



---

# USING MOTHER TONGUE TO FACILITATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN LOW EXPOSURE SETTINGS

---

Early Literacy Initiative  
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad

Practitioner Brief (18)  
2019

Supported by

**TATA TRUSTS**

This Practitioner Brief is part of a series brought out by the Early Literacy Initiative anchored by the Azim Premji School of Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad.

---

*Using Mother Tongue to Facilitate English Language Learning  
in Low Exposure Settings*

---

Shivani Miss is a government school teacher who teaches English and Social Studies in Udaipur district of Rajasthan. She studied in a local Marathi-medium government school herself where, her exposure to English only began from sixth class onwards. She's done her B.A. and pursued Social Studies as a pedagogy subject during her B.Ed. While she was appointed to teach only Social Studies, due to shortage of teachers and her better grasp over English as compared to her fellow teachers, she was given the additional responsibility to teach English. The following conversation echoes her woes and worries about teaching English:

Interviewer: What is your experience teaching English to students? Since when have you been teaching English?

Teacher: *First I used to teach only Social Studies. For the past two years, I have started teaching English because the English Sir retired. There is no one else who can teach now, so, I have to teach it. I like teaching Social Studies because I have learnt it in college so that is good. However, sometimes I feel unprepared to teach English because I don't know it well.*

Interviewer: How do you teach English?

Teacher: *I read the chapter from the textbook and then translate it to students in Hindi after few sentences because otherwise they don't understand. The words are difficult for them. Understanding Hindi is itself a huge thing because they speak other languages at home. For them, English is out of the question without translating.*

Interviewer: What kind of challenges do you face while teaching English?

Teacher: *We, as teachers ourselves struggle with English because we were taught only from sixth grade onwards. I try to do some activities with them and try to talk to them in English. Students don't respond to me when I speak in English to them because it is all new for them. They have not heard these words before and don't know how to respond. So, I used to translate in Hindi a lot but the HM and even other trainers tell us to use English only with them if they want to learn it. We have to listen to them also.*

Interviewer: What do you think about using English in the classroom to teach?

Teacher: *My English is good to teach young children, but they will not understand English directly, because they don't come from English backgrounds. I have been asked to teach older children also and their textbooks have long chapters and difficult words. Teaching only in English becomes difficult because they lose interest if they don't understand.*

Interviewer: How often do you use Hindi to teach English? Do you use any other languages?

Teacher: *I have started using a little Hindi and sometimes even Mewadi (local language) for them to learn and understand. At least, they understand and give answers if I ask them in Hindi or Mewadi. Otherwise, in English class, they are very silent. I know we are told only to use English but what can we do? We have to translate otherwise they won't learn.*

Shivani Miss's worries are echoed in the experiences of many other teachers in India. The biggest challenge they face is to teach English in a manner that students understand and respond to them. In this brief, we will explore the possibility of using a multilingual approach to address this challenge. We believe that such pedagogies can help students to learn English through their mother tongue (MT) in settings where exposure to English is low.

### **English Language Teaching in India: The Need for an Alternative**

English has established itself as a *lingua-franca*<sup>1</sup> in most countries; India is no exception. Naturally, the need to learn English has grown, since it provides access to many opportunities. Due to growing demands, many states have introduced English from the first grade of the government school curriculum. For most Indian children, English is not their home language. It's not even their second language, since many students come from low exposure settings. English is often a language that is far removed from the student's context and is a foreign language for them to learn. However, given the prevailing importance (socially and economically) surrounding it, it is important to explore effective pedagogies that enable students to learn English in the elementary grades.

---

<sup>1</sup> A language that is adopted as a common language between speakers whose native languages are different.

At present, the most prevalent methods for teaching English in India are Grammar Translation<sup>2</sup> and Direct Method<sup>3</sup> which use methods for teaching children only in English. However, such approaches are challenging to implement in many parts of India due to low-exposure to English, the teachers' limited knowledge of English, and limited opportunities to use the language on a daily basis. Many educational contexts in India, therefore, require English language pedagogies that are sensitive to these issues and also aware of the low exposure to the target language outside of the classroom. Keeping this in mind, it becomes crucial to explore methods beyond what are being practiced at present.

Research conducted over the past several decades (but mostly in Western contexts) suggests that the first language (L1) can be used as a resource in teaching a second language (L2). For example, Vivian Cook strongly recommends that "...it is time to open a door that has been firmly shut in language teaching for over a 100 years, namely the systematic use of the L1 in the classroom" (Cook, 2001, p. 403). Even though theorists have discouraged the use of L1 in L2 teaching, this does not mean that L1 remains shut out of real classrooms. In fact, Jhingran (2009) has pointed out that there could be a large difference between the official medium of instruction and the actual languages in which children are taught. Some teachers use L1 minimally, while others use it extensively to help children understand and learn.

Some scholars (e.g., Garcia & Wei, 2014) have pointed out that many of these theories have been developed in largely monolingual countries, and therefore, are limited in terms of their understanding of how multilingual brains actually work. These scholars argue that multilingual speakers do not categorize languages as "L1", "L2", and so on, but mix and use them fluidly based on the needs of the context. Most contemporary Indians would be able to identify with this theory, because we know that we mix our languages freely, creating strange mixtures of Hindi and English, Marathi and Hindi, and so on. Especially in the early years, it would be important to permit children to mix their languages, so that they can use the support of the languages they know better, to access the languages that they know less.

