

A Letter Rides on the Train of Subjects...

Chandrika Soni

Every teacher colleague must have experienced that when the boundaries of subjects are removed or blurred, then learning becomes an immensely enjoyable experience. And in any case, young children cannot be contained within these boundaries of subjects. If they so desire, the winds of environment would be found in the music notebook; the song threads in the Hindi notebook, and the four mangoes that disappeared from a basket would be found in the environment notebook. All the subjects are so tightly woven that children do not try to separate them at all. And in that, if a particular topic in two subjects is similar, then a mix-up is inevitable. I had a beautiful experience of that kind in class three, with which I experience a special bond as I go to this class at least two to three times every day, sometimes, as many as four times a day.

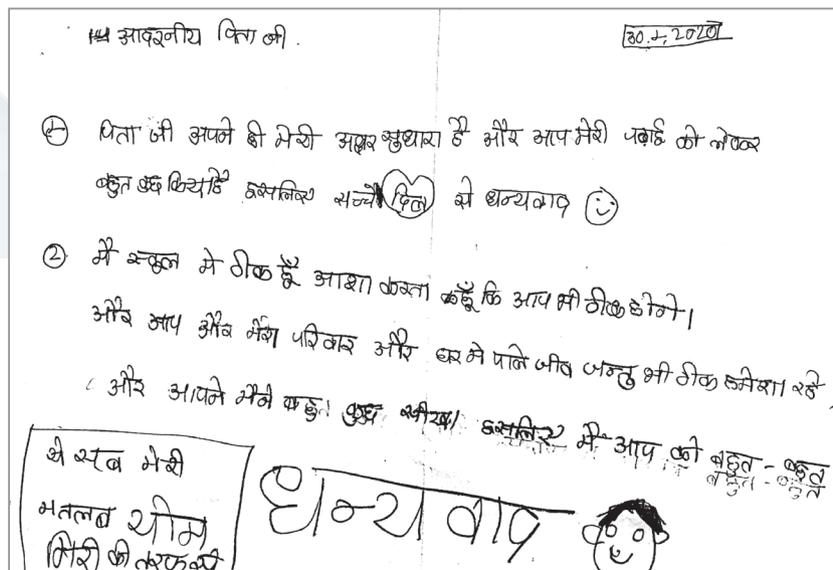
I work with two subjects here – Environmental Studies and Hindi. I am working with Hindi for the first time, and sometimes, the complexities of language entangle me and at other times, it opens new directions for me that also help me in teaching the other subject: Environmental Studies. Once when both subjects had a similar theme, I found a common way to teach both together.

Ghatati Dooriyan (decreasing distances, based on means of communication) - Environmental Studies

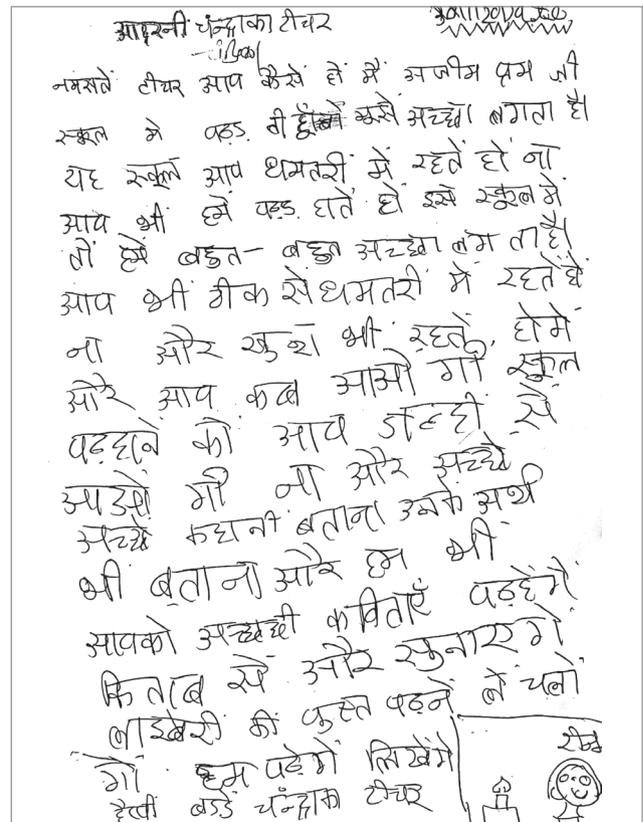
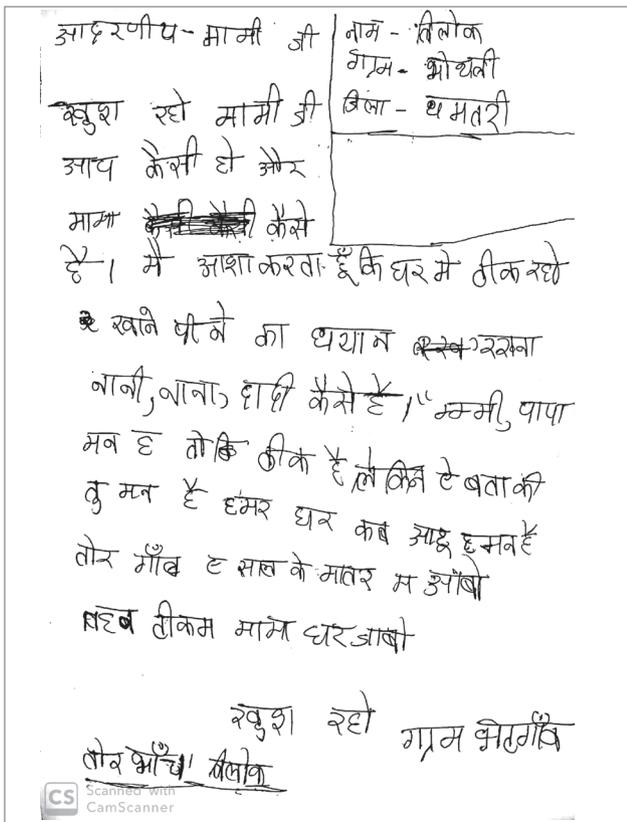
Maitri Bagh (the beginning of letter writing) - Hindi

