



COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY INSTRUCTION MODEL IN INDIAN CLASSROOMS

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 Comprehensive Literacy Instruction Model In Indian Classrooms

My group of very smart, intelligent, happy, some mischievous, some very quiet and shy, bunch of children are all of 7 years old. I have known them for a little over a month now. I have been teaching in a government school in Bengaluru. I teach them Kannada and English. The medium is Kannada but since English is in demand, the school would like to teach English, too. I have 18 children in this group, most of whom speak Kannada, with a few Telugu and a couple of Hindi speaking children. The last month has given me time to know and understand a little about my children – the language they are most comfortable with, the kind of families they come from, the kind of food they like, the games they enjoy, and so on. I have a sense of who among these are more or less talkative. Raju, Mallamma, Anita, Hussein, Krishna, Durga, Srinivas, Chaitra, Babu, Rangappa, Rubiya, Lakshmi, and Rajappa are all Kannada speakers. Hussein, Rubiya and Mallama know a little Hindi too. Naragarju, Venkatesh and Seeta are Telugu speaking children who have just come to the city and Kannada is a very new language for them. Krishna and Anita, too, can speak a little Telugu. Suraj and Bindiya are Hindi speaking children who have been in the city for a little more than two years but can understand very little Kannada. They do not follow most of what I speak in Kannada, and are, also, extremely shy and do not talk to other children in their class. But all in all, the majority of the children speak Kannada at home, and it is just a small group of children who have to learn Kannada with a bit of a struggle.

With this knowledge, I am to begin teaching my children the important aspects of learning to read and write Kannada in the coming months. While I think I know what each child is capable of and ready for, I still find it very challenging to plan my lessons considering how different the need of each child is. My assessment of each child's knowledge of the varnamala is leaving me anxious as well. How do I bring them all to a certain consistent level with their reading? Some children cannot identify even 5 - 6 aksharas of the varnamala. Of the children comfortable with Kannada, only Krishna, Durga and Mallamma can read a few simple words in Kannada. The rest are mostly struggling readers, and some children make me wonder how well would I be able to bridge the gap between their home language and Kannada.

Though I have textbooks and other reading material in the classroom, I still struggle with two questions. One, how do I go about teaching my children how to read, and two, what is the best method? When it comes to English, it is all the more difficult. These children do not know any English. What do I do? How do I plan my lessons? What do I teach them first— the aksharas, the alphabet or word meanings? Where do I begin? I wish I had someone to tell me how to go about having all my children come together and learn!

The vignette presented here is an excerpt from a teacher's journal. Vasanthi is a keen, observant teacher who is deeply invested in the learning of every single child in her classroom. She has spent weeks getting to know her students - their needs, likes and dislikes, and so on. She is wondering how she can make their engagement meaningful for them, and fulfilling for herself. Vasanthi is not alone. Her situation is reflected in the day-to-day struggles of teachers in many Indian classrooms, though her 18 students' class is a happy exception as compared to the typical Indian classrooms which tend to be quite large. Thus, these questions become even more difficult to answer in the context of large classrooms, where students' needs and abilities are more varied.

Let us return to the questions Vasanthi raised - what should I teach and how should I teach it? In this practitioner brief, we will introduce you to the Comprehensive (or Balanced) Literacy Framework (Fitzgerald, 1999), with the hope that it will show you ways to tackle these questions. What does this framework do? Well, simply put, this framework provides teachers with some answers to the questions:

- What should we teach?
- How should we teach?
- With what should we teach?

Like all frameworks, the Comprehensive Literacy Framework is not perfect; but it does provide a useful set of ideas about where to begin from.

In this brief, practitioners can expect the following:

- A brief overview to the approach
- References to other resources and practitioner briefs produced by the Early Literacy Initiative, for more in-depth explanations of particular ideas or techniques mentioned here.

However, what it will not do is provide a comprehensive guide to teaching early language and literacy. It is beyond the scope of this brief to discuss language-specific pedagogies (for example, how to teach English versus Indian languages). It will, also, not be able to help teachers differentiate instruction for different kinds of learners in their classrooms.