---

<sup>2</sup> A traditional method of teaching that placed the most emphasis on the explanation of grammar rules, translation exercises and long lists of vocabulary and their meanings were meant to be learned by heart. The focus on oral skill development was low.

<sup>3</sup> A method that approached second language learning by creating forced-monolingual settings where only the Target Language was to be used to teach the language. "English-only" Classrooms are an example of this.

Will this mixing of languages cause children to suffer in terms of learning the new language? We know from an entire body of work conducted by Jim Cummins and his colleagues (see Cummins, 1991) that multilingual speakers appear to develop a “common underlying proficiency” for the several languages that they know, and this proficiency allows them to transfer knowledge between languages. For example, a child who has learned how to read in Hindi has understood a variety of things about how language works. She knows that all the abstract symbols (the *aksharas*) stand for sounds; she knows that she needs to blend the sounds in the words that she reads; if taught well, she has also learned that she is expected to make meaning of words; how to find out the meanings of unfamiliar words, how to use punctuation while reading or writing, and the like. Depending on her classroom culture, she may have learned how to discuss the meaning of what she has read with others, as well. When she learns English (or, any other language), all of these understandings can be transferred to the new language. Therefore, rather than seeing the first language as a barrier to learning the new language, scholars working in this tradition encourage us to use the first language as a *bridge* to second language learning. But, would this work in Indian settings where the exposure to English is very low? The first author of this piece (Riya Parikh) decided to explore this question as her Masters of Education research project, under the guidance of the second author (Shailaja Menon).

### **Teacher Research in Maharashtra**

We decided to work with an organization, Quality Education Support Trust (QUEST), a non-governmental organisation that works largely in tribal areas of Maharashtra. Its main office is located in Sonale village (Wada Taluka, Palghar district), which is home to the, Katkari, Malhar Koli and Warli tribes. These three tribes, classified amongst the primitive tribes, together form nearly 70% of the population in that area (Kulkarni, 2008). In addition, there is a significant proportion of the population who are classified as OBC (Other Backward Castes). As per the Census data 2011, the literacy rate of Wada is 63%. QUEST runs supplementary educational programmes in several schools in that area.

Riya planned to conduct a “teacher research” study in a government school classroom where QUEST was running an intervention. Teacher research is a systematic collection, reflection and interpretation of data that the teacher collects on her own actions while teaching, with the

aim of better understanding and/ or improving her practice (Wallace, 1998). Having observed the high felt need for English and its inaccessibility in different settings, the question that we had initially wished to explore was: Can MT be used as a bridge for learning English in low-exposure (to English) settings? Initial observations conducted at the setting suggested that the teachers themselves struggled with some of the problems that Shivani Miss faced in the vignette presented at the beginning of this brief. We thought that using the children's MT might help ease children's transition to English. However, Riya did not know the MTs of children who spoke tribal languages in the classroom. Therefore, while not ideal, we decided to use Marathi – a language that is in the children's daily environments – as the bridge language to English. A mixed-grade classroom of third- and fourth-grade students who were conversationally familiar with Marathi were included in the project. These students had been learning English for three to four years, but had very low proficiency in understanding, speaking, reading or writing it. They knew the letters of the English alphabet, but beyond that, their knowledge of the language was minimal. Accordingly, a plan for exploring this question was collaboratively designed, and Riya spent six weeks (November-December 2018) teaching English to 22 third- and fourth Grade students in a *Zilla Parishad* (government) school in that area. Here, we will not report on all the details of the teacher research study; but we will describe a process for English language teaching that evolved over the course of the study, which seemed to hold promise. Of course, six weeks is too short a time to reach firm conclusions; and we are only describing here one set of processes that worked for us – perhaps there are others. We hope that what we share here will be useful for other practitioners struggling with similar issues.

### **Pedagogical Principles**

We designed our study on the basis of a few assumptions or principles for teaching, which we describe briefly here.

**First language as a resource in second language learning.** We decided to use Cook's (2001) recommendation that a known language be utilized in an active and systematic manner to teach the unknown one. In our study, Marathi was the known language. We decided to legitimize the use of Marathi in the classroom by using certain approaches, such as:

- a. creating active links between the Marathi and English through translations; or, by using Marathi for discussions around interpreting the meaning of the text better.

- b. using it for classroom-management such as maintaining discipline, explaining tasks, gaining contact with individual students.
- c. using it for presentation and explanation of rules on grammar, phonology and spellings.

**Teaching languages using a “comprehensive” or “balanced” literacy framework that uses multiple practices and materials.** The comprehensive literacy approach (Fitzgerald, 1999, cited in Position Paper on Early Language and Literacy in India, 2016)<sup>4</sup> is based on a few principles that we decided to use in our project:

- a. *What to teach.* We decided to focus on teaching children multiple aspects about language, such as, decoding, comprehension strategies, fluency, ways to respond to literature, writing, and so on, simultaneously.
- b. *How to teach.* We decided to use a variety of methods for teaching language – from reading aloud to children, to discussions and oral conversations, phonics instruction, and opportunities for shared and guided reading and writing.
- c. *With what to teach.* A variety of teaching materials were used, including charts, activity cards, textbooks, children’s literature, and so on. We decided to use bilingual books and other kinds of materials that are developed based on classroom proceedings. We also decided that story books would be first introduced in Marathi, and only then in English.

Thus, what is taught, how it is taught, and the teaching materials used, should all provide flexibility and balance, shunning neither skills nor the process of learning a language.

