

Enquiring Context in the Content of Honeycomb

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In this article, I will analyse a class 7 English textbook called *Honeycomb*, published by NCERT.

The role of the textbook book in formal school education

No one can deny the fact that books have very crucial role in formal school education. On the other hand, it is also true that knowledge is not limited to the world of books only. Thus we have to analyse the situation: at what stage do books become an essential tool in teaching and when do learners learn without help of a textbook? In the early stages, a child learns how to read and once he/she has ability of reading, then later in life she/he reads from different sources to learn various things. This establishes the importance of the reading skill for children. When we see a child in the initial stages of learning in school, we find that there are books in the target language to help them in reading. It has been proved that the mother tongue helps in learning different subjects. Thus almost every educationist would say there should be use of mother tongue (in our case, Garhwali) to teach the target language (in our case both Hindi and English) and to strengthen target languages. When we ponder over this thought then we find that the mother tongue helps in making connections

with content. This connection is essential for understanding of content. Along with this, if there is content which is contextual to learners then the learning becomes long lasting.

Now we can see the situation from two perspectives. The first is the textbook which we (facilitators) use in our schools or classrooms, and the second is the pedagogical approach, which we use in our classroom teaching. Reflecting on the first perspective we will analyse whether in our textbooks the content is contextual and relevant or not to our learner. Second, does it provide an opportunity to explore interesting activities which may be helpful in learning of children? This means: are the exercises given in a way that helps children to learn with fun? The second perspective is mostly about the teachers' exposure and their belief system of teaching and learning and how they use local language in strengthening of target language.

With this background I would now like to share my experience of English teaching in Class 7. As all of us know that now we are using NCERT text books in our schools. The textbook for Class 7 in English is titled *Honeycomb*.

Given below is the brief summary of content of the book

Unit 1	Three Questions (story) The Squirrel (poem)	Leo Tolstoy- Mildred Bowers Armstrong	Three questions is a story by Tolstoy. The squirrel is a poem.	Good story makes the child think. And the poem is also nice.
Unit 2	A Gift of Chappals The Rebel	Vasantha Surya D.J. Enright	A gift of chappals is a story based on South Indian literature. The rebel is a poem highlighting the naughtiness of child.	The background of the story is a South Indian family. It was difficult for children to relate to it.
Unit 3	Gopal and the Hilsa Fish (comic story) The Shed (poem)	Frank Flynn	Gopal and the Hilsa fish is a comic story. The Shed is a poem which describes the talks between siblings.	Gopal and Hilsa fish is a good comic story.



Unit 4	The Ashes that made trees bloom (story) Chivvy (poem)	William Elliot Griffis Michael Rosen	The Ashes that made trees bloom is a Japanese story. Chivvy is a poem that tells about elders talk for children.	Japanese story is a good to listen and enjoy with some sense of magic.
Unit 5	Quality (Story) Trees (poem)	John Galsworthy Shirley Bauer	Quality is a story based on background of London. A trees is poem which helps us to understand the various use of trees.	Quality is a story which gives good message however again has a foreign background.
Unit 6	Expert Detectives (story) Mystery of the Talking fan (poem)	Sharada Dwivedi Maude Rubin	Expert detectives is a good story.	Children enjoyed it.
Unit 7	The invention of Vita Wonk (story) Dad and the Cat and the Tree (poem)	Roald Dahl Kit Wright	It is an imaginary story. It is funny poem	The story is imaginary. However there are some phrases which have very high level of difficulty. The poem misses the context.
Unit 8	Fire: Friend and Foe Meadow Surprise	Lois Brandt Philips	Good to understand dual nature of fire. A poem which reveals the surprises of meadow.	Yes good in context.
Unit 9	A Bicycle in Good Repair (story) Garden snake (poem)	Jerome K. Jerome Muriel L. Sonne	A humorous story	Child may get connection.
Unit 10	The story of Cricket	Ramchandra Guha	A knowledge full chapter.	A child will get easily connected with it. However, long texts may bore them.

Now I will try to share my experiences for above mentioned chapters one by one:

Unit 1: *Three Questions* (story), *The Squirrel* (poem)
Three questions is a philosophical story by Tolstoy. When I ask the class the third question, that is, what is the most important thing for him to do? The children responses were - study, play, etc. As the story proceeded, all of them were excited to know the answers of these questions asked by the hermit. However at the end of the story all of them were surprised when the hermit gave the answers.

Then I told them to read the last section of the story again. Then some of them got the sense. As it is story by Tolstoy, it is very obvious that it is not easy to get the sense of content. I myself found some difficulty with this chapter.

The Squirrel is short poem. Children are familiar with squirrels and have their experiences to share such as a squirrel is very shy, very quick to run away when noticed. The content of poem is in the context of children's lives. Thus it was easy for them to understand it.



Unit 2: *A Gift of Chappals* (story), *The Rebel* (poem)

A Gift of Chappals is a story with a South Indian background. The story is long and it was difficult for children to connect with the text. The exercises are good enough, specially the speaking and writing parts.

The Rebel is a very interesting poem. The children said that there is more than one rebel in our class!

