e.g., realistic versus fantasy story, or poetry or letter writing). You could start the guided writing time by discussing a specific aspect or purpose for the writing exercise to follow (e.g., give students an example of the kind of poem you want them to write and discuss it with them). Students could then work on their pieces individually. You could go around the class and confer with them on their on-going writing, identify their strengths and leave them with specific ideas to work on. At the end, do a few shares in the group and close the session. Even though spelling is not the focus of these lessons, students get better and better at reading and writing when given regular opportunities to practice them in meaningful contexts. Also, students can be encouraged to write multiple drafts of a piece, and focus on proof-reading and spelling towards the end, when they get ready to share their "final" versions with an audience. This could be their classmates, or students from another class, or parents. The final, proofread versions could go up on the classroom walls, or into a "class book" created by the teacher.

The motivation of sharing their pieces with others can help students to work on their spellings, even as they work on other aspects of their writing.

Conclusion

Through this handout, we hope to have shown you that learning the script need not be tedious and boring! Yes, we need to teach the script systematically and explicitly, but we could use engaging and meaningful activities for this! Also, isolated word study (that is, activities described under Sections 1 and 2) need not take up more than 20-30 minutes of your language class every day. We also hope to have convinced you that children do not need to learn all the *aksharas* and *maatras* before they begin to read and write meaningful words and sentences. So, try to engage your students with authentic reading and writing tasks from the very beginning, making a word-solving an important part of them. Overall, try to balance word study with other goals of a language program - like reading for pleasure, writing for expression, reading for comprehension, and so on. As children engage with these different aspects of the written language, they will soon be on their way to reading and writing independently and effectively!

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