**Insights from Krashen’s Natural Approach (1982).** Krashen is a prominent thinker in the world of second language learning who proposed the “natural approach” to learning a second language. While we did not adopt this approach in its totality, we took a few principles from this approach, such as:

- a. *Providing comprehensible input and keeping the focus on meaning.* The likelihood for learning English increases when the target language is provided in a form that is only

---

<sup>4</sup> See: ELI’s Practitioner Brief 12, “[Comprehensive Literacy Instruction Model in Indian Classrooms](#)” to learn more.

“a little beyond” what we already know. This is called “comprehensible input”, and all our lessons were planned with that in mind.

- b. *Creating a low affective filter in language classrooms.* In order for language acquisition to not be affected by various stress-related barriers, we tried to create a stress-free environment that did not induce fear or avoidance in the children.
- c. *Provision of interesting and relevant inputs.* We decided to include topics that the learners are interested in and find important, to keep motivation to learn high.
- d. *No forced language-production and error-correction.* Krashen suggests that first-time learners of the language must not be forced to speak or write in the new language until they feel ready and comfortable to do so. In the initial phases, error-correction must be avoided or kept at a minimum to not discourage the learner from expressing completely. Additionally, in case of error-correction instead of directly pointing out the error, the teacher would model the correct alternative. For example:

Child: I *eated* in morning.

Teacher: Yes, that’s right. I also *ate* in the morning.

### **Learnings and Recommendations**

We used these principles to design our approach based on which Riya taught English for six-weeks in Sonale. We found these strategies to be quite useful in our work! Here we describe some of our learnings and recommendations arising from our work. We change the language from “Riya/we did” (learning), to “you could” (recommendation) throughout this section – we hope the readers can follow along!

**Selecting appropriate children’s literature.** We found it to be very helpful and important to introduce a variety of texts (in a bilingual mode) that would create a space for storytelling in two languages and in engaging with the different themes of the stories. The selection of books should be done before-hand -- keeping in mind the context, age and fluency of the students. A few considerations are listed here.

- The books selected were available in Marathi and English (e.g., *Rani’s First Day at School*, Pratham Publishers; *Annual Haircut Day*, Pratham Publishers; *Maharani, the Cow*, Tulika Publishing), hence, the same book was used in both languages. A few of the books selected were bilingual (i.e., it had both Marathi and English text within the same book).



- Books that were approximately 6-7 pages in length, with only one or two simple sentences per page were ideal for the age-level of the students.
- They were all picture-books (see Figure 1), so students had a lot of support from the illustrations.



*Figure 1.* Classroom library in multiple languages that were used during the English classes.  
**Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.

- Most students preferred the bilingual books over individual English and Marathi books since they could refer to the Marathi text whenever they found the English to be difficult. However, this also led students to refer to Marathi, when the focus was to remain on the English text. Keeping that in mind, it is recommended to use more bilingual books in the beginning, but to move to books with individual languages, over time.

### **Bilingual read-aloud and creating a “meaning bridge” between Marathi and English.**

Riya developed a particular process that worked quite well.

*Day 1. Reading aloud and discussing text in known language.* On the first day, a book was read-aloud in the known language – that is, Marathi. During this read-aloud, she engaged the

students in discussions by asking a variety of questions that sparked their interest and drew them into the conversations. The questions were asked in Marathi initially; but, if the teacher feels that children would find the English easy enough, the question could be asked in English. Or, the teacher could ask the questions in the known language first, and then repeat it in English.

After the read-aloud, do allow some time for discussion in the known language about students' thoughts on the theme of the book. In this case, the book was discussed with the students in Marathi, because they could comfortably and easily express their thinking in this language and build their understanding about it. An activity was also conducted after the discussion. The class can collectively decide which themes they want to engage with in the post-book activity (drawing/writing). For example, during the first week after the read-aloud on *Rani's First Day at School*, students drew pictures of their first school (see Figure 3) and wrote about what they saw and how they felt on their first day of school.



*Figure 2.* Students reading books in Marathi and English simultaneously. **Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.



*Figure 3.* Students' drawings of their schools after the read-aloud. Students were asked to label places in MT, English, or both. **Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.

*Day 2. Revisiting text in known language, and creating a “meaning-bridge” to unknown language.* On the second day, the class can do a “picture-reading” of the book to revisit the details about what had happened in the plot of the story. A picture-reading is when the teacher walks the students through the pictures in the book, and discusses these with them. While doing the picture-reading, the teacher could ask students various leading questions about details in the story, and through their responses (which would be in the known language, or sometimes in English), *key phrases* from the plot could be introduced in English. These key phrases should be written on the board and the teacher could point to the phrase

written on the board while reading it out. This helps in creating a “meaning-bridge” between the Marathi and English text and in providing exposure to both written and spoken English at the same time.

Here is an example from the fifth week of the study which will illustrate this process. The following conversation happened in a mixture of Marathi and English.

T: काल आपण काय वाचलं होता? (What did we read yesterday?)

S: (mixed responses): गाय, महाराणी, पुस्तक, गाय ची पुस्तक (Cow, Maharani, Book, Book on Cow)

T: बरोबर. ते गायचं नाव काय होता? (Right. What was the Cow's name?)

S: महाराणी. (Maharani)

T: लेखकांनी गोष्टीची सुरुवात कशी केली होती? (How did the writer begin the story?)

S: गाय रस्त्यावर बसली होती. (Cow was sitting on the road)

T: हो बरोबर. पण हे गोष्टी कधी घडत आहे? (Yes, right. But when was this story set?)

