CREATING A PRINT-RICH ENVIRONMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

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Try to visualize the Grade 1 classroom described here.

As soon as one enters the classroom, one sees rows and rows of akshara cards and students’ artwork hanging down from the ceiling. High up on one side of the blackboard is the school prayer song and at a similar height, on the other side, is the varnamala, both painted in bold black on a bright, yellow background. On the other three walls, there are a couple of charts with balgeet/poems and inspirational quotations. The previous language teacher bought these charts last year. Students’ notebooks and textbooks are kept in a rack at the corner. Stacked behind these are a couple of children’s books and magazines for older children. Overall, it is a very colorful and inviting classroom.

Would you call this a print-rich classroom? Why or why not?

Many teachers believe that classrooms like this one are “print-rich”. But we think these are not because, if you look closely, it is clear that print usually serves a decorative function in these classrooms and it is not used in classroom transaction. What, then, is a truly print-rich environment?

A print-rich environment is one where young children get many different opportunities to interact with many different forms of print. That is, in order to be truly print-rich, a classroom needs to display and use print meaningfully during teaching and learning. This exploration of print in meaningful contexts and observing adults around use print is critical for literacy development because it shows children that print carries meaning and that reading and writing serve real, everyday purposes. Over time, children become motivated to try to read and write themselves (Abraham, 2003).
Children who have exposure to books and print at home may appear to pick up many things about print “naturally”. However, in actuality, children learn these things in print-rich environments. Thus, for children who may not have this exposure at home, it is even more important that teachers provide a print-rich environment at school to enhance their literacy learning. In this handout, we present ways to help you design a print-rich classroom and to use this print in your language instruction.

Using Print in the Environment

Display a variety of print around the classroom, including print created by students. Show your students how to use this print and encourage them to use it. Create daily routines or exciting activities that demonstrate the purpose of this print. In multilingual classrooms, it is important that you use both students’ home languages along with the school language for this print. In this section, we list the different categories of print you could use in your classroom.

Print That Labels Things or Spaces

Use labels that tell students what things are or where things belong. Some suggestions include:

- Label things with their names (for example, black board, chalk, comb, mirror, etc.)
- Label shelves and containers used to hold materials. You can use print and pictures for these labels for students to start associating names easily with their meaning and function.
- Label the different areas in the classroom (e.g. “reading corner”, “writing corner”, etc.).

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1 The ideas in this brief have been adapted from ‘Literacy Centres in Preschool Settings’ by Shailaja Menon (personal communication, 1 September, 2018).
Let children see you making these labels, and invite them to make their own signs and labels. Try to include and use common signs and symbols that children see in their surroundings (e.g. ‘stop’ and ‘danger’ signs, signage for men’s and women’s toilets, popular brand symbols for milk/ biscuits/ chocolates, etc.). This helps children see how print is used in daily life.

**Print That Reminds Students What to Do**

Display print around the classroom that reminds students how to use a particular thing or space. Some examples include:

- Simple rules or instructions that you have discussed with students (e.g. “Ssshh! You are in the reading corner!”, “Put your bags and tiffin boxes here”, etc.). Draw students’ attention to their use, even if they cannot yet read conventionally. For example, after they finish reading, remind them to replace books neatly in the reading corner by pointing to and reading out the corresponding label (shown in Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Print reminding students how to replace books in the reading corner. QUEST, Maharashtra*

- Signs made by students (for example, “Please do not touch our project”).

