

The Teachers' Guide to Literacy Research

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Part I. Teaching and Learning the Script

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An Introduction to Our Research

We are all aware of the worryingly low reading levels of children in the country. In order to be able to improve the teaching and learning of literacy, we need to understand *why* children are facing difficulties. A research study called LiRIL (Literacy Research in Indian Languages) was designed after a national consultation on Early Literacy in 2011 to investigate this.

The LiRIL study tracked over 700 children from the beginning of Grade 1 to the end of Grade 3 in government schools in Wada block, Palghar, Maharashtra and Yadgir block, Yadgir, Karnataka. Our broad objective was to understand how children learned to read and write in Indian scripts and contexts, particularly children studying in government schools in very



socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of the country. During this study we assessed 360 students per site, twice a year, for three years, on a range of skills and sub-skills of literacy. In this way, we could understand how children were learning to read and write Marathi and Kannada, and the challenges they faced in the process. We also analysed curricula, interviewed and assessed teachers, and observed classroom instruction. In addition to this, we worked with 48 of these children (24 per site) closely to understand specifics about how they engaged with and comprehended texts. Finally, we carried out three case studies to look deeply at children's lives at home and their connection or disconnection with the school.

In these Teachers' Guides, we share three select topics from our research that are relevant to classroom teaching and learning. These are:

1. **Teaching and Learning the Script**
2. Comprehension
3. Children's Writing

We hope that our learnings will help to make your teaching of language in classrooms stronger, as you understand the reasons behind children's difficulties.

Along with our findings, we will also share some strategies that you can use in the classroom. Please use these as beginning tools as you develop your own techniques to improve your children's reading.

Introduction

Introduction



Why Suman Skips School

A SHORT STORY

Suman was a big girl today.
She felt important, wearing her new uniform and carrying her new bag.
Today, like Didi, she was going to school!

She got ready all by herself.
She wore her new blue dress.
And she combed her hair.

When Suman reached school she was super excited.
There were so many children like her to make friends with!
She let go of Didi's hand and walked to her new friends.

“What’s your name?” said a nice lady who kneeled down next to Suman
and her friends playing in the sand.

“Suman”

“Namaste, Suman. I’m your teacher.”

She looked kind. Suman liked her.

“You all can play for some time before we start school, OK?”

In the next ten minutes, Suman had found out about all her new friends. There was Kajal who liked to make *Ganapatis*, Sunil who liked *natak*, Kalpana who liked to draw, Venkateshwari who liked to play cricket and Chandraprakash who liked to wear matching shirts, pants and shoes. Suman was so happy. She imagined days of school doing all these things together. And playing kabaddi! That was her favourite thing to do.

When she went into class, the kind ma’am asked Suman and her friends to sit down. She asked all their names and made some drawings on a paper very quickly.

Was ma’am drawing them? Suman wanted to see her picture.

Ma’am asked them to come to her and sing a song.

“Pa-oos-pad-tho-sar-sar-sar. Gi-ri-cha-lo-re-bhar-bhar-bhar...”

Suman liked hearing all her friends’ voices together. She had fun standing and singing.

“Do you all like rain?” Ma’am asked them.

“Yes”

“Yusss, yuss, yusss.”

Chandraprakash shook his head.

“Now we are going to write some words from our song,” said Ma’am.

When Suman got the paper she started making pictures of the rain. She got all her colours and started to “write”.

“You write what I’m writing in your copies.”

Ma’am was making a drawing on the board.

Suman couldn’t understand what was on the board.

“Ma’am!” she called, “see my drawing”.

Ma'am's face changed. She came to Suman and asked her to stand up. Suman got ready to go to the board and draw her BIG picture for all her friends to see.

Ma'am looked at her copy unimpressed. She was not smiling now. "I asked you to write what's on the board."

She pointed at an older girl: "Eh! Sit with her and make her write." Suman did not understand what happened. She had made such a pretty picture. Why didn't ma'am like it? What was wrong with it? Suman started to cry.

"I told you we will write! Is this how you write? Look, children, Suman does not know how to write." The teacher showed Suman's picture to the whole class. Everyone started laughing.