The Comprehensive or Balanced Literacy Framework

The teaching of early language and literacy has been marked by serious debates in the field. How do young children learn to read and write? Should we start by introducing letters or *aksharas* first, then help children combine letters into words, words into sentences, and sentences into passages? Or is there some other approach which is better? The first approach, the one that many of us have learned to read and write with, is called the “bottom-up” or “phonics” approach. Here there is a clear and systematic focus on teaching letters and sounds, with an emphasis on correct spelling and pronunciation. The assumption is that when children are able to read the script fluently, they will automatically comprehend what is written.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is another approach– the “top-down”, or “whole language” approach. Whole language theorists oppose the meaningless nature of the drill-and-skill instruction associated with the phonics-based approach. They argue that with such a heavy focus on lower-order skills acquisition, higher-order capabilities often get postponed until the later grades. Scholars who support whole language based instruction suggest that children learn to read and write just as they learn to talk (Goodman, 1967). So, teachers need to immerse students in highly print-rich, literate environments, and expose them to lots and lots of opportunities to read and write. While exposing them to these opportunities, teachers should model how they themselves read and write. In this approach, it is not important to start with *aksharas* first. Of course, *aksharas* will be taught, but not in any particular order.

Children will be permitted to try to express their thinking by experimenting with drawings, scribbling, and invented spelling. All instruction would be meaningful to the children.

Who can argue with some of the ideas expressed by the whole language theorists? All of us want children to find what is taught to be meaningful, and want to introduce them to a wide range of opportunities for reading and writing. We also want to model good practices for them, and to have them experiment with their own reading and writing. Whole language was used as the primary philosophy guiding instruction across many classrooms in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. After 20 years of trying out this approach, several scholars studying it reached a similar conclusion (see: National Research Council, 1998): most children benefit from many of the practices advocated by whole language theorists, *but they also need help with explicitly and systematically learning the letter-sound relationships!*

It appears that both the bottom-up and the top-down approaches have certain strengths and limitations; and that neither is complete in itself. This brings us to the idea of a “balanced” or a comprehensive early language and literacy classroom.

Before we further explore the word, “balance”, let us pause and ask ourselves: What are some of the important goals of an early literacy and language classroom? How might a teacher like Vasanthi, whose journal entry you read earlier, answer this question? In our opinion, a key goal of the early language and literacy classroom is to help develop engaged and skillful enthusiastic, life-long readers and writers. We want children to be able to decode a text automatically and fluently, such that they are able to understand what it means. We want them to make sense of what they are reading. We want them to be able to pick, choose and use a wide variety of books and other reading and writing materials to fulfill various purposes in their lives, including content area learning. They should be able to read texts with critical thinking and awareness, ask questions, find answers, and continue thinking about the texts they have read. We want them to be able to respond aesthetically and emotionally to the books they have read – which parts did they like and why, which parts they didn’t like and why? We want them to be able to write with ease for a variety of audiences and purposes. And we want to give them a good foundation for many of these goals during the very early years of schooling. By the end of third grade, they should be well along their way!

Such large and ambitious goals for young readers and writers! How can a teacher like Vasanthi even dream of doing all this within the first few years of a child’s schooling? Is it even possible? Or, should we stick to what is safe and known to us - teaching *aksharas*, words, sentences, and passages? Should we stick to giving dictations to make spellings correct and give handwriting practice to make children’s writing neat and legible? This is where the idea of “balanced” or comprehensive literacy instruction comes in – to do a lot in a limited amount of time.