S: दुपारी, उन्हाळा. (Afternoon, Summer)

T: बरोबर. दुपारी म्हणजे afternoon आणि उन्हाळा म्हणजे afternoon. It was a late summer afternoon.

(Right. In English, it is called a summer afternoon. It was a late summer afternoon).

T: आणि महाराणी कुठे बसली होती? (And where was Maharani sitting?)

S: रस्त्यावर. (Road/Street)

T: हो बरोबर. तो रास्ता कसा होता? (Yes, right. And how was that road?)

S: मोठा, ट्रॅफिक वाला, धूळकत, शहराचा रास्ता. (Big, Traffic, Dusty, City street)

T: हो. महाराणी एक शहराच्या बाजारतल्या धूळकत रस्त्यावर बसली होती. त्याला English मध्ये

एक dusty, crowded street म्हणतात. (Yes. Maharani was sitting on a city crowded street

which was dusty. In English, we would say it was a dusty, crowded street.)

The phrases, “late summer afternoon” and “dusty, crowded street” were written on the board (see Figure 4) and read out loud. This pattern continued throughout the picture-reading of the book, thus forming a “meaning-bridge” from the Marathi text to English text<sup>5</sup>.

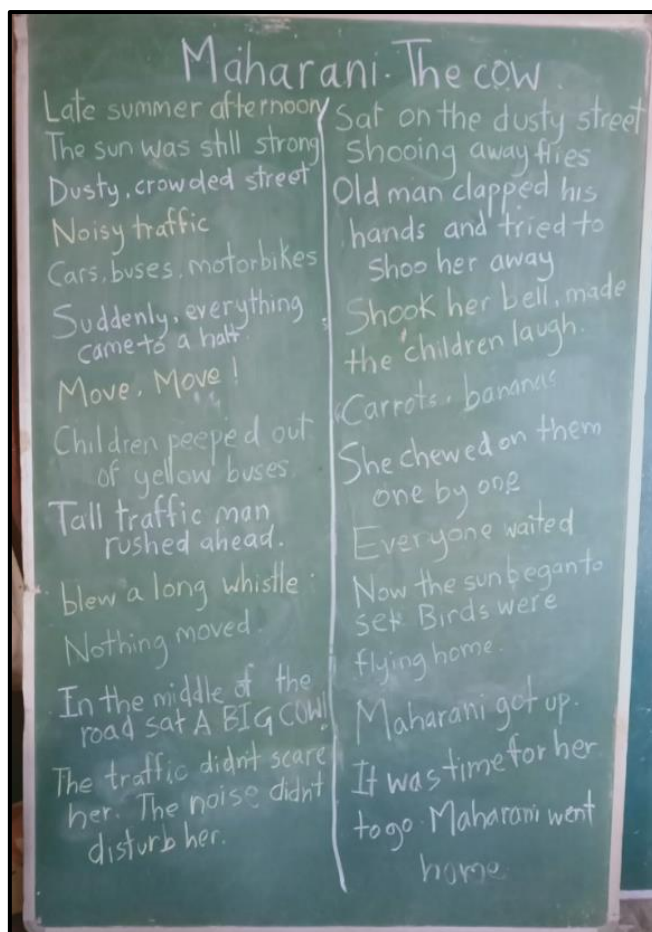


Figure 4. Blackboard image during “Maharani, the Cow” read-aloud and meaning-bridge. Image Courtesy: Riya Parikh.

*Day 3. Reading aloud in unknown language.* By the third day, the children are ready for a read-aloud of the same text in English. By this point, the students would have become very familiar with the plot and would also have received their first exposure to phrases from the text in English. This process of reading-aloud and developing a meaning bridge increased students’ responses during the period of the study and was one of the major contributing factors in increasing students’ comprehension of the English texts. To ensure student comprehension and focus on meaning, the teacher could continue to ask questions in the known language.

<sup>5</sup> Watch the video in which Riya and her group create the “meaning-bridge” [here](#).

**Descriptive Writing (six-step process).** Riya also developed a six-step descriptive writing process (see Figure 5).

*Step 1.* Students discuss or draw about a particular theme from the book and then write about it in their known language. It was observed that when students wrote in Marathi first, their

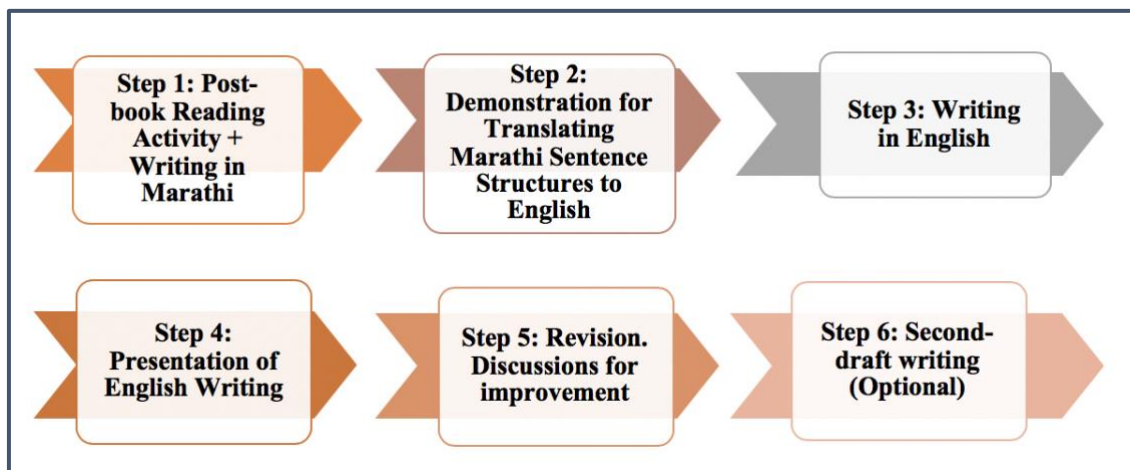


Figure 5. Six-step descriptive writing process.

flow of thinking was not restricted--as it would have been if they wrote directly in English due to lack of vocabulary, grammar and knowledge of script. This resulted in writing that was better structured with more supporting details. Writing in a language known to students ensures that their individual expression and voice isn't restricted.