In Environmental Studies, this topic is always a problem because children, now-a-days, neither write letters themselves nor see anyone in their homes do so. In today's world of mobile communication, letter writing has become extinct, just like the message-bearing pigeons of yore. The letter box is neither seen nor used. Explaining letter-writing and letter-transportation to children is as difficult as making castles in the wind. Children have neither seen an inland letter or a postcard, let alone knowing how these are used. They have some familiarity with the use of envelopes, used either to carry *Rakhis* or wedding invitations. But even so, they are unaware of the process of the transportation of letters.

While I was still wondering how to introduce the process to children, I started the chapter, *Maitri Bagh* in Hindi. This showed me the way. In the chapter, a child's uncle describes *Maitri Bagh*¹ to him in detail in the form of a letter. After reading this chapter, children also wrote some letters to their friends, family members and teachers. Then the question of sending these letters came up.



¹A zoo in Bhilai, Chhattisgarh, India.



To send a letter, the address has to be written and the letter has to be dropped in a letter box. This process presented difficulties. The picture in the Environmental Studies book is confusing. One cannot make out the process from the pictures. For example, it is not clear whether the person shown sorting letters in the post office is in the city from where the letter is sent or in the city where it is delivered. Role play on this topic is helpful but ensuring that it is carried out correctly, can be challenging.

While struggling with these dilemmas, I was reminded of the book, *Khat* published by Eklavya. It is a very beautiful short story, written by a little girl named, Apoorva to her grandfather (Ajooba) who lives in Nagpur. Apoorva has written this story to wish her grandfather on his birthday. She wants the letter to reach her grandfather on time. On the envelope, she has made a smiley face with two pretty eyes. And inside, the message is decorated with flowers and vines.

While dropping it in the letter box, she says, 'Go to my Daddu, fast!'

In this way, the letter's journey to Nagpur has been beautifully described. When I shared this story with the children, their faces too had a sweet smile. It is then that I thought of the including this in a role play.

We made some lovely characters. Four children became letter boxes, one child became Apoorva and one child her letter. Six other children played the character of other parcels and letters that were going to other places. Two children played the role of postmen. Some children played other officials of post office, who sorted the letters or put stamp on them. Some others became cycle and train bogeys. In this way, at least half of the class could participate in the activity. Other children enjoyed being audience to this process.





How the letter feels scared in the darkness inside the letter-box; how it hides behind the other letters; how he is frightened by the sound of the train; how he befriends the parcel, who is going to Nagpur and how it sleeps the whole night near the big parcel; how it shuts its eyes tight, when it is stamped *thump!* (sound of stamping). Children played each part very well and also learnt about the process of transportation of a letter.

Children's participation was so enchanting that we decided to showcase it in the morning assembly so that others can also enjoy this beautiful presentation and understand this complex process.

Children started preparing for this play with full enthusiasm. We decided to present the play in the next Wednesday assembly.

In this way, a topic of study started its journey from the Hindi textbook and took a turn towards Environmental Sciences and then reached its destination in the morning assembly. We also came to know of some interesting thoughts of the children while making sense of this topic. Some parts of the letters that the children wrote to their parents were extraordinary. We sent those letters to their parents and they too experienced immense happiness.



Chandrika Soni works as an Environmental Science teacher in the Azim Premji School, Dhamtari. As a teacher, her special interests include working collaboratively with children, giving new dimensions to children's talents through creative pursuits, and skill-oriented teaching of environment. She can be contacted at chandrika.soni@azimpremji.org