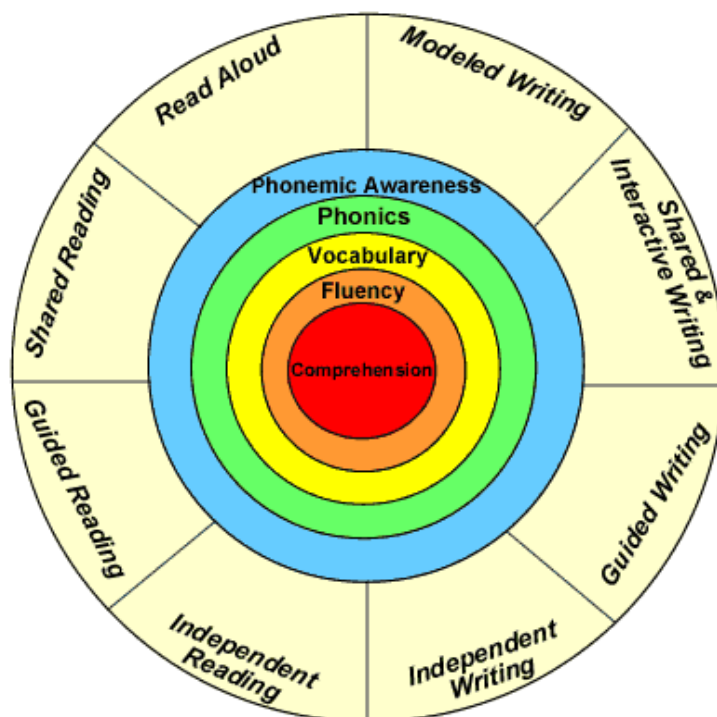


Figure 1. Figure showing the key elements of a Comprehensive Literacy Framework

Figure 1, gives an overview of the Comprehensive Literacy Framework as it is commonly described in many Western contexts. The inner concentric circles answer the question, “What should we teach?”. These circles represent five components that have been identified by researchers working in the United States as central to learning to read and write: *Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary* and *Comprehension*. The outer circle addresses the question, “How do we teach?”. It represents the various approaches that teachers could use to teach reading and writing, such as, *Read Aloud, Shared Reading, Shared Writing, Guided Reading, Guided Writing, Modeled Writing, Independent Reading* and *Independent Writing*. We will explain each of these circles next in the sections (a) what to teach; and (b) how to teach. In addition, we will also address a third question, (c) with what to teach.

A. What should we teach?

What should we teach in the early language and literacy classroom? Figure 1 points us to five critical aspects that we should attend to carefully. Each of these is described briefly here.

1. **Comprehension.** At the heart of the comprehensive literacy model is comprehension, or meaning-making. When a child is able to comprehend or make meaning she is able to defend, distinguish, explain, extend, generalize, give examples, make inferences, predict, rewrite, and summarize what she has read. Teachers need to teach children how to make sense or meaning of what they have read or written – that is a core aspect that needs attention.
2. **Vocabulary.** In order to read, write and speak with comprehension, children need to have a wide range of words at their disposal. This is not just about “mugging up” word meanings. If vocabulary is taught properly, children will be able to *use* the new words in their speech and writing.
3. **Fluency.** Fluency is the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy and expressiveness. Many children in our classrooms are able to recognize *aksharas*, but read them laboriously, one-by-one. Reading this slowly makes it difficult for children to understand what has been read. Being able to read or spell effortlessly helps them comprehend what is being read or written. Helping build fluency is a key goal in the early grades.
4. **Phonics.** This refers to the ability to recognise the relations between letters/ *aksharas* and sounds. As described in the earlier section, children need to be taught phonics systematically and explicitly. Reading and writing is *not* like learning to speak – it doesn't come naturally, or through immersion and modeling alone. We need to teach young children letter-sound correspondences in a clear manner, and spread it out over time. Menon et al. (2017) have reported that it may take children several years to learn all the *aksharas* used in Indian scripts. Likewise, in the English language, it takes several years for children to become familiar with all the spelling patterns.
5. **Phonological Awareness**¹. Phonological awareness is the ability to notice, think about, and work with the sounds in spoken language. It involves the ability to hear

¹ See ELI Practitioner Brief 5 on ‘Supporting Phonological Awareness in Pre-primary and Primary Classrooms’ to gain insights into how to teach for phonemic awareness and other important aspects under Phonological Awareness.

rhymes, to be able to distinguish words in sentences, to hear syllables within words, and so on. Why is it important for children to be able to hear sounds? Because the texts we read and write are made up of sounds! A young child might benefit from being exposed to exercises that help her see that “बाल” and “बकरी” both start with the /b/ sound; or that “नल” and “फल” both rhyme. Noticing similarities and differences in sounds, being able to put them together (blend them), or take them apart (segment them) – all help children become better at reading, speaking and writing.

Are these five components the only things that children need to learn about reading and writing? Absolutely not! We recommend that in addition to the five components described here, we should help children learn the following:

6. **Oral language development.** Children come to school with a rich repertoire of oral language of their homes. However, some children’s home and school languages are quite different, and they need to acquire a new language at school! Even children who speak the same language at home and school need to continue to grow in their understanding and use of their mother tongue. So, oral language development is a key area to focus on during the early school years.

7. **Literary Knowledge.** Children should be able to appreciate good literature, and be able to respond to it in informed ways. Even very young children can learn to appreciate, understand and respond to good stories and other texts that are read aloud to them.

8. **Critical reading.** It is not enough that children “understand” the texts that they read. They should also be able to critique and respond to the texts they read. While it takes many years to cultivate such skills, foundations can be laid during the early years.

9. **Using reading and writing in their lives.** Children should be taught how to use reading and writing in their daily lives. For example, they could learn to make lists, write letters, explain how to do something through writing, as well as respond to the events of their lives through reading and writing.

This list is not a complete one. We are sure you can think of other “must teach” elements. Please feel free to add your own items to this list. It is intended to just get you started in terms of thinking about *what* is critical to teach in early language and literacy classrooms.

B. How should we teach?

The outer circles of Figure 1 specify several ways by which teachers could teach reading and writing to young learners. Let us try to briefly understand each.

