

# Using Contextual Material to Teach Language

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Beyond the confines of classrooms and textbooks, countless materials and opportunities in children's surroundings make the path of language learning easier for them. When a teacher connects these materials and real-life experiences of children with the classroom process, learning is not just guaranteed but is also enjoyable. This article is about such experiences.

In my childhood, my father would take me on his bicycle for rides to faraway places. He always asked me to read the signboards placed along the roadside carefully. He would point at and ask: 'Read that board'; or 'Look and tell me, what is the name of this place?' and so on. Gradually, this became a habit. I began reading every signboard, advertisement, and poster that appeared along the way. This gradually improved my reading and my confidence in reading.

As a teacher today, I believe that students' learning is not limited to textbooks; there is a bigger world beyond these. I decided to bring back my childhood days into my classroom. To be honest, this idea came to me when I looked at the learning outcomes for class IV, which included reading and understanding children's literature, main headlines of newspapers, children's magazines, as well as hoardings. Further, in the 'Curricular Expectations' section, I got the idea of searching for and reading material from the library, the Reading Corner, and even from the wrappers of various shop-bought items. I knew that even those students who are not able to read properly would gradually move towards reading through the hoardings they see in their everyday routine, the wrappers of items used at home, and the advertisements printed in newspapers. This is because the visuals present in these materials would encourage them to make connections, guess and try to read.

## Creating a learning environment through conversations

The plan had already taken shape in my mind. I entered the classroom with a smile. In my hand was a packet of biscuits, and in my bag were newspapers, magazines, and several slips of paper. As soon as I entered the classroom, I said dramatically (just as in a famous biscuit advertisement), 'A little twist, a little lick, a big dunk! It's very delicious! Tell me, what is it?'

Navya was ready to respond immediately. She quickly said, 'Ma'am, this is an advertisement for [...] cookies!'

I took out the packet of the same cookies, held it up for everyone to see, and then said, 'Yes! This is an advertisement. Now, can anyone guess what we are going to do in the classroom today?'

On hearing this, the entire class echoed with excitement. Navya immediately made a guess and said, 'Advertisement activity!' There was a sparkle in her eyes.

Charu said, 'Ma'am, we did a similar activity in class III as well, didn't we?'



Figure 1: An 'advertisement activity' effectively captivates learners' interest.

**“ I knew that even those students who are not able to read properly would gradually move towards reading through the hoardings they see in their everyday routine, the wrappers of items used at home, and the advertisements printed in newspapers. ”**

I smiled and said, ‘Yes, we certainly did. Do you remember what we did in that activity?’

Charu nodded eagerly and said, ‘Yes, I remember!’

I pretended as if I was trying to recall it and said, ‘What was that? I am not able to remember it clearly.’

Charu explained, ‘Ma’am, all of us had brought different kinds of wrappers from our homes—salt, rice, chocolate, and *namkeens*, and also packets of tea leaves, matchboxes, and empty bottles. Then we read the information written on all those items and shared it in class. I remember that I had brought a bottle of glue, and I had read the printed weight, MRP, the name of the manufacturing company, and the method of using it. And you had asked me to read it like this: ‘This is a bottle of glue. It weighs 25 grams.’ After that, I spoke about the method of using the glue. And, I had even tried to write down all of this.’

I said warmly, ‘Very good, Charu! Your memory is sharp.’

Rajeev raised his hand and said, ‘Madam, we had done something similar in class I as well!’

‘Oh, really! What did we do?’

Meera said, ‘Ma’am, all of us had brought wrappers from our homes, and we had read them. You had even made a file for all those wrappers.’

I smiled and asked, ‘And what happened after that?’

‘Then you had asked us the names of items, such as washing powder, salt, coconut oil, rice, turmeric, and so on, that were kept in those wrappers, and you wrote those names on the board and read them aloud. Then all of us spoke about the uses of these items. Some conversations were very interesting. Saroj told us that when he has a cold and cough, his father makes him gargle with salt water.’

Meera continued, ‘We used to read that file every day; it was so colourful! Can we make it again?’

‘Certainly,’ I said, ‘We can now make it as a project.’

Bheem suggested, ‘This time, can all of us have our own files?’

I laughed and said, ‘Yes, yes, why not!’

### Creating an atmosphere of anticipation

I said to the students, ‘Today I have brought some newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets for you. All of you may distribute these among yourselves. You have to look for an advertisement of something you like and that you can understand, cut it out, and keep it aside.’

As soon as the newspapers and magazines were given out, the students began turning the pages eagerly. Waving a colourful advertisement of chocolate in the air, Navya said, ‘Ma’am, I have found an advertisement I like!’

I said, ‘Very good! Now read everything written in this advertisement carefully. Observe and understand the words, pictures, and the slogan used in it.’