Unit3: *Gopal and the Hilsa Fish* (comic story), *The Shed* (poem)

Children enjoyed the comic story as they got character of Gopal as of Birbal and Tenaliraman. Children enjoyed the role play of the story. *The Shed* is easy to understand because children are familiar with it as they have seen in their villages. The exercises given at the end of the chapter gives them an opportunity to talk about scary places in their locality.

Unit4: *The Ashes That Made Trees Bloom* (Japanese story), *Chivvy* (poem)

The Ashes That Made Trees Bloom is Japanese story which has magic power which the children understood. The poem *Chivvy* is easy to get connected with as most of the children have experience of this types of talk from elders.

Unit5: *Quality* (story), *Trees* (poem)

The background of *Quality* is London. This is the story of two brothers who were born in Germany and settled in London. The message of story is good though it was difficult for children to understand about buying shoes from a cobbler as they had not seen this. They had only bought shoes from a shop.

Trees is easy to understand as children have experience with trees. The exercises given at the end of chapter is interesting, specially writing poems on water and air.

Unit6: *Expert Detectives* (story), *Mystery of the Talking Fan* (poem)

Expert Detectives is an Indian story of Indian in which a brother and a sister are trying to gather information about a man. They find some suspicious information about him. While reading the story, the children thought at the end of the story they will get the climax of story. However the ending was open, so that the the children could have different

opinions.

The poem *Mystery of the Talking Fan* was easy to understand as children were familiar with noisy fans. They extended it to the idea that cycles too make noise if not oiled properly.

Unit7: *The Invention of Vita-Wonk* (fantasy), *Dad and the Cat and the Tree* (poem)

The Invention of Vita – Wonk is a fantasy, but the vocabulary used in the content is very difficult. It was difficult for children to connect with the background, although the theme of story is interesting. The exercises given at the end of chapter give opportunities to use the local language.

Dad and the Cat and the Tree is a poem in which a father is trying to bring down cat from a tree. However, the situation was not understood in our rural context.

Unit8: *Fire: Friend and Foe* (informative), *Meadow Surprises* (poem)

Fire: Friend and Foe is informative as it explains the causes of fire and ways to put it out. The children understand the dangers of fire and find it easy to connect with the content. The poem *Meadow Surprises* is easy to understand.

We have still to complete the following:

Unit9: *A Bicycle in Good Repair* (story), *Garden Snake* (poem)

A Bicycle in Good Repair is a humorous story and It is easy for children to understand as they have experience with bicycles and this will help them to understand the story.

Garden Snake is a poem which says that most snakes are harmless to human beings. Most of the children have seen snakes and are familiar with the sight. This will help them to understand the content of the poem.

Unit 10: *The Story of Cricket* tells about history of cricket. Although cricket is always favourite topic for children to read about, the text is very lengthy and children may feel bored with it.

Out of the ten units there are five which I found difficult during classroom transactions. The reason of this difficulty is mainly due to non-contextual content, lengthy text and complex vocabulary.



Below is the table about the authors.

Name of author	Brief note
Vasanth Surya	Born in Tamilnadu and also worked in Tamil film industry as a director and actor.
Mildred Bowers Armstrong	Born in Newyork, USA also known as queen of carbon science.
Frank Flynn	Born in Sydney, Doctor as profession
William Elliot Griffis	Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. Educator
Michael Rosen	Born in London, UK. Children’s novelist
John Galsworthy	Born in England, Writer
Shirley Bauer	Born in New York, writer
Sharada Dwivedi	Born in Mumbai, writer
Maude Rubin	Born in Colorado, USA. Writer
Kit Wright	Born in Crockham Hill, UK. Writer
Roald Dahl	Born in Cardiff UK, writer
Lois Brandt Philips	Born in Lowell, Massachusetts USA. Writer
Jerome K. Jerome	Born in Caldmore, Walsall, England. Writer
Muriel L. Sonne	Born in Canada , Writer
Ramchandra Guha	Born in Dehradun, Writer

The above mentioned table shows that out of fifteen writers, there are only three Indian writers: one from Tamil Nadu, one from Mumbai and one from Dehradun.

When I look at Honeycomb on the basis of pointers mentioned in first part of this article, then I find the following:

- the book seems lacking in contextual content. especially when we are using the book in schools of rural background. However it may be seen as an opportunity of exposure to new learning

- the book has very good section called Notes for the Teacher, which helps the teacher to understand the theme of particular chapter
- the book provides ample opportunity for children to learn with fun
- the book also gives opportunity to bring the local language into the classroom



Final comment

This is the first time I have used this book in our school and these are my impressions.

As the book is published by NCERT, it tries to cover certain prescribed parameters of an English text book for Class 7. However, if and when the book is used in schools all over India, because of the diversity, it will definitely lack in contextual content.

The dominance of foreign writers is very apparent in this book and there is need for including more Indian writers, although it is almost impossible for a single book to contain content in context of whole country.

The book is balanced in other ways as it gives ample opportunity for facilitators to teach with fun activities and along with this there is also scope of creativity for children. I feel there is a need of other books which have a lower level of difficulty to help the children understand NCERT books better

Another suggestion is: in order to make this book more useful SCERT should work to include a few lessons which have context relevant to their regions. Then this book will be a boon for learners and facilitators.