Read Aloud². Typically, in Indian classrooms, teachers read out from the textbook to the students. Students repeat the text, sentence-by-sentence, after the teacher. Here, we introduce a different way for you to read to your students - the read aloud way. In a comprehensive literacy framework, the read aloud is not the time of the day to teach children how to read the *aksharas* and words. Read alouds are times to familiarize children with good literature, and to vocabulary, language use and meaning making. Read alouds also help build a sense of community in the classroom. Vasanthi, for example, could bring in different books in different languages³ to her classroom to ensure a sense of community and belongingness. She could also use simple Kannada story books to familiarize children like Suraj and Bindiya in her class to the language.

Before trying this out in your class, read and keep the following in mind:

1. Start by choosing a “good” book to read out to your students. Avoid textbooks. Look for children’s books or literature, selected from the school or classroom library. Select high quality books to whatever extent possible.⁴ Many Indian publishers are bringing out good literature for young Indian readers. All kinds of texts, such as, fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and so on, could be used for read alouds.



Figures 2 & 3. Read Alouds can be conducted outdoors as well as indoors. We could use Big Books too. Picture Courtesy Poorna Learning Center, Bangalore and Bookworm, Goa

² For a detailed look at conducting Read Alouds, please see ELI Practitioner Brief 9.

³ Some useful links to read detailed reviews of story books from Indian publishers and also access free online storybooks that you could read to your group are – www.goodbooks.in and www.storyweaver.org.in

⁴ For ideas on how to select “good” books, see NCCL Guide to Good Books. National Centre for Children’s Literature (NCCL). (2012). Guide to Good Books: Criteria for selecting quality children’s books.

2. While selecting texts, keep in mind the need to build on the children's background knowledge, even while providing enough elements to challenge their thinking.
3. The next point to remember is that in this approach, you, *the teacher*, has to read out the text to the children. Children are not expected to repeat the text along with you.
4. Try to read out to your children every day. Discuss the book with them before reading it out aloud. For example, discuss the story a little before reading it out, show children some pictures from the text, ask questions around them, explain difficult words, and so on. That way, even children who come from different language backgrounds can understand the story when you start reading it. While reading the text, pause a few times, and discuss interesting ideas that come up. These discussions must be brief, so that the flow of the story is not interrupted. Pausing to explain a difficult word, a confusing concept, to ask a question that makes students think critically, or to point out an illustration – are all excellent reasons to stop and talk during the reading of the text. But remember, the teacher must decide before hand where she wants to pause and why.
5. After reading, it is important to discuss what has been read with the students. Ask them if they liked it, and why. Ask them to show you a place in the book that made them think. Ask them what they agreed/ disagreed with. Help them think about important ideas that may have come up. Help them connect ideas from this book to their writing, or to learning in other content areas. If time runs out, these discussions can continue the next day. Remember, reading aloud without discussions is not as effective as when books are discussed carefully with children.

Modeled Writing. In this approach, the teacher models what good writing is to the students. One easy way to do this is to share your own piece of writing with the students. You can read aloud your writing and discuss your writing process with them. For instance, share how you got the idea for the piece, how you went about writing it, your thinking about how to improve it, and so on. This can be done even with very young writers. For example, young writers often find it difficult to order the events of a story – what happened first, what happened later, and so on. Model for your students how you ordered the events in the story before writing it down. In this way, even very young writers can learn about how more mature writers problem-solve their writing and can learn from it.



Figure 4. Modeled Writing. QUEST, Maharashtra

Shared Reading. In Read Alouds, only the teacher reads, while the students listen. In contrast, shared reading has both the teacher and the students reading the text together. Why should teachers and students read together? When very young readers come into the classroom, they are not yet able to read independently. In Indian classrooms, we ask our young students to read only *aksharas* or simple words and sentences. This can be boring for young children. It also does not help them develop vocabulary, fluency, and critical thinking skills, or encourage reading for fun. By reading aloud stories and engaging in shared reading, children can move beyond the level at which they are currently reading and become confident about their reading abilities.