**Print That Informs Students**

Display and use print that provides information to students. This print can take many forms. Some examples are listed below:

- Students’ names on artwork (written by children or dictated to an adult).
- Descriptions of students’ artwork or writing attempts, posted next to the work itself (shown in Figure 2). These descriptions are dictated to an adult who writes the child's words.
Figure 2. A note describing a child’s work

Figure 3. Class name chart, OELP, Rajasthan

- Students’ name-chart. This can be used for different activities (see Figure 3). For example, ask students to run and find names starting/ending with a particular letter or sound.
- Alphabet/Varnamala charts hung at children's eye-level. If you are teaching a specific akshara group, display that group prominently and use it during the lesson (see the last section for word study activities). For English, both upper case (capital) and lower case (small) letters should be displayed, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Alphabet Chart, ELI, Hyderabad

Figure 5. Word Wall, OELP, Rajasthan

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2 Source: https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/balancedliteracydiet/Home/index.html
• ‘Word walls’ with words that your class commonly uses or encounters (e.g. aai, mama, baba, tai, kaku, gaay, ghar, paani, etc.). They could refer to this chart when they want to read/write some of these words. Students can themselves write these words on small card sheets with your guidance. If you set up the word wall as shown in Figure 5, the older word cards can be retained as students add new ones.

• Picture dictionary charts. Figure 6 shows an example. Students can create these, with your support.

• Charts describing steps for creating something (e.g. recipe, origami) with both words and pictures (see Figure 7).

![Figure 6. Picture Dictionary, Sita School, Bangalore](image)

![Figure 7. Chart describing steps for making thumbprint figures, Awesome Art and Cool Crafts, Scholastic, 2011](image)

**Print That Elicits Response**

Include print in your classroom that asks students to respond or contribute. Examples include:

- Attendance charts (students can sign against their name or put checks next to their names on a list, as figure 8 shows).

- Daily/weekly class schedule. As Figure 9 shows, take students through the plan for the day every morning, perhaps also assigning tasks and responsibilities to students.
• Sign-up sheets (e.g. where students have to sign up for a classroom task).
• Record sheets (e.g. students can maintain a list of books that you have read-aloud to them).

![Figure 8. Child signing her name on the attendance chart, QUEST, Maharashtra](image1)
![Figure 9. Teacher discussing the daily schedule with students, QUEST, Maharashtra](image2)

• Surveys in which students can answer a question by writing their names in the appropriate place. Figure 10 shows a variation. The chart asks for students’ response after the teacher read out the book *Dear Zoo* (Rod Campbell, 1982). Students color, label and stick the picture of the animal they want from the zoo.

![Figure 10. Chart asking children to respond with their favourite animal.](image3)
![Figure 11. Poem poster created by children](image4)
• Language experience charts (where you record students’ stories, recollections of a shared experience, say a recent trip to a market/ haat etc.) or other collaborative writing work created by students.
• Poem charts and story posters/ charts that students have recently read/ heard. Use this print during shared reading sessions. Students would love to recite poems and songs they have heard at school and outside. You can use these to create the posters. Older students can copy the text that you give them on a sheet of paper and younger students could help in adding illustrations. Figure 11 shows an example.

As we said earlier, displaying print is not sufficient by itself; refer to this print in classroom routine and teaching-learning activities. This naturally means that the displays have to be changed regularly based on what students are learning. This is why any print painted on the walls, like the classroom at the beginning of the handout, is likely to have limited use. Displays must also be hung at students’ eye level and font used must be large enough to be seen from across the room.

In addition to general print in the environment discussed earlier, it is important that you also have specific ‘reading-’, ‘writing-’ and ‘word-study’ corners in the classroom. The next three sections will give you detailed information about what these corners are and how you can set them up in your classroom.

**Setting up a Reading Corner / Classroom Library**

A classroom library, or a reading corner, well stocked with children’s books for students to browse and read on their own, is a great space to have in the classroom. Don’t be discouraged if you don’t have many books to start with. You can still set up this corner and build the collection as resources become available. You could also use books from the school library and rotate the collection every couple of days. Figure 12 shows what a reading corner looks like.
Suggested Materials for the Reading Corner

- Arrangement for displaying books. If possible, use low, open shelves or low tables along the wall. But you could also display books by hanging them on wires (at students’ eye level), or by laying them on dhurries or in trays.
- Mat / rug/ space for students to sit and read.
- Different genres of books: fiction, non-fiction, poetry/ balgeet, alphabet books, picture books, wordless books, books made by students, activity books, children’s magazines, books of riddles, reference books like children’s dictionary and atlas, and so on. If you’re organizing books (e.g. by genre, language, etc.), label them and tell students what these categories mean in simple terms.
- Books in both the home languages of students, as well as the languages taught at school.
- Basic stationery like plain paper, craft paper, pencils and colors, and so on.
- Puppets and props relevant to popular books read aloud in class.

