



A New Approach for Learning Enhancement

E S Ramamurthy



The state of primary education in Public Schools gets regularly highlighted in the Annual Survey of Education Reports (ASER) from time to time. Some of the facts brought up in them are indeed disturbing; to cite an example, in Karnataka as many as 27% of the students in 7th Std are seen to lack the ability to read fluently simple non-text book content in own language. Of greater concern is the fact that such skill gaps will, if unaddressed at this stage, go on to become lifelong issues. Sikshana¹ wanted to ensure that no student leaves primary schooling without acquiring the three basic skills - reading, writing and expression in own language; as a part of this, it focussed on fluency in reading as a first step. Sikshana has come close to achieving this goal using an innovative approach, which is the

focus of this article. That it is easily replicable in different environment and could also apply to other areas of primary schooling makes it even more interesting.

Sikshana realised that the shortfalls reported by ASER are notwithstanding the fact that the teachers in Public Schools are invariably well equipped to handle them in terms of qualifications and experience. Neither can it be traced to the students' inherent abilities and intelligence as, barring very few, most of them are found to be bright enough not to fail on this score.

It is generally recognised that there are two tracks for learning: acquisition of knowledge through teaching and getting/ building a skill through practice. While the former fell in the realm of the teacher, the latter depended on the student putting in the effort. It was felt that attaining fluency in reading fell in the latter category and needed to be dealt with accordingly. Focusing on this skill, Sikshana quizzed a number of Kannada teachers in randomly selected schools and ascertained the feasibility of students gaining such a skill within a reasonable timeframe. The next step was to evolve a structured programme which ensures that the students put in the required amount of effort on a verifiable basis. Thus a process along the following lines emerged:

¹<http://www.sikshana.org>

At start, the kids were given a strong message that this would be their last chance to learn to read Kannada as they could expect no more interventions of this type during their schooling. However if they were willing to commit themselves for a brief spell, they could acquire this vital life skill even at this late stage- something that has eluded them in spite of years of schooling.

The practice sessions took place in the school premises- during the working hours wherever feasible. They were of one-hour duration, six days a week for five weeks with no break permitted on any grounds; nor were changes in timings or location allowed. The entire regimen was built around observance of strict discipline, which is the key to success.

Learning is enabled from a peer rather than from a 'teacher'. In fact, no teaching takes place in the conventional sense during the sessions. Kids are known to prefer practicing a skill in the company of their peers; it is further an accepted fact that learning takes place more effectively in a non-threatening support system. These form the basis of the proposed sessions, which are structured as follows.

Each learner student is paired with another who has the required skill. A common facilitator oversees a group of 15 to 20 pairs of students at a single location. Each pair is given identical reading material of appropriate level. The learner is asked to try reading the text. Whenever he comes to a stop, the mentor student is required to read out the word loudly. This intervention should happen after the learner has made an effort to read and not later than two to three seconds after the attempt, in case he/she fails. The time delay is designed to ensure the learner is not frustrated due to persistent failures and keep a steady pace of reading going. The entire process involves three steps: effort to read, hear the correct word in case of failure and read it correctly this time while observing it 'visually'. An association between these is thus brought about in the mind of the learner, which is bound to last for some time. If the

practice sessions are frequent enough, difficult words will recur to an extent that they get registered permanently in the learner's mind.

Our findings showed that children feel safe, secure and motivated to learn in the presence of an adult even if the adult is not a trained teacher. Accordingly a facilitator is provided to ensure compliance to the above guidelines during the sessions. He/ she will not however intervene in the process, especially in the role of a teacher.

The anticipated success of the venture actually centers around the incidental acquisition of the vital non-cognitive skills - perseverance, determination and grit. Once a kid agrees to submit himself/ herself to a regimen as above, he/ she is pre-disposed towards success; the above drill takes care of the rest.

To put these premises to test, a pilot was run in a school with 13 students. These were what one would call as 'down and out' kids who besides having huge skill gaps also tended to skip classes frequently and were not known to evince great interest in learning. After a briefing as prescribed, a camp was run for 30 days without a break from 31st Aug to 5th Oct; this period incidentally included three major festival holidays. The kids surprisingly offered to come to the camp on Sundays too, making it a 35 day programme. It ran with 100% attendance right through; the kids were showed unprecedented enthusiasm and a sense of pride in their progressively increasing level of competence right through the program. At the end of the stipulated period, 10 of them acquired the Level 2 reading ability as defined under ASER within the period; two more acquired it after another two weeks, leaving only one behind. The success rate of 12 out of 13 encouraged us to initiate a second phase during



Oct/ Nov 2012 with 43 schools. This time too, in spite of the fact that the schedule coincided with the mid-term holidays and three major festivals of the season, the attendance in all centers was near total. Of the 506 students covered, 327 gained the prescribed skill amounting to 65%. Though this was less than that obtained in the first trial, the figure is still a significant increase over the attrition rate of eight percent per month obtained by Sikshana under the traditional approach adopted during 2011-12 involving 3789 students in 136 schools.

The programme was then extended with a few modifications to cover 7th Std students in more than 220 Sikshana schools during the remaining period in 2012-13. Those who looked to be falling marginally short in fluency at the end of 30 days were given an extension of 15 days. Further, those who did not have the minimum knowledge of alphabets/words were taken out at the start itself and put through a 30 day qualifying programme with identical structure for acquisition of the desired skill. 7894 students participated in this phase out of which 7166, amounting to 90.8%, reached the competency levels prescribed. Taken along with those who already had the skill or acquired under its the other initiatives, the Sikshana schools scored an overall 96.9% with 17904 students out of 18471 passing the ASER benchmark of Level II for Reading. Based on this resounding validation, the program is being expanded during the current academic year to cover all the 7th Std students in Sikshana schools.

A word of caution is due here. Achievement of reading fluency as assessed under ASER does not automatically entail comprehension, which is the ultimate goal of any comprehensive reading programme; however fluency being a prerequisite for this, the acquisition of the skill becomes an important step towards achieving this objective- a fact given due recognition by the Report.

Incidentally, Sikshana ran an identical program in parallel across many schools for acquiring the ability to carry out simple division of whole numbers. Success rates obtained here too were comparable to those in the Reading Programme. This showed that it is not the targeted competence of reading that mattered; it is the role of non-cognitive skills in the enhancement of learning levels under controlled conditions. The success of this programme and the insight it provided into certain learning processes has given us hope that it can be used towards achievement of a broader range of skill sets in primary schooling.

A detailed paper going into the causative factors for the above results and providing the theoretical validation for the key presumptions is due for publication in "Working Papers on Educational Linguistics" shortly.

Ramamurthy has had a long and distinguished career in Industry. Opting to get out of it at its peak, he founded Sikshana, of which he is now the Chief Mentor. The programme is aimed at evolving a sustainable model for the Public School System. He can be contacted at esmurthy@gmail.com