Figure 5. Shared Reading with a Big Book. QUEST, Maharashtra

A few tips for shared reading:

- The chosen text must have large print, readable even at a distance. You can use “Big Books”, and poems, short stories, or student generated writing written in large letters on a chart paper, or projected clearly so that everyone can read together.
- While conducting a Shared Reading, point to each word of the text (as shown in Figure 4). This way, young children learn the direction that print moves in – and they also pay closer attention to the words that the teacher is pointing to and reading out.
- Choose simple, rhythmic texts which are memorable and fun to repeat. When the texts are read over and over again, children are able to anticipate the repetitive part of the text and “read along”. For example, in the English nursery rhyme, “Old MacDonald”, all the children can join in the reading of the refrain, “Old MacDonald had a farm, Ee-ya-ee-ya-oh!” The repetitive frame of the sentences, “And on that farm he had a _____” also permits children to “read” along, because they can guess the name of the animal from the picture (if there is a picture). Here, even though they may not be reading the words like older children do (by decoding the sounds), young readers are able to participate in the joint reading of the text.
- Read each text aloud multiple times – so that, in later readings, children are able to join in along with you. .

Shared Writing. “Today, I saw a red balloon”. Imagine if you wrote this sentence on the blackboard, and invited children to contribute ideas about what they saw that day. Imagine that Rishi saw a newborn calf. Sharani saw a truck carrying wheat. Praveen saw a football match. You could invite several students to contribute their responses and help them write it on the board. For example, you may write, “Today I saw a _____”. Rishi knows how to write “c” for calf, but doesn’t know how to go further. Together, you could complete the word. Another day, the class could discuss, “Today I ate _____ for breakfast.” On a third day, maybe the class goes on a walk together and comes back wanting to discuss their shared experiences. They could compose a piece of writing together. This is called Shared Writing.

The purpose of such writing is to get children to engage with the written word and to support them with writing beyond their current level. In Shared Writing, the teacher and the children work together to compose messages and stories. You could use this as an opportunity to

model your own thinking to the children, to show what thought processes are involved in writing, and introduce them to some writing conventions. For example, ask, “‘Who took my ball.’ That is a question. Maybe I should add a question mark at the end of that sentence.” And go back and add the question mark. Children will be able to watch and observe how you made that decision. Ask students to contribute ideas for the piece. Act as their scribe as they dictate their ideas. Once done, the piece that was written together can then be re-read several times. It could also later be used for a shared reading activity. In Vasanthi’s class, shared writing approach could be a useful way to engage her diverse group of learners – because each can contribute according to their own levels and capabilities.



Figure 6. Shared Writing. QUEST, Maharashtra

Guided Reading⁵. In Guided Reading, the teacher “releases the responsibility” of reading to the children. Unlike Shared Reading, where the teacher read and children contributed sporadically, here, the children read, while the teacher supports. Steps to take in this approach are:

1. Arrange your students in small, homogenous ability groups by reading level, that is, children with similar needs and instructional reading levels are grouped together.
2. Select a text that is readable by the students with very little support. Thus, unlike in read alouds and shared reading, the texts for Guided Reading must be at the students’

⁵ Please refer to ELI’s blog piece, “From Theory to Practice: Guided Reading Strategies to Support Fluency and Comprehension”, which gives a brief overview on Guided reading, [here](#).

reading level. The objective is to help students to build fluency in reading, along with comprehension, vocabulary and word-solving skills.

3. All students in the same group read the same text at the same time. Each student in the group reads the text on his or her own. Your role is to pay close attention to each child in the group and offer support and provide strategies to support their growth as readers. At the beginning and end of each session, you could address the small group – introduce the text at the start, and discuss the text at the end.



Figure 7. Guided Reading. QUEST, Maharashtra

Guided reading allows for reinforcement and practice of the strategies and techniques that the teacher may have modeled during read alouds or shared reading. This, again, would be a very useful technique for Vasanthi to use – because she can reach different groups of learners at their own learning levels and needs.

Guided Writing. In most Indian classrooms, very little time is given to teaching children to write for expression and communication. In older classes, students are taught how to write letters, essays, and so on, but young children learn mostly how to write for correct spelling and good handwriting. But, there is so much more to good writing than that! Even very young writers can learn how to write in meaningful ways⁶. The remedy is not to give students “free writing” time, where they are asked to write “anything” based on their imagination.

⁶ Please refer to ELI Practitioner Brief 7 for ideas on Creating Books for the Classroom; and to ELI Practitioner Brief 11, Supporting Children’s Writing in Early Grades for more detailed ideas on how to guide children in their writing.

This will not work because while good writers will write well, average writers will remain average and poor writers may lose all interest in the activity, without any structure or input from the teacher into their writing. Rather, we recommend that teachers teach writing in “guided writing” formats, where,

- students are made to understand different kinds of writing out there – for example, writing a story based on own life (personal narrative) versus a fantasy story, or writing a poem, or a letter, and so on.
- teachers model and guide students about the different genres and on how to write in an interesting manner. For example, adding dialogues could add to the interest level of a story.
- support is extended to individual students or during small group conferences.
- teacher coaches and supports students in a variety of writing strategies.
- peers can give each other feedback as well.
- children write more than one draft of a piece, with their second drafts being stronger than the first one with consistency and focused guidance.