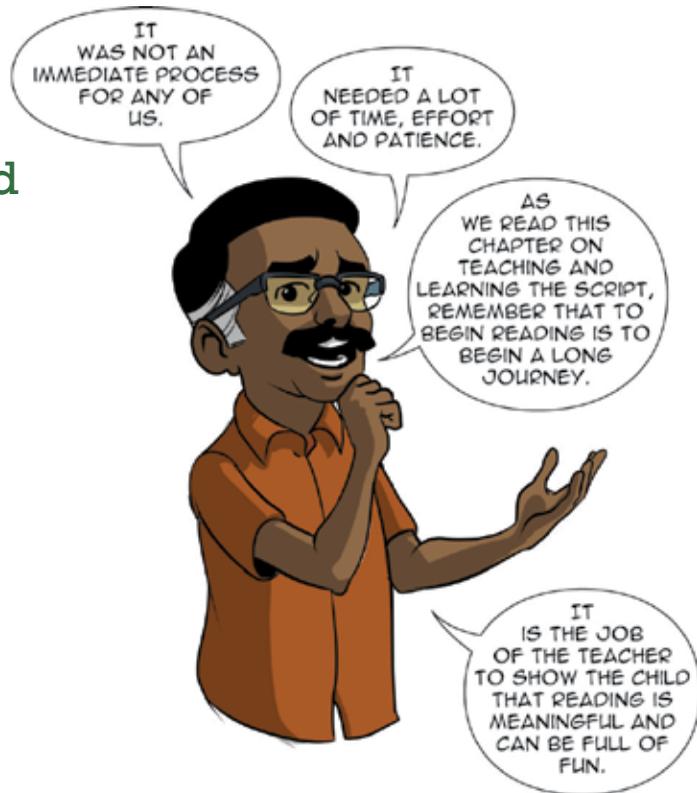
"Now children you copy what I have written on the board into your books."

Suman's face was hot with tears. She wanted to go home.

She sat in the classroom feeling sad, feeling alone, feeling stupid. If this was writing she never wanted to do it.

Suman thought she was too dumb for school. She would never come back.

Do you remember how you first learned to read and write?



What is this teachers' guide about?

In this guide, we summarize what we have learned on the LiRIL project about how children learn to read and write the Kannada and Marathi scripts – the difficulties and challenges that they face. We also spend time discussing what these findings mean for teachers and their classrooms.

What is decoding?

Decoding is the term used in literacy to describe the ability to recognize letters, understand letter-sound relationships, know letter patterns and correctly pronounce written words.

In scripts used by many Indian languages, each *akshara* usually represents one [and only one] sound. Therefore, many people assume that learning to read, or “decode” Indian scripts is an easy and automatic process. We also assume that once children learn to decode the passage, they have learned to “read”, and will automatically understand the meaning of what they are reading.

In fact, both assumptions are inaccurate. The scripts used by many Indian languages have a large number of symbols that take children a fairly long time to learn. Indian languages also use a complicated system where children have to learn to “attach” *maatras* (secondary vowel signs) to *moolaksharas*. On top of this, children have to learn special symbols for *samyuktaksharas* (conjunct consonants) (Nag, 2007). Learning to decode Indian scripts is a time-consuming and laborious process!

Why is decoding important?

We need to build children’s decoding skills AND their ability to make meaning at the same time!

Many educators agree that meaning-making is at the heart of learning to read and write. But, we can be very good meaning-makers in our daily lives and still not be considered “literate”, because we do not know the language’s script!

Believe it or not, there have been wars fought about the importance of decoding versus meaning-making for decades. (These were called the Reading Wars. But, not to worry, they were academic wars, without real bloodshed). After years of furious debate, most experts now advocate a balanced, comprehensive approach to literacy. This means, they say, that we must not choose between teaching the script or teaching meaning. It just does not work! What we need to do, instead, is build children’s essential decoding skills AND their ability to make meaning at the same time.

Here’s some evidence from our research that explores the connection between decoding and meaning making/comprehension:

Decoding and comprehension are strongly linked. From the longitudinal data we collected on LiRIL we found that good decoding skills are needed for comprehension. In statistical terms, the correlation coefficient between decoding accuracy and comprehension is +0.76 in Wada and +0.87 in Yadgir. What this means is that as performance on decoding increases, performance on comprehension also increases.



In fact, decoding is necessary in order to make meaning when reading. We found that students need to decode at at least 75% accuracy for them to even begin to understand the passages they were reading. In short, a child needs to be able to recognize at least three quarters of the words being read in order to begin to comprehend.

However, understanding needs more than just decoding skills. We found that even students who were able to read a passage with 90% decoding accuracy could still do very poorly on understanding the passage! This tells us that while children have to be able to decode well in order to understand passages, decoding alone does not give students all they need to understand texts. **Children also need separate help that focuses on building understanding of the texts they read!**

And so, as we teach, it becomes crucial that we help children and guide them to make and build their own meaning. It is essential that we give children strategies to read and understand better. We will be addressing the topic of comprehension in the second volume of the LiRIL Teachers' Guides. We recommend you go through that, in combination with this guide, to help make your teaching of language more balanced and directed. In this Guide, we focus on teaching children to read the script, that is, decoding instruction.