Suggested Activities at the Reading Corner

- **Oral storytelling and read-alouds**\(^3\). Oral storytelling involves narrating a story to children and discussing it with them; while in a read-aloud, you would use a book to read out the

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\(^3\) Please refer to the ELI’s Practitioner Brief – 9 ‘Reading Aloud with Young Children’ for more details.
Not only storybooks, even non-fiction books (for example, books about animals or plants) can be read aloud to children.

- **Shared reading.** Shared reading is an important way to demonstrate how spoken language and printed word are connected, and show children what fluent, expressive reading looks like. It also gives you an opportunity to teach them different features and functions of print. Shared reading involves using a big book with large font and illustrations and tracking the text word-by-word as you read it out. Re-read the book this way over a couple of days and invite students to join in wherever they can. Books with repetitive words and phrases help them to do this easily. In some readings of the text, you can quickly discuss a feature of print (like different punctuation marks), for example, and how it affects meaning and expression. If you don’t have access to big books, you can write out stories or poems or students’ experiences in big font on a chart paper and use that for shared reading.

- **Story retelling.** Support retelling of stories that students read together in class. Children can retell stories through role-playing, drama and puppetry. If students are provided interesting props and material relating to a story/book in the reading corner, you may find them doing spontaneous retelling during their free time. But you could also teach this more explicitly in the language class. Remind students to talk about the characters, the setting, the sequence of events, and the main problem and its resolution, in their retelling.

- **Independent/ free reading time.** Allow students to read and explore books independently. This can be a part of the planned class time (for example, when one group is doing a guided reading activity, another group could explore books in the reading corner). Or, you could establish some rules with students for using this space other than the specified time. For example, if a child finishes her class work sooner than the others, she can read books in this corner, and so on.

- **Book-based activities.** Use this corner for extended engagement with books including writing, drawing or art and craft based on a book, writing book reviews (could be simple comments on post-its stuck on the inside cover of a book or on a chart with the book’s name) or other book-based activities (solving picture crosswords, etc.).

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4 Please refer to the ELI’s Practitioner Brief, ‘Emergent Literacy’ for details on Concepts-about-Print.
The idea is to increase engagement with books and reading. So, create a welcoming corner, have engaging reading experiences, display books in interesting ways (say, based on themes like rain, birds, friendship, favourite author, sports etc.), and organize exciting book-based activities. Start with what you have and slowly build the collection, mindful of the genres available in the languages of your need and interest.

**Setting up a Writing Corner**

You can set up a writing corner next to the reading corner. This is a space where students can scribble, draw, write, cut-and-paste, stamp, and otherwise engage with print using a variety of media and material. As reading, writing, speaking and listening develop in interrelated ways in young children (Dyson, 1988), any ‘corner’ or literacy centre you set up should allow children to express and communicate using different modalities simultaneously.

**Suggested Materials for the Writing Corner**

- Pencils (regular and colored), sketch pens, crayons, color pencils, paints, erasers, sharpeners, and so on.
- Paper, card sheets and chart paper (lined and unlined; different sizes and colors).
- Notepads and notebooks.
- Staplers and glue (to be handled by adults).
- Chalk (white and colored).
- Slates (if you have blackboard surfaces painted at the bottom of the walls, you could ask students to write there as well).
- Puppets and props can be kept here too for dramatic retelling.
- If possible, keep clipboards or low tables to make it easier for students to write.
- ‘Word wall’, alphabet books, picture dictionaries can be displayed close to the writing centre for students to refer to while writing.
- Stamps, that students can dip into paint and use. These can be letter and number shapes, of animals or other interesting objects from their environment.
- Clothes pegs and a string strung across the centre can be used to ‘peg’ students’ creations once done!
Suggested Activities at the Writing Corner