*Step 2.* Invite a few students to share their writing with the class and record part of their writing on the blackboard. After this, demonstrate how a few sentences (choose similar sentence structures) could be written in English (see Figure 6).

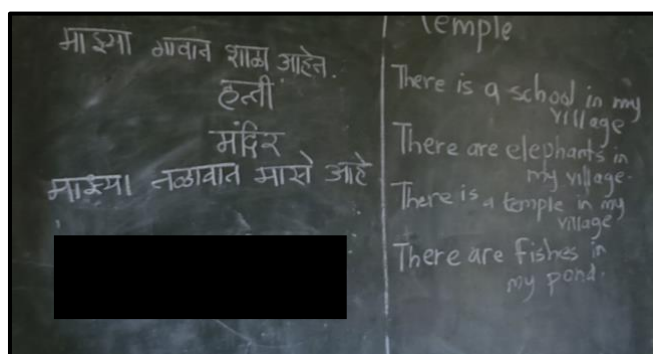


Figure 6. Marathi writing by a student and its English translation done in class.  
Image Courtesy: Riya Parikh.



Step 3. Space and time should be given to students to write their known language pieces in English, after the demonstration by you in Step 2. Students should not be forced to write only in English but can be encouraged to mix English with their known language in their writing. As a facilitator, be around to help children out with ideas, vocabulary and spellings. Such an activity allows for many different writing styles to evolve as shown in several students' writing in figure 7 (a-d).

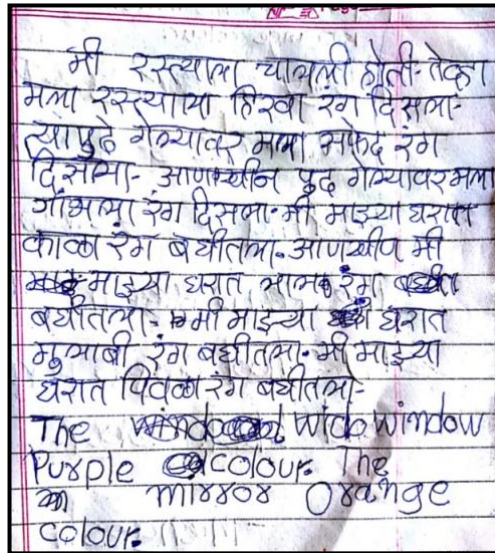


Figure 7a. Mostly Marathi with few words or sentences in English.

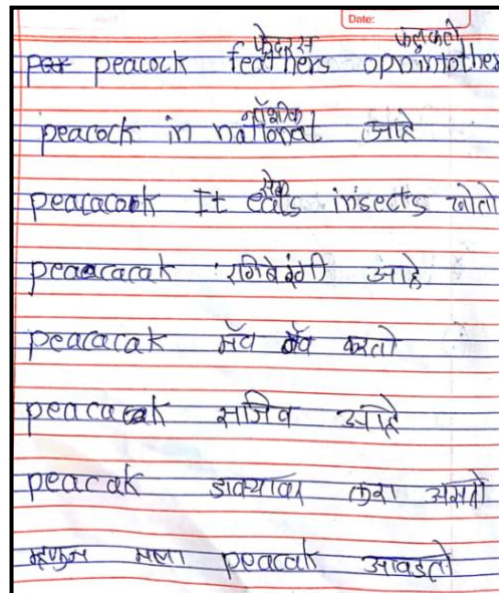


Figure 7b. Mixed Marathi and English sentences. Some Marathi words are written in the Roman script. Some English words are written in the Devanagari script. Students writing in this format would often ask for spelling in English for a Marathi word ('What is the spelling for घर in English?'). It can be observed that students using such formats did not differentiate between two languages and their scripts in their minds and were fluid in their language as well as script usage.

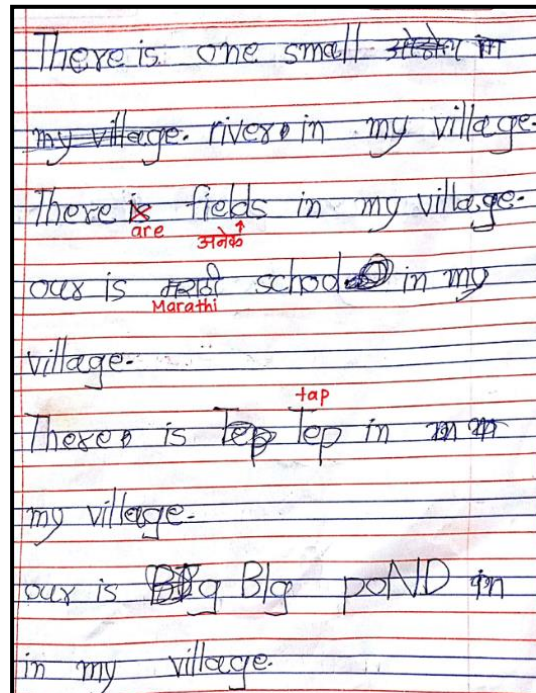


Figure 7c. Mostly English with few unknown words or sentences in Marathi. There are invented spellings for English words. Corrections were made alongside students for pre-learned concepts, as a part of demonstrating correct usage.