What are we going to learn about in this teaching guide?

This Guide is organized into four main sections.

In Section I, we will answer the question: how well do children in our sample perform on reading words and passages?

In Section II, we will look at common trends of teaching the script in the classrooms we observed. How is the script taught? What difficulties may students have because of these methods?

In Section III, we will take a closer look at how children's capabilities to read and write words develop over time in the classrooms we studied.

In Section IV, we end with specific recommendations for you to put to practice in your classrooms.

Section 1

How do Children Perform on Decoding?

Section I: Children's Performance in Decoding the Script



The LiRIL team spent over three years in classrooms in Yadgir (Karnataka) and Wada (Maharashtra) observing how young children are taught to read and write in Grades 1, 2 and 3. We ended up completing well over 200 observations in these classrooms. What we report here is the result of long and detailed analyses.

When we analysed our observational notes, we found that at both sites, most of the language class is spent on learning to read and write the script (decoding/encoding) during the first three years of schooling.

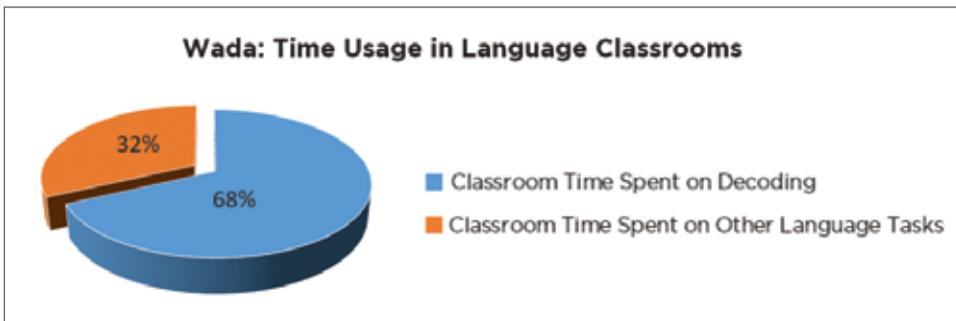


Figure 1. The percentage of time spent on decoding and other language tasks in Grades 1-3 in Wada.

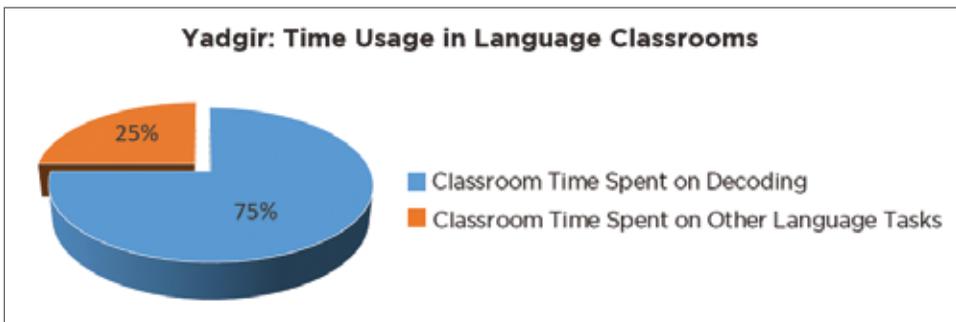


Figure 2. The percentage of time spent on decoding and other language tasks in Grades 1-3 in Yadgir.

Since so much of classroom time is spent on decoding (68% in Wada and 75% in Yadgir!), we assumed that children would become really good at decoding by the end of Grade 3. In fact, we found the opposite to be true — despite the amount of time spent on decoding tasks, we found that students are still doing very poorly with decoding. For many, reading the most simple words and simple passages are not possible after three years of being in school.

Figure 3 shows how students perform on reading a *very* simple word list at the end of Grade 3. The simple word list had very simple 2-3 *akshara* words used in children’s day-to-day language with only the easiest *matraa* /a:/. Ideally, a Grade 1 student should be able to read this entire word list. Figure 3 also shows how students perform at reading a word list that is *at* the Grade 3 level.

