EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Language and Literacy Learning in Early Years: What Should It Look Like?

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Raju[1] , a 6 year old boy, looks intensely at a picture of an elephant shown to him by his teacher.

"What is this picture?", asks the teacher in Kannada.

"Aane" (elephant), responds Raju, a native speaker of Kannada.

The teacher looks puzzled for a minute when she realizes that he is right; but the word "aane" doesn't fit into the sequence of letters she is supposed to be teaching!

"Yes, you're right", she says, "but there is another word for it – Salaga (tusker). What is the word?"

Raju does not respond.

"Salaga", emphasizes the teacher, making Raju repeat it after her, before moving on to the next picture. After going over three more pictures, the teacher returns to the first card.

"What is this?", she asks.

"Aane" (elephant), says Raju.

"Yes, correct, but remember I taught you another word – Salaga – for it? Say Salaga."

Raju repeats obediently.

Three more picture cards later, Raju sticks to "aane" when prompted.

The teacher is getting increasingly impatient.

In the final round of questioning, Raju responds to the picture card with, "I don't know."

Vignette drawn from field work done on the LiRIL project, Feb 2013[2]

This example is drawn from the transcript of an interaction documented on the Literacy Research in Indian Languages (LiRIL) project[3] currently being conducted in Yadgir (Yadgir District), Karnataka, and Sonale (Thane Distrcit), Maharashtra. It raises important and interesting questions about early language learning that warrant greater attention from practitioners and scholars alike.

What Do We Know About Early Language and Literacy Learning?

Many children in Indian classrooms, like Raju, are first-generation learners, or come from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts. Such children may have had very limited exposure to print prior to school, and may not have models at home or in their communities who use it effectively in their own lives. Their vocabulary and other oral skills may also be somewhat limited as compared to peers from more socio-economically advantaged backgrounds.

In any early language learning context, but especially in ones that cater to more disadvantaged populations, one of the key tasks of teachers in the early grades is to reinforce and extend the oral language(s) that children bring to school from their

[1]The name been changed to protect identity of the student.
[2]This vignette is drawn from the work of BinduThirumalai, who completed an internship on the LiRIL project from Feb-April 2013.
[3]This is a longitudinal project that is funded jointly by Sir Ratan Tata Trust and AzimPremji University; and includes field partner organizations, QUEST (Sonale, Maharashtra) and Kalike (Yadgir, Karnataka). The detailed field observations conducted by Research Associate, Neela Apte, are foundational to this paper.

homes and communities; and to help build their understanding of the written system of texts. Table 1 summarizes three central tasks that young language and literacy learners are engaged in, and principles that could help them accomplish these

Table 1
Principles of Language Learning

What is the child doing?	Programme built on ECCE principles should:
Transitioning from home to school	Build curricular and pedagogical bridges from home to school. Set larger goals of language and literacy learning; establish it as meaningful and purposeful.
Developing oral language	Provide rich opportunities for extending oral language learning, vocabulary acquisition and meaning making. Use language that moves from the known to the new.
Acquiring familiarity with written language	Introduce children to relationships (similarities and differences) between oral and written language. Establish meaningful contexts for the use of written language. Introduce sound-symbol relationships.

Principle 1: Enable Successful Home-School Transitions

The first principle suggests that young learners are engaged in making a home-school transition during their early years of schooling; this is a significant transition, and is often not an easy one for learners to make. Scholars who have researched early literacy learning in diverse sociocultural contexts have noticed that the language of the school is more similar to the language of the home for middle-class populations, than it is for children from more socioeconomically disadvantaged sections of society (e.g., Heath, 1982; Purcell-Gates, 1997). In multilingual societies like India, children are oftentimes asked to cross barriers of language and dialect in going to school. Even when the home and school languages are the same, children may face challenges with the vocabulary and discourses used in school (as in the case of Raju, a native speaker of Kannada attending a Kannada-medium school). Paulo Friere, the famed Brazilian educator, believed that reading the word is connected to reading the

world; people's worlds and words must be included in the curriculum for true learning and empowerment to be possible (Freire & Macdeo, 1987).

If we go back to the vignette at the beginning of this paper, we notice that the child began by thinking that he knew what the picture was, but he ended by saying, "I don't know." That poignant "I don't know" hints of the possibility of many such interactions past and future, interactions that could lead to a growing alienation from the world of school and texts. This vignette, it must be noted, is but one of several documented instances on our project of the child's words being replaced by more formalistic, unfamiliar curricular words. Why, we may ask, should a six year old child remain interested and invested in a schooling that consistently replaces his words with their own, moves him from a place of "know" to a place of "I don't know"?

Principle 2: Develop and extend oral language

All school-based learning is built on strong oral

language skills. Without proficiency in the oral language used at school, a child will struggle with vocabulary and understanding the meaning. It is critical for developing comprehension and also for developing facility with writing. Even for children whose home language is the same as the language of the school, planned and sustained opportunities for extending oral language are important. This does not happen by simply replacing the child's (known) vocabulary with unknown (more formal) words. Oral language development happens through a variety of ways that include opportunities for extended conversations, discussions, storytelling, book reading, and opportunities to write, and so on. Talk has often been referred to as the "tool of tools" in developing oral language and comprehension. Early language learning environments, therefore, need to be places where rich oral language is modeled, practiced and reinforced consistently.

On the LiRIL project, we have noticed that opportunities for developing oral language are not many, or systematically planned in the curriculum, in the early language classrooms that we have observed. Where it is included, it has appeared as the recitation of a group song each day (e.g., in Yadgir), or as unplanned "fillers" between activities (e.g., in Sonale). Neither of the sites we are working in uses read-alouds of children's literature or shared experiences to facilitate rich discussions. Instead, the focus at both sites, appears to be on developing proficiency with mastering the script.