By the end of the class, each student had their chosen advertisement. I said, ‘Now, when you go home, watch some advertisements on television. Read the hoardings that you see on your way. If you use any packaged item, keep its packet with you. Tomorrow, we shall discuss



Figure 2: One of the advertisements created by the students.

this and together create our own advertisements in the classroom.'

## Going beyond perceived reality

When the class began the next day, there was visible energy among the students. The atmosphere was very enthusiastic. Swarnika shared that she had watched many advertisements the previous day for items such as shampoo, soap, and toothpaste.

'Very good!' I then asked them, 'Do you know that sometimes companies slightly change the name of a product and sell duplicate goods in the market under a similar name?'

On hearing this, the students were completely surprised. Charu's eyes widened in astonishment, and she asked, 'Is this true, Ma'am?'

'Yes,' I replied, 'People who cannot read carefully often buy fake products thinking they are real.'

I explained, 'They make the duplicate product look almost like the original. They only make a slight change in the spelling of the product name. This makes people think that it is the original item. That is why whenever we read something, we should read it very carefully.'

Meera said, 'This is a kind of cheating!'

'Yes, absolutely! It is indeed cheating,' I agreed. 'That is why it is important to know how to read properly.'

## Exploring creativity

I said, 'Now it is your turn to become advertisers. Take the advertisement you cut out yesterday, tweak some of the words, and make it more creative so it takes a new form. In this way, create your own advertisement.' This activity included giving students space to express their creativity, encouraging them to think in new ways, and writing down their ideas.

I gave them old calendars to write their advertisements on the blank side. They shared coloured pencils, crayons, glue, and scissors among themselves.

'Ma'am, may I create an advertisement for a magical shampoo?' Navya asked.

'Why not? Go ahead!' I replied with a smile.

Soon, the entire class began speaking at once, sharing their ideas. Rajeev raised his poster and said, 'Ma'am, please look at this!' On his poster, written in large letters, were the words—*Dubraj Rice, unmatched in taste and fragrance!*

'Wonderful! This is very good,' I said.

Sunita asked, 'Ma'am, may I make it in Chhattisgarhi?'

'Yes, of course, that is a good idea,' I replied.

She wrote, '*Bah! Abbad mahmahaat he, aaj Dubraj randhe has ka vo?*' (Wow! What a fragrance! Have you cooked *Dubaraj* rice at home today?)

All the students were very happy.

After one hour of creative work, it was time for the presentations. Each student came forward one by one, holding the charts they had prepared. In a very dramatic manner, Meera said, 'Ma'am, my advertisement is for a toothpaste which will make your teeth shine like pearls!'

## Building understanding and critical thinking

During the discussion on advertisements, a question arose: 'Ma'am, is everything said and written in an advertisement true?'

'That is a very good question. What do you think?' I asked.

'I don't think so,' Navya said thoughtfully. 'Shampoo advertisements claim that they make hair longer, but that is not true.'

'Exactly,' I said, 'Advertisements often show only one side of the story. Fairness creams promise fair skin within one week, but is that true?'

'No!' the entire class chorused in agreement.

'Ma'am, my mother says that no one becomes fair by using fairness creams. It is all a marketing strategy,' Charu shared.

'Yes, absolutely right,' I said. 'In any case, the very focus on skin colour is superficial. People are not good or not-so-good because of their skin colour. Why should anyone *have* to become fair? If we understand this, then there is no need for such creams at all.' I had found an opportunity to weaken the wall of discrimination between fair and dark complexions in the minds of the students.

I also began to find links to this activity in the textbook and in their practice questions.

## Building connections and communication skills

We had to read Lesson 4, 'Food'. I said, 'Today, before reading the lesson, we shall do an activity. We will select some items from the lesson and create advertisements for them. One group will create the advertisement, and

the other group will become customers and question the claims made in the advertisement.'

The classroom turned into a mini market.

The list of items selected from the lesson included rice, pulses, potatoes, lady's finger, gourd, milk, curd, banana, mango, guava, and other such items.

Navya stood confidently. A large picture of a carrot was pasted on her chart. 'This carrot is truly amazing. Eat it, and you will become a wrestler in just one day,' she announced loudly. Rajeev was playing the role of the customer. Raising his eyebrows, he said, 'Is that really so? Overnight? Can you prove it?'

Navya burst into laughter. 'Yes, it is a magical carrot! Just eat it and see.'

The classroom echoed with laughter, but the point was clear that it is important to question such claims. I observed that through this activity, all the students were not only enjoying themselves, but their reading, questioning, and ability to express their ideas in new ways were also improving. The students had now begun reading hoardings and signboards on their way to and from school, which they discussed in the class the following day. Some students had started keeping wrappers of food items so that they could paste them into their files and write about them. I began thinking about the next lesson I could connect with this activity and conduct it again in a new/different way.

*Translated from English to Hindi by Nalini Ravel.*

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