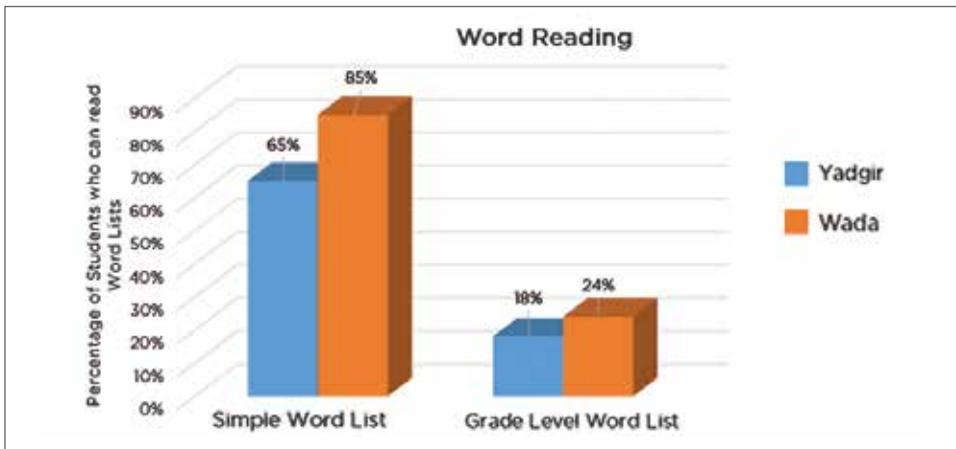


Figure 3. The percentage of students who can read a simple word list and a grade-level word list at the end of Grade 3.



HMMPH! MOST CHILDREN CANNOT READ AT THEIR GRADE LEVEL!

We notice in Figure 3 that although 85% of students in Wada can read a very simple list of words by the end of Grade 3, only 24% of them can read a word list at their own grade level. In Yadgir, the situation is a little worse — only 65% can read a very simple word list and 18% can read a word list at the Grade 3 level.

What has changed between the words used in both these words lists? The grade level word list (appropriate for Grade 3 readers) has longer words. It includes words that use a wide variety of *matras* and *samyuktaksharas*. It also has words that are more distant from the child’s spoken vocabulary. ***This makes it clear that *matras* and *samyuktaksharas* pose problems for children’s reading. Unfamiliar words, too, it seems are harder to read.***

Figure 4 shows student performance on a very simple passage. This passage has 2-3 *akshara* words and under 30 sentences. It also shows student performance on a passage that is at a level of difficulty appropriate for Grade 3.

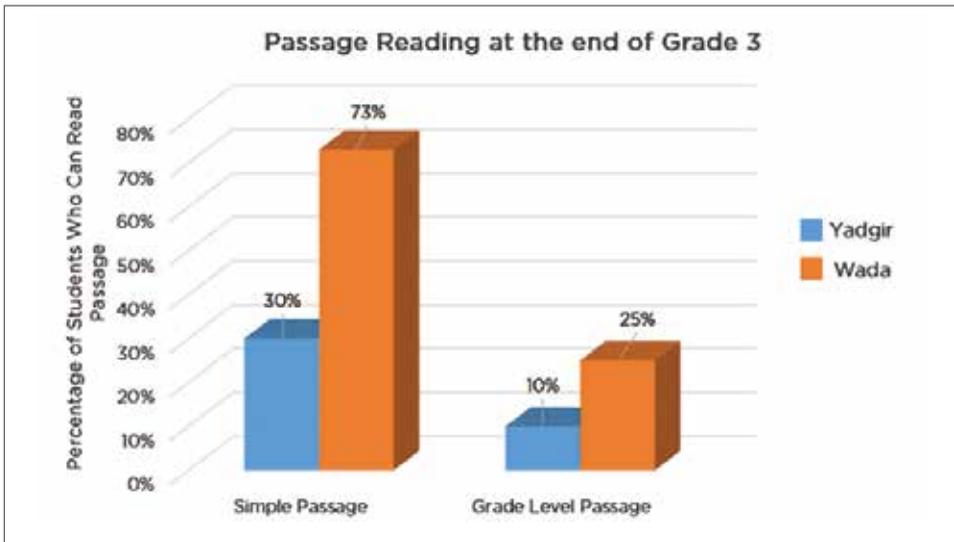


Figure 4. The percentage of students who can read a simple passage and a grade-level passage at the end of Grade 3.

Figure 4 shows that **children perform even worse on reading passages than on reading individual words**. 73% of the students in Wada can read a very simple 30-word passage, but only 25% of them can read a passage at their own grade level of difficulty. In Yadgir, only 30% of the students can read a very simple passage, and only 10% can read a passage at their own level of difficulty.

There is a definite difference between the performance of students in Wada and students in Yadgir. One possible reason for this is the complexity of the Kannada script, when compared to the Devanagari script (that is used in Marathi). *Matraas* (the symbols for vowel sounds) and *samyuktaksharas* (the symbols for conjunct consonants) have complex, unique rules for different letters in Kannada, and words tend to be longer.