Principle 3: Help learners to acquire familiarity with written language

It is true that young language and literacy learners need systematic opportunities to acquire proficiency with mastering the script. Since this is the focus of the curriculum in many of the early grades we have worked in, we may ask, are children developing proficiency with the script? Our data indicate otherwise - 33% of third-graders in Yadgir, and nearly 28% of third-graders in Sonale were unable to proficiently read a word-list consisting of simple two-akshara words. Even larger numbers of third-graders were unable to decode a short passage consisting of very simple, familiar words. Why is this so?

The reasons for this failure are complex. Without being overly simplistic in our analysis of the issues, it appears that one of the reasons could be that when the written language is broken down into sets of abstract symbols that have no reference to meaning, and are presented to the child day after day for copy-writing and memorization, the child's motivation to learn these symbols is at an all-time low. Jim Gee (2003) has noted that children from poverty stricken, inner-city homes in the US, who fail year after year to acquire the 26 letters of the English alphabet, appear to have no problem with acquiring a far more extensive and complex set of abstract symbols related to Pokemon cards and games that were popular in the US at that time. Motivation to learn appears to be key to success. Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963/1986) exploited this principle in her organic approach to teaching reading to children from the Maori tribes of New Zealand. She asked children to select words that are important to them. No words were taboo, words for fear, lust, despair, were all welcome in her classroom. In her seminal book, Teacher, she writes of how children instantaneously learnt words that belonged organically to them.

Compare this to the prevalent situation in many parts of our country, where the alphabet is taught in sequence, ordered according to one kind of logic (traditional varnmala) or another (more experimental versions of grouping letters together). Many of these systems, for example, the ones we have observed and documented closely in Yadgir, exclude the introduction of matras (gunitas) - the secondary signs used to represent vowel sounds in Indian languages - until well into the first grade. As a result, first generation learners come to school to be exposed to a language devoid of most vowel sounds for the first four-five months of schooling. What kind of words and thoughts can be expressed without vowels? Potentially the most naturally important words to a six year old – me, mother, food, home, friends, tree, school, brother, sister, father, cow, dog – are eliminated from the curriculum because each of these contains either matras or jodakshars (vattakshara), the conjunct consonant sounds (e.g., the /mm/ sound in "amma"). It is for this reason that the child is not permitted to say, "anne", because this word contains one vattakshara(/nn/), and one gunita (/e/). Salaga (tusker) is selected only because it conforms to the permitted combination of aksharas currently being taught.

This is a gross misunderstanding of what it means to help young language learners to acquire familiarity with the written language. Written language should be introduced in a manner that is continuous with, and not divorced from, oral speech. Similarities and dissimilarities between how oral and written language work can be pointed out to young children – e.g., we often talk in phrases, but we write in complete sentences. The formality of our language also shifts – these can be pointed out explicitly and discussed with children during read-alouds, shared writing opportunities, and more. Marie Clay, in the 1970s, has pointed out the importance of teaching young language learners "concepts of print", such as, how the book is held, which direction the script is read in, the idea that print carries messages (young children tend to attend mostly to the pictures), and so on (Clay, 2000).

The script itself must be introduced and practiced systematically – but, ideally, this should take up only a certain percentage of the total time spent on language instruction in the classroom and should not be the mainstay of the early language and literacy curriculum. In our research, we have documented that lower-order decoding and copy writing takes up between 73-81% of the total time spent on language instruction in first and second grade classrooms.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to briefly sketch three important tasks that young language learners engage in as they transition from home to school, and have identified certain pedagogical principles for helping children succeed in these tasks. The principles are illustrative, and are by no means exhaustive of what might constitute good language and literacy pedagogy. I have also tried to describe a few insights from our research project to exemplify the issues on the ground. While the issues are complex and need far more time, thought and research devoted to understanding them fully, a safe take-away from this piece would be that connecting the curriculum to the learner, and the learner to the curriculum, is central and critical to early language learning.
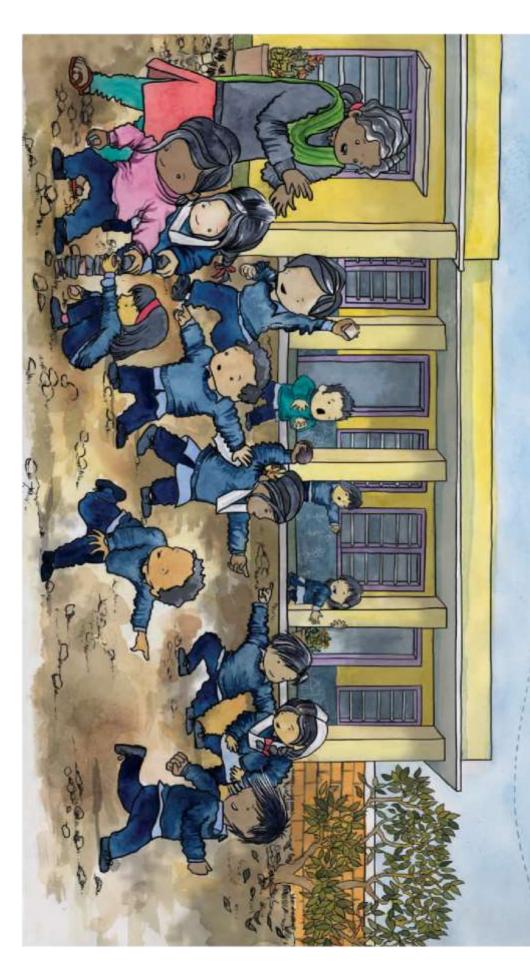
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