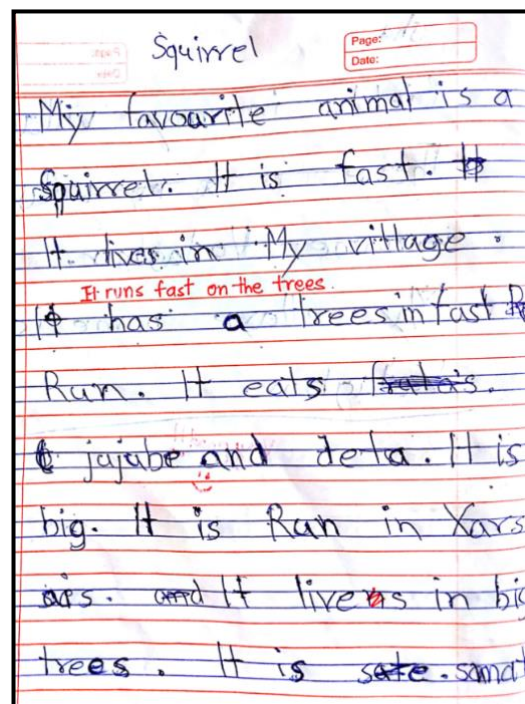
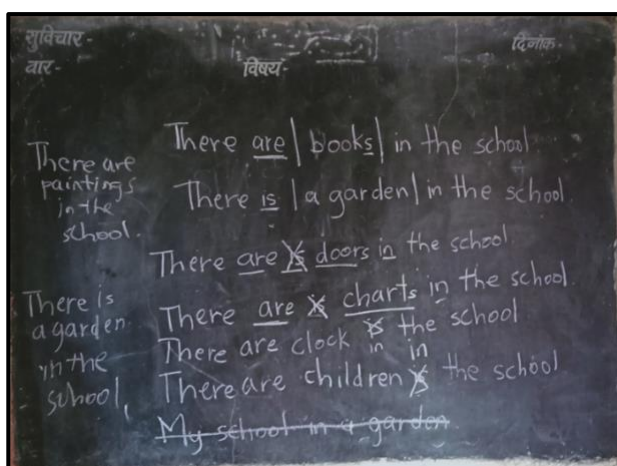


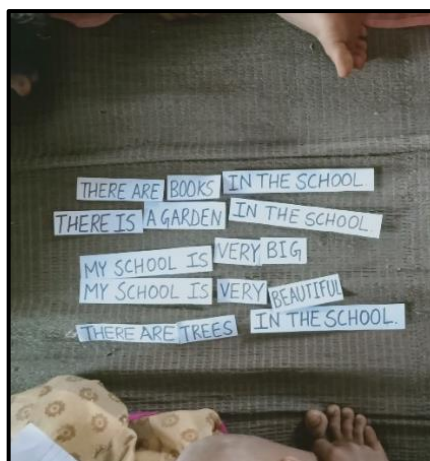
Figure 7d. Written entirely in English with few errors in sentence structures and invented spellings. Most students who wrote at this stage took help with vocabulary and idea structuring during independent writing. Corrections were made alongside students for pre-learned concepts, as a part of demonstrating correct usage.

*Step 4.* Once students complete writing in a mixture of known language and English, a few students can be invited again to share their writing with the class. Other students can engage in giving responses to questions about the meaning of particular sentences, or to the overall writing. This step allows students to move back from English to discussing it in the known language. Such two-way interactions between English and the known language support meaning-making.

*Step 5.* After a session of individual writing and analysing the written responses, if the need arises, a short session can be devoted to teaching formally correct sentence structures, in order to avoid common or repetitive mistakes. Such sessions should only be conducted after three to four exposures to a particular sentence structure, and can be conducted with the help of activities that would provide more exposure instead of drilling and extensive form-correction. For example, in figures 8 and 9, students were taught the use of ‘is’ and ‘are’ through a mini-lesson and an activity to promote correct sentence structure usage.



*Figure 8.* Mini-lessons for error-correction.  
**Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.



*Figure 9.* Activities for giving exposure to sentence structure. **Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.

*Step 6 (Optional).* Space should be provided for second-draft writing for students who are willing to rework their writing. Second-drafts help students increase supporting details in their writing, or to experiment with the use of newly learned English words or sentence structures. At this stage, a few corrections (grammar, spelling, punctuation) can be suggested by the teacher, although *at no point is formal correctness the goal during the initial teaching of English in low exposure settings!*



**Word Hunt.** This activity can be conducted after the read-aloud and the descriptive writing. In this activity, students (in groups) can engage with books from both languages to search for particular words they wish to learn and their corresponding meanings. The teacher can distribute papers where students can write their words down, and can help students who are struggling to find words. After this activity, the teacher can write all the words selected by the students on the board (see Figure 10) to give the class exposure to all the words explored, thus enhancing their collective vocabulary. Such an activity allows students to engage carefully and search carefully for word meanings in the texts, which results in increased exposure to words and their meanings in both languages.