Figure 8. Guided Writing. QUEST, Maharashtra

Independent Reading. Children need time to read independently or with a partner. When children are provided with opportunities to read independently, it helps them develop the habit of reading quietly and for themselves. It also helps them value the act of reading,

reflecting on, and experiencing a book or text for pleasure. Children should be able to freely choose the book or text that they want to read during this time.

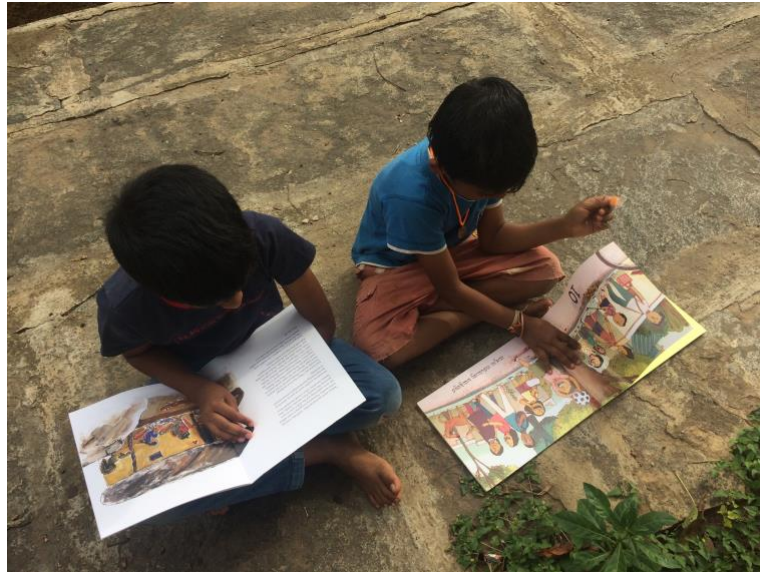


Figure 9. Independent reading. Picture courtesy: Harshita V. Das

Independent Writing. Children should also be given the opportunity to write their own stories or messages. This gives them the opportunity to practice what they have learnt during the shared writing and guided writing activities.



Figure 10. Independent Writing.

A balance in teacher's and students' roles. Look at the different methods suggested here for teaching. You will notice that there is a nice balance in terms of methods that are more teacher-centered and others that are more student-centered, Figure 11 demonstrates how to move from teacher centered approaches to allowing students take greater charge over their own learning curve. While it is important to keep such a trajectory in mind, it is equally

essential to take into consideration each student's learning level and ability which could determine the kind of support they need.

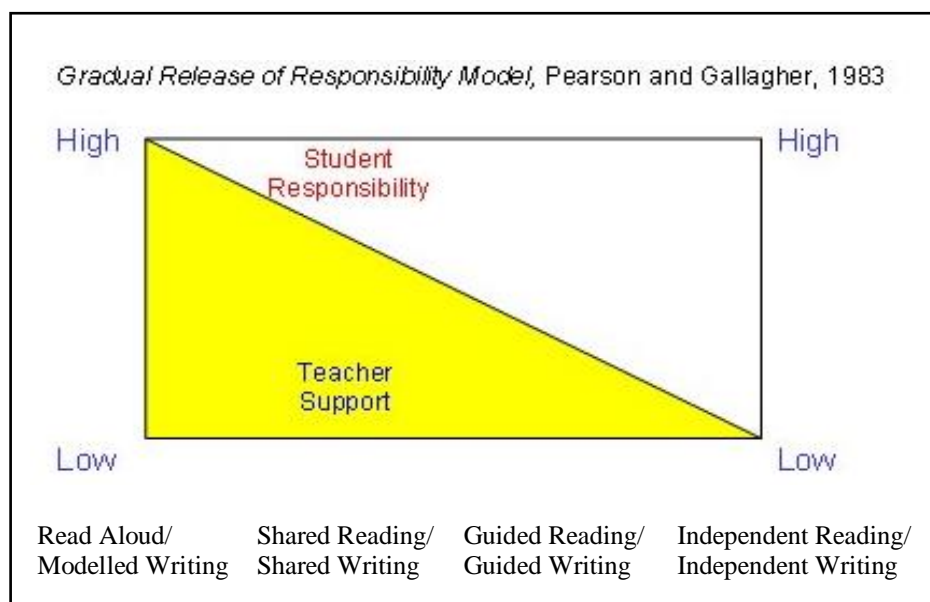


Figure 11. Approaches to teaching reading and writing.

