

Don't underestimate the value of language familiarity

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On 20 October 2022, the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) was launched by the Indian ministry of education. My last column was an overview of the NCF-FS. In this piece, I will describe the approach the NCF-FS takes to the learning of reading and writing; what is often called basic or foundational literacy. Many considerations had to be kept in mind while designing this approach—from how children learn languages to the importance of their socio-cultural context, the linguistic diversity of India even within a classroom, and other practical realities. This matter is of utmost importance because we know that India has an ongoing crisis of basic literacy, which has been exacerbated by the 2-year long shutdown of schools because of the covid pandemic.

By the time children enrol in an educational institution—pre-school, kindergarten, Anganwadi or a Baalvatikaa, for example—at the age of 3 or later, they have already learnt at least one language, usually their mother tongue. They can speak and understand this language. Many children in India also learn a second language by this age; this is likely to be the language that is spoken in their local milieu outside their home, if that is different from their mother tongue.

Children not only know these languages, but they also have significant knowledge about the world that they relate to through these languages. These skills of language that children have, along with their knowledge of the world, which too is in the language(s) that they know, are the most important of resources for a child to draw upon in learning how to read and write.

Imagine trying to learn how to read and write for the first time in a language that you don't know. This creates an exponential order of difficulty—it involves gaining literacy while also learning a new language without access to an existing knowledge base. Without a doubt, then, children learn to read and write most effectively in their mother tongue.

While the ideal language to learn how to read and write is the child's mother tongue, sometimes also referred to as the 'home language', given India's social and linguistic diversity, there are many circumstances where the child's mother tongue may not be the language in which she is acquiring basic literacy.

For example, in a large city, migration leads to situations where the same classroom has children with four or five different mother tongues. Here, the local language becomes the language of literacy. Another situation is where reading and writing is learnt in a regional language in schools. This is largely a result of practical considerations, including the

difficulty of having books in multiple languages or the impossibility of having teachers who speak all languages spoken by the children. Another kind of example is when children speak, say, Chhattisgarhi, Maithili or Bhojpuri at home (languages that are misclassified as ‘dialects’), while the language for reading and writing in school is Hindi; or in multilingual regions, such as where the children’s mother tongue is Tulu, for instance, while the classroom language of reading and writing is Kannada.

Given that India has over 700 live languages, these complex situations arise much more often than we might imagine. In such circumstances, it is critical to use the child’s home language inside the classroom in all ways necessary to help the child learn reading and writing in the other language, the one for literacy. For this, not only do teachers need to be encouraged, but they also need to be systematically trained. They may not be able to use the child’s language, but they need to create an environment where the child’s language becomes a real bridge to the language of literacy.

Children at that young age learn languages very quickly and have the capacity to learn many of them together. So, classrooms should introduce and expose them to many languages orally as early as possible, without attempting literacy in all those languages. To help learn to speak these languages, the child’s mother tongue must be used (or the other familiar language from the local milieu). Once the child has learnt to read and write in one language (ideally the mother tongue), then the child can learn to read and write in other languages—quickly and effectively— through the use of that first language of literacy.

This approach of the NCF-FS is designed such that all children have the best chance to be able to learn to read and write by Class 2 or 3. And also to help them learn multiple languages fluently by the time they are in middle school.

The undeniable widespread social aspiration for children to learn English can also be met more effectively through this approach. When English is made the language for basic literacy, it is ineffective for all the reasons stated earlier. Children will learn English better if the first language of reading and writing is their mother tongue, or a familiar regional language.

The NCF-FS takes an educationally effective approach. In our federal polity, the execution of the curricular framework and specific decisions on all these matters are in the hands of states. Hopefully, the states will recognize the soundness of this approach and will implement it in its true spirit, which would help ensure basic literacy for all our children, and with that, a sound educational trajectory.

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