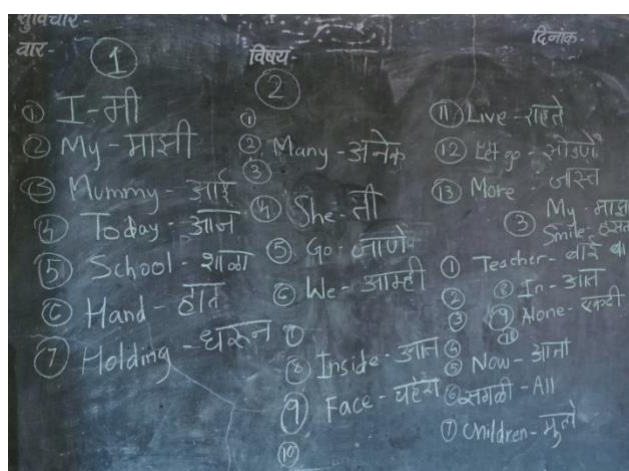


Figure 10. Word hunt. **Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.

**Choral reading.** Choral reading is a strategy in which students and the teacher can read parts of the text together, and then students can read it again as a group in chorus. This strategy was introduced in order to expose students to various aspects of learning English (such as, intonation, letter-sound combinations, syllable-breaking etc.) through demonstration and practice. This can be introduced once the read-aloud has happened in both the languages, or as a final step in the process.

**Repeated engagement with known texts.** On a daily basis, students can be encouraged to read the books introduced in class by creating a classroom library<sup>6</sup>. This can be on an independent basis as well as in groups. Ideas, words, phrases, spellings introduced in earlier books can be invoked during discussions and writing around new books.

<sup>6</sup> See: ELI's Practitioner Brief 17, "[Setting Up a Classroom Library to Support Early Language and Literacy](#)" for more on how to set up a classroom library.

**Which language should the teacher speak in?**

The teacher can switch between English and the known language to maintain a balance between providing exposure and ensuring comprehensible input. During initial weeks, the teacher can use more of the known language, as compared to English which increases comfort for the students. It also improves student understanding. Once classroom routines are in place, a few common instructions can be repeated in English after stating them in the known language. In the beginning, this sort of repetition can seem time consuming, however, this is a way to ensure understanding as well as provide students with much needed exposure to English. There were instances in Riya's classroom, when English was spoken directly. This was in cases when she was sure that the meaning of a sentence was definitely known to the students.

It is important that the teacher consciously uses both languages in the classroom, especially English. This supports children in acquiring phonological representations (how a word sounds) of words, as well as familiarity with new vocabulary, grammar, even idioms and expressions in the new language, even while it creates an atmosphere of ease in learning this language.

**Is this pedagogy effective?**

While it is not possible to draw grand conclusions from a small, short-term teacher research project, we did find that using a multilingual pedagogy supported the learning of students in Riya's classroom over the six weeks. We found that using the known language in the classroom can:

- lead to building a sense of familiarity and comfort for students.
- support teachers who have limited comfort in the use of English since opportunities to use it are limited in their contexts. The teachers in the government school in which these classes were conducted felt that this was less intimidating for them to try, than to use English alone.
- help in keeping higher motivation and interest levels in a language classroom, which is crucial for overall language learning and expression of thought.
- help students with comprehension, and with expressing and developing their thinking.
- support teaching English in a contextualized manner.

But...did the students' capabilities in English increase as a result of this intervention, in addition to helping them feel more comfortable and at-ease? Six-weeks is a very short time-span to reach definite conclusions, but Riya did see several markers of improvement in her students' learning, as is shown in figure 11 (a-b), which shows the development of a child's writing between Week 2 to Week 5.

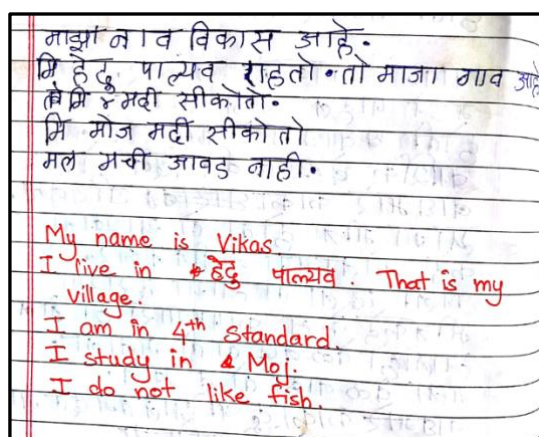


Figure 11a. Student writing sample from second week. **Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.

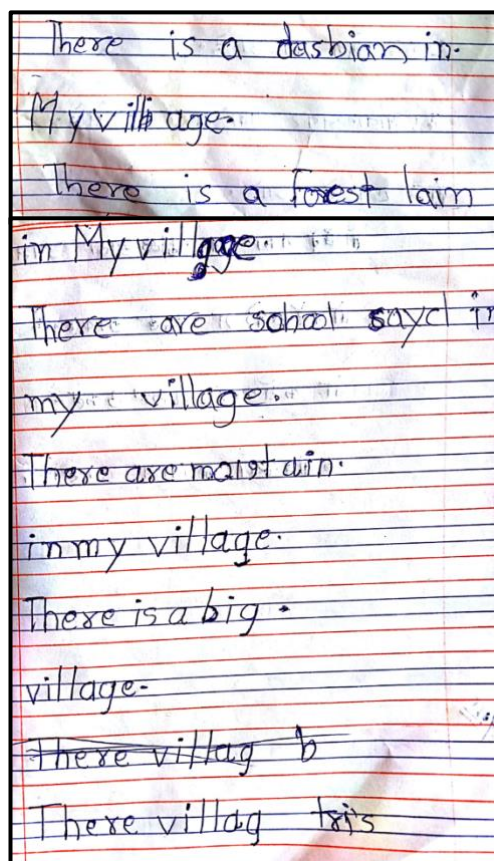


Figure 11b. Student writing sample from fifth week. **Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.