C. With what should we teach?

We now come to the third question we set out to answer. It is clear that textbooks are not enough to allow us to teach in all the ways described in the earlier two sections. So, what other kinds of material should a teacher use in a comprehensive literacy classroom? A brief list might include the following:

- *Textbooks.* Textbooks can be used in the classroom, especially for guided reading practice. If the textbook is not at the child's reading level, then alternative material would be needed for children reading far below or above the textbook's level. Otherwise, many children can make use of the textbook lessons for guided reading practice.
- *Children's literature.* We cannot have a Comprehensive Literacy classroom without access to good children's literature. Reading aloud and shared reading both depend on a good supply of children's books. If your school does not have a library, please inquire into how you can help establish one⁷. The library should also lend books out

⁷ Please refer ELI Practitioner Brief 3, "Promoting Language and Literacy Development Through School Libraries", for activities that can be used to get children engaged in libraries.

to students for independent reading time. Additionally, you can set up a reading corner in your classroom⁸.

- *Worksheets.* Worksheets have a place in your classroom too! They provide practice for skills that have been covered in class.
- *Games and activities to teach letters, sounds, and letter-sound relationships.* A variety of materials are needed for this purpose, from letter/*akshara* cards, to sands and beads that children can use to trace letters, to games, puzzles and other activities that they can use to become fluent readers and writers⁹.
- *Print-rich environment.* Your classroom walls and environment should be filled with a variety of meaningful print that young children can relate to¹⁰. This should include children's own writing and drawings.
- *Assorted materials.* These could include items like puppets and props for story-telling, paper, pencils, crayons, slates, and so on.

This is not a comprehensive or complete list. Please feel free to add your own favorite materials to this list!

Comprehensive Literacy in the Classroom Context: Is it Practical?

The position paper on Early Language and Literacy in India (Center for Early Childhood Education and Development, 2016) recommends that a comprehensive approach be taken in the classroom. But, how can a teacher with limited time and space create a comprehensive literacy classroom? Is it practical in Indian contexts where there are so many obstacles to teaching well? Several practitioners working with a variety of NGOs in India have tried to answer this question by experimenting with the comprehensive literacy framework in their settings. One such practitioner, Keerti Jayaram (Organization for Early Literacy Promotion-OELP), has written about and published her experiences in a two-part series in the

⁸ Please refer ELI Practitioner Brief 8, "Creating a Print-rich Environment in the Class", to know more about the classroom library/ reading corner.

⁹ Please refer ELI Practitioner Brief 6, "Learning the Script", for a variety of decoding activities that teach letter-sound relationships.

¹⁰ Please refer to ELI Practitioner Brief 8 to understand how to set up a Print-rich environment.

*Contemporary Education Dialogue*¹¹. Her work, conducted in government schools in New Delhi, and later in highly disadvantaged settings in Ajmer¹² proves that this framework is adaptable and usable even in resource-scarce settings with motivated teachers¹³. In her work Jayaram (2012) emphasizes that when working in many Indian contexts, it is important to spend time building and strengthening the foundations for a meaningful engagement with reading and writing; along with building skills. In other words, with first generation school children, establishing the relevance of literacy in their minds is as important as building skills.

In order to make sure that there is enough time for everything, it is important to organize both time and space in your classroom. In the next section, we suggest some practical ways in doing so.

Organizing time: The “block” approach

The *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat* document published by India’s Ministry for Human Resource Development (2014) recommends that at least two-and-a-half hours per day, out of a six-hour school day, be spent on early language and literacy activities in the primary grades. Language is a foundation for all other learning – and is a priority in the early years. Even if so much time cannot be managed, try to take out one to one-and-a-half hours (90 minutes) of time per day for teaching language and literacy. Organize your weekly schedule into “blocks”. A minimum of four blocks should be included in your weekly schedule – Read Aloud/ Shared Reading, Word Work, Guided Reading, and Guided Writing. In addition to this, independent reading/ writing time could be worked out through library time and homework assignments. Assume that each block is 30 minutes long and you have three such blocks in a day; you would have 15 blocks of time in a week + 1 block for library. Table 1 shows a sample time-table of activities – you can adapt and make this your own.

¹¹Jayaram, K. (2008a). Early Literacy Project – Explorations and Reflections Part 1: Theoretical Perspectives. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 5 (2), 133-175.

Jayaram, K. (2008b). Early Literacy Project – Explorations and Reflections Part 2: Interventions in Hindi Classrooms. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 5 (2), 175-212.