• **Shared writing.** You can demonstrate to your students how to write a shared account/story that they have composed. Invite them to come up to the chart paper, and add a letter, word, punctuation or a phrase as you write, depending on their level. Display these charts at the writing corner, which can also be used for shared reading. Children, even emergent writers, can then attempt to write their own versions of the incident or story through words and pictures.

• **Guided and free writing time.** Encourage and support young children as they attempt (or pretend) to write, for example, stories, poems, posters, labels or list of rules for the classroom, a letter or a birthday card. In *guided* writing, you can start by giving students a specific purpose for writing and a quick ‘lesson’ on it. Say, they have to write recipes of their favourite evening snack. You can show them an example, tell them about the different parts of a recipe and their purpose. Students then work on their pieces individually. You can go around talking to them about what they’re writing and sharing your feedback on it. At this point, focus on meaning; don’t worry about spelling and other conventions. Students can use a mix of drawing and writing, until they gain confidence in writing more conventionally. Display students’ work at the writing corner.

• **‘Chalk talks’.** You can draw the story on the chalkboard or a chart paper while reading or telling a story. This helps in children’s comprehension and children might attempt the same in retelling stories they have heard. (Likewise, puppets and props help in dramatic retelling).

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**CREATIVE WRITING CORNER IDEAS**

Writing need not be boring! You can be very creative in sparking students’ imagination at the writing corner. We have compiled some ideas here for you:

• **Help students create their own storybooks**! It could be their own stories that you write out on ‘book pages’ for them, which they illustrate. Older students can write their own stories with invented spellings. Have students listen to each other’s stories and respond to

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5 Except creating books, all ideas in this box have been taken from [https://www.weareteachers.com/writing-center-ideas/](https://www.weareteachers.com/writing-center-ideas/)

6 Refer to ELI’s Brief on “Children’s Writing: Creating Books in the Classroom” for more ideas and examples.
them. Display these books in the classroom for students to read these themselves and to each other.

- **Create a variety of writing stencils to get your students started.** Figure 13 shows how the teacher has provided some key words on the stencil that students can use in their writing. Students choose a stencil, trace the picture, brainstorm ideas, and write out their ‘stencil stories’ on a sheet of paper.

![Figure 13. Writing Stencil.](www.weareteachers.com)

![Figure 14. Theme-based writing centre.](www.weareteachers.com)

- **Keep ‘Story Bags’ and ‘Story Jars’ at the writing centre.** Each story bag (e.g. Story Bag #1, #2, etc.) will contain pictures/names of everyday items in odd combinations to spark creative ideas. A story jar will contain several slips of paper, each one containing the beginning of a story. Students pick one and then build on the idea. The same ideas can be used for poetry as well.

- **Adapt your writing corner for theme-based dramatic play.** Figure 14 shows an example where, with simple changes, the writing corner is temporarily set up as a post-office. It has plain paper, post-cards, envelopes, greeting cards, stamps, glue, postbox, and so on. Label these things and include simple instructions for using the ‘post-office’. Students can write and send letters, greeting cards, write addresses on envelopes, fill out simple forms, etc. They can read out the letters addressed to them, in front of the class. This way, students engage with reading, writing, thinking, imagining, all during an engaging play activity.
Setting up a Word Study Corner

In the process of learning to read and write, young children need many occasions to make and break words, to think about how sounds and symbols are connected. The word study corner can become the space for this word-solving. Ideally, you should have a separate corner for word study but given the space constraints in our classrooms, you can club it with the writing corner. Please demonstrate and encourage students to sound out letters and words as they engage in the activities we have described here.