As can be seen in figure 11 a, during the second week of the study, the student wrote only in Marathi. When Riya asked the student to try to write the same in English, he did not do so, saying that he “did know how to write in English”. Following this, she wrote the same content in English, just to model for him how it could be written. However, by Week 5, the same student was willing to try writing about his Dream Village in English, after first writing it in Marathi. He was supported by a peer in this exercise. There is a dramatic improvement in willingness, and perhaps in capability to write in English across the intervening three weeks. This was not an isolated example – many students exhibited the same opening up in terms of willingness to experiment with the lesser-known language.

In terms of oral language development, Riya's experience suggests that while the spoken language instances will be limited in the beginning, there will be instances of *translanguaging*<sup>7</sup> (using words from multiple languages in a sentence) that can be observed in student speech (see figure 12). Gradually, with exposure to new English words and sentence structures in context, the fluency in English will also proportionally increase.

<p>"ते green कुल्फी creamy होती." (That green kulfi was creamy) "ते door purple आहे." (That door is purple) "There are घर in my village." (There are houses in my village)</p>	<p>T: What date is it today? S: 13<sup>th</sup> December दोन हजार अठरा (2018)</p>	<p>T: 'हात लावणे म्हणजे काय? (What does 'to touch' mean in English?) S: 'Touch' करणे (To touch)</p>
--	---	---

Figure 12. Examples of translanguaging in oral conversation.

Interestingly, in this project, we found that fluency in Marathi also increased as a result of active engagement with both languages. Figure 13 shows a writing sample from a student who was an emergent and somewhat reluctant learner and writer in Marathi. By the last week of the project, the student willingly wrote about his favourite animal in Marathi with the help of the teacher (all students were writing on the same theme in English). The red markings are of the teacher demonstrating how the same piece could be written in English – there was no pressure on this student to write in English before he was ready!

माझा आवडत प्राणी हली	My favourite animal is an elephant
१) हलीला एक तोंड आहे.	It has one trunk (तोंड)
२) हलीला दोन कान आहेत.	It has two ears. very good.
३) हलीला दोन डोळे आहेत.	It has two eyes.
४) हलीला एक तोंड आहे.	It has one face. (तोंड)
५) हलीला एक शेवट आहे.	It has one tail. (शेवट)
६) हलीला चार पांज आहेत.	It has four legs.
हलीला आज्ञा झाला होता	
हलीला पाणी पायझ होते	
हली रडत-रडत चालला होता	
हली रडत-रडत चालला होता	

Figure 13. Student writing sample in Marathi. **Image Courtesy:** Riya Parikh.

<sup>7</sup> Translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014) is a theoretical approach that suggests that the very idea that bi- or multi-lingual children have an "L1", an "L2", and so on, is incorrect. Rather, multilingual speakers have a language-repertoire that includes all the languages known to them, which they use to express and communicate flexibly. Hence, students should be allowed to use all the languages known to them in a classroom or it would be a waste of their linguistic resources. Keeping this in mind, students (or the teacher) should not be restricted from using the languages they know to convey their thoughts in the class, in an oral or written form.

This goes to show that in multilingual contexts, languages are not learned in isolation from one another. Therefore, we should also teach them without isolating them from one another, but in a manner that supports students in using their entire language repertoire.

In conclusion, such a pedagogy can be effectively used with beginners who are able to identify the English alphabet. It will be most beneficial in settings where there is low or no exposure to English and where students have acquired some proficiency in at least one another language. Ideally, this other language should be the students' MT; but, as was shown here, even a bridge language that is reasonably familiar to the students can be used. A pedagogy such as this would be less effective and tedious to be used in settings where exposure to English is high and chances of acquiring the language through natural exposure is high. It helped that Riya was comfortable and familiar with both the languages, although, perhaps it is usable even in contexts where the teacher's own English is imperfect.

## References

- Cook, V. (2001). *Using the First Language in the Classroom*. Draft paper.
- Cummins, J. (1991). Interdependence of first- and second-language proficiency in bilingual children. In E. Bialystok (Ed.), *Language processing in bilingual children* (pp. 70-89). New York, NY, US: Cambridge University Press.
- García, O., Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jhingran, D. (2009). Hundreds of home languages in the country and many in most classrooms: Coping with diversity in primary classrooms in India. In A. K. Mohanty, M. Panda, R. Phillipson and T. Skutnabb-Kangas (Eds.). *Multilingual education for social justice: Globalizing the local* (pp. 250-267). New Delhi: Orient Blackswan.
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Sarda, M., Sen, S. R., Menon, S., Sachdeva, S., Singh, S., & Kaul, V. (2016). Early language and literacy in India: A position paper. *Approaches to language and literacy* (pp. 47-50). CECED, Ambedkar University, New Delhi: USAID; Care India.

**Authors:** Riya Parikh & Shailaja Menon

**Conceptual Support and Editing:** Shailaja Menon

**Copy Editing:** Simrita Takhtar

**Layout and Design:** Harshita V. Das



© 2019 by Early Literacy Initiative, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Hyderabad. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>