¹² For more details on her work in Ajmer, see: <https://www.oelp.org/>

¹³ Keerti Jayaram has also written a blog piece for ELI on building script knowledge within a balanced literacy framework, to which we would refer interested readers: <http://eli.tiss.edu/oelaps-approach-to-building-script-knowledge-in-beginning-readers-and-writers/>

Table 1

Sample Time-Table

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Block 1 (30 mins)	Reading Aloud/ Shared Reading	Reading Aloud/ Shared Reading	Modeled/ Shared Writing	Reading Aloud/ Shared Reading	Reading Aloud/ Shared Reading
<p>What do children learn during this block?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehension • Oral language development • Vocabulary • Literary appreciation (including understanding of different genres) • Concepts of print – how does print work? • Critical reading 					
Block 2 (30 mins)	Word Work	Word Work	Word Work	Word Work	Word Work
<p>What do children learn during this block?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phonological Awareness • Phonics • Vocabulary 					
Block 3 (30 mins)	Guided Reading	Guided Reading	Guided Reading	Guided Writing	Guided Writing
	<p>What do children learn during this block?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluency • Comprehension • Vocabulary 			<p>What do children learn during this block?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies for becoming a good writer • Understanding different genres of writing • Vocabulary and comprehension 	

If you have more than one-and-a-half hours per day for language, we would recommend that you conduct a Read Aloud every day, and that you increase the time allocated for Guided Reading and Guided Writing. The assumption is that children can borrow books from the library and read independently at home or during free time in school.

Organizing space

To organize space, try these simple recommendations:

1. Use the walls of your classroom to put up samples of children's written work, art-work, words you want them to learn (word walls or word trees), rules you want them to remember, and so on. Label everything in your classroom.
2. Keep materials organized in little boxes that can be stacked up when not in use, and handy when you need them. The "writing box" should contain all materials that children may need for their writing work – including pencils, crayons, erasers, paper, glue, even stamps that the children can use to "stamp" their work. The "word work" box can have letter cut-outs, games and activities appropriate for the age group you are working with, sand trays for letter tracing, beads, and so on. The "reading box" should contain a variety of children's books.
3. String up a clothesline in your classroom and hang children's books from the line. These are the books that you will read aloud to them from; while the books in the reading box can be browsed independently by them during free time. Please change the books on your "display line" every week or two.
4. If your classroom is large enough, consider creating a "reading" and a "writing" corner in well-lit places in your classroom, where these materials are invitingly arranged.
5. Maintain folders for each child where you can store their work (writing, for example), as well as your own notes and assessments of each child.

Conclusion

We have not given you (or, Vasanthi) any simple answers on how you can reach all the diverse, unique and precious learners in your classroom. Maybe, we have left several of Vasanthi's questions completely unanswered. But we hope we have addressed her broad question about which method she should use to best reach all her students.

Here, we have tried to do two things. One, we have provided you with a very broad framework of ideas that you will need to take up, understand better, try out in your own

contexts and classrooms, and adapt, as needed. The Comprehensive Literacy Framework offers a balanced approach that gives equal importance to acquiring the nuts and bolts of reading – strategies for decoding and automatically recognizing letters and sounds- as well as to comprehension, meaning-making, and so on. It emphasizes the need for exposing children to a variety of genres in literature and to a variety of print material that can be read or written with. It offers ample space for supporting all aspects of reading, writing, listening and speaking. It invokes the “gradual release of responsibility” model (Duke & Pearson, 2002) where the teacher first models, then, works along with the students (through shared and guided reading and writing formats), and only then expects students to work independently. Thus, it provides ample space for teacher modelling, as well as for children to practice and apply their knowledge and learning.

Two, through this practitioner’s brief, we hope that we have emphasised the idea that teaching children to learn to read and write is not a matter of knowing or adopting *one* method or technique. It requires a deep understanding of a variety of techniques and perspectives, and knowing how to balance these well in order to create a comprehensive literacy classroom. Neither does mastering the script, learning to write neatly, or to pronounce the words correctly, mean that the child has become a good reader or writer. The child must be engaged with good quality literature, provided modeled and guided opportunities to become a skillful and engaged reader and writer through a variety of ways. We have tried to convince you that it is possible to create such a space. In fact, not just possible, it is *necessary* that you create these opportunities in order for children to become truly literate.

Finally, an important point to bear in mind is that this framework or anything else you might read, should not be reduced to a mere method. Balance does not mean “one size fits all” (Fitzgerald, 1999). Reflective teachers need to constantly adapt their approaches to the needs of their classrooms and learners!

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