Suggested Materials for the Word Study Corner

- Letter/akshara cards, and wire and clips (optional) to hang the cards up with. Please note that for Indian languages it may be better to create aksharas that include maaatras from the beginning, as shown in Figure 15. For English, keep multiple cards for vowels and for high use consonants.
- Letter blocks (for block printing).
- Sand trays for tracing letter shapes.
- Clay or playdough.
- Paper and card sheets (blank and lined).
- Writing materials (stamps, pencils, crayons, erasers, etc.).

Figure 15. Akshara Cards, OELP, Rajasthan

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7 Refer to ELI’s Brief on ‘Learning the Script’ for more information on word-solving and a detailed list of classroom activities to support it. We have described only a few in the current handout.
• Cut out letters using different materials: velvet paper, sand paper, sponge, etc. Figure 16 shows how children can touch and move these around and learn about the shape of letters.
• Name tags of everyone in class including the teacher.
• Alphabet books, rhyming books, word walls displayed nearby.
• If teaching English, use flip books or sliders for word families (“-at”; “-op” etc.). You can easily create your own using card sheet, as shown in Figure 17.
• Small toys and picture cards of things beginning with different akshara or letters. You can use a clear bag for each akshara, label it and keep these things sorted in those bags.

Figure 16. Children using letter cutouts, SAJAG Foundation, Mumbai and The Metta Community working in HBP Indian School, Bangalore

Figure 17. Word-family flip books and sliders. www.iheartliteracy.com; www.teacherspayteachers.com; www.differentiatedkindergarten.com

Suggested Activities at the Word Study Corner

• Younger students can stamp letters on paper. Older students can trace letter shapes on sand-trays. Or, form letter shapes with clay/ playdough.
• Ask students to sort letters into two piles – one that contains the letters in their own name and another made up of the remaining letters. They can do the same for letters in their friend’s and teacher’s name. For this, students can refer to name charts or tags for this. Write each child’s name on a card sheet and then cut it up. Put these pieces in a bag with the child’s name labeled on the front. The students manipulate the letters to spell the name.
Similarly, write down words on card sheets and cut in the middle in an odd way (zigzag, curve, etc.). Students can then put puzzles together and try to name the words.

**Figure 18.** Children matching picture cards to the beginning sound and letter  

**Figure 19.** Children playing a word building game in a Nali-Kali Classroom, Karnataka

- Students can play picture-sound-letter matching activities. You can put pictures of objects starting with different sounds into a bag. Students can take them out and sort them by beginning letter sounds. They have to say the sound as they sort. Later, they can place the cards near the corresponding letter cutout, or in a cup marked by that letter or on a chart paper with spaces for each letter as shown in Figure 18. Do the same activity for ending sounds.

- Have students hang up the letter/ akshara cards on the wire (or place them on a mat) in sequence of the varnamala, or as they appear in their names or their friend’s names. Older students can also make words with these cards. Students can use books, word walls, picture dictionaries and the like for reference. Figure 19 shows a word-building game based on the same concept.

- For English, students can use the flipbooks or sliders for each word family and say/write down the words down made on each flip (see Figure 17).

- You can write simple, popular poems on a chart paper and cut out sentences/words from there. Students can look at the corresponding poem poster and try to order the sentences/words. Figure 20 shows one such set offered by Eklavya but you can easily
create your own. Encourage students to say the lines/words as they match and order the text.

![Image of poem poster and sentence/word cards](image)

*Figure 20.* Poem poster and sentence/word cards (‘kavita patti’) set from Eklavya.

We hope that this handout has given you some concrete ideas on how to make your classroom a print-rich space. It is perfectly fine to start small, and slowly build each corner. Just remember the difference between ‘decorating’ the classroom and having a print-rich environment: **print must be used in your instruction.** In terms of managing all the different spaces, take your students’ help! Show them how to use and maintain each space. Later, a pair of students can each manage one corner on a weekly basis.

**References**


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