So, clearly, it is not as easy to decode Indian scripts as many people assume. Our findings suggest that children learning Indian scripts need more time and practice to master script knowledge - much more than we currently give in our timetables and curricula.

What makes indian scripts challenging for students to learn?

- There are many different symbols to learn — the basic *varnamala* has 45+ symbols
- In addition, **these scripts have *maatras* and *samyuktaksharas* — which can be very challenging for young learners.** In scripts like Kannada, the *gunitas* (*maatras*) attach differently to different *moolaksharas* — so children have to not just learn the symbols for the *moolaksharas* and the *gunitas*, but also the rules for attaching them!
- The scripts are visuo-spatially complex — the *maatras* can go above the line, below the line, or to the left or right of the *aksharas* to which they are attached.

With such poor results in decoding, it is clear that there is a lot missing from the way that we are teaching and learning the script.

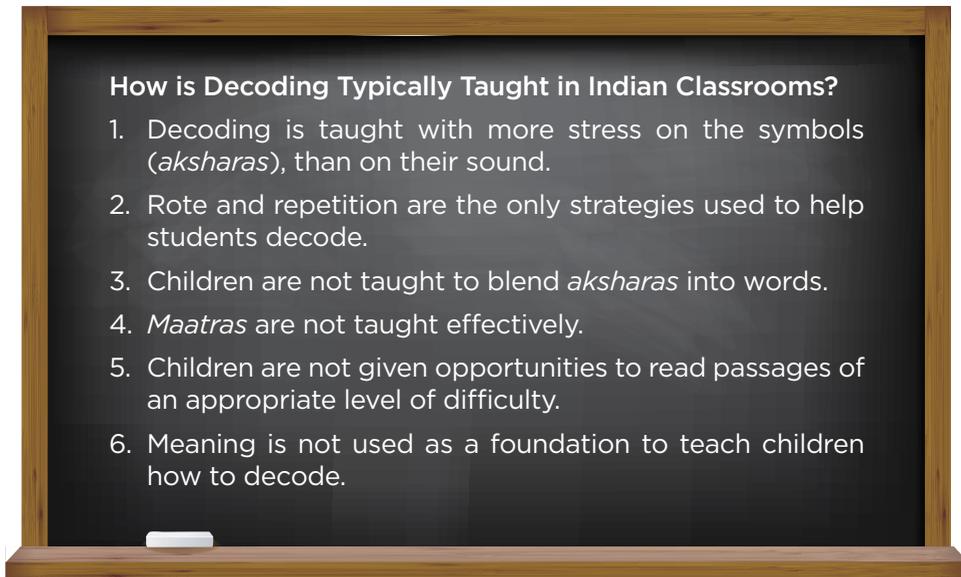
Let us look at how decoding is taught in the classrooms we studied.

Section II

How is Decoding Taught?

Section II: How is Decoding Taught?

There are six common trends we have noticed in the teaching of decoding across sites (both in Yadgir and Wada).



Let us have a look at how these trends look during classroom instruction. The following examples are taken from our detailed classroom observations.

1. Decoding is taught with more focus on symbols than on sound.

Children engage in tracing and endless copy-writing of the *aksharas*. But teaching the sound of each *akshara* is not emphasized!

Decoding is largely about learning the relationship between symbols/*aksharas* and their sounds. When we emphasize mostly the symbol, and repeatedly focus on teaching the child only how to write *aksharas*, building the child's knowledge of the *akshara*'s sound is neglected. Putting symbols together in a meaningful way becomes very difficult (without this strong knowledge of sounds). This makes writing and reading words difficult.



BUT क IS NOT A कमल
क IS A SOUND!

One very common practice we saw was to introduce the *varnamala* by associating each *akshara* with a word that starts with the same *akshara*. For example, क se कमल, (/k/ for *kamal*). The reason this strategy fails is because teachers do not explicitly explain that the *akshara* is the symbol for a sound and that different sounds come together to form a word. What we see, therefore, is that the student starts to associate the *akshara* with the word used to teach it, instead of the sound that it depicts.

[Classroom Observation, Grade 1, Wada]

In this classroom, the teacher has given children picture cards with the *akshara* written on it, and a picture of a word that starts with that *akshara*.

Teacher (T): What picture is this?

Child (C): Balach (meaning baby)

T: Which *akshara* is this? (pointing at ल /l/)

C: Balach

Student Difficulty. Because of this method of teaching, the difference between the concept of the *akshara* and the concept of the word is not clear to the students. Students do not know that *aksharas* represent sounds. They also don't know that sounds/*aksharas* come together to form words that have meanings.

In Yadgir, we found that children spend a lot of time tracing the symbol for the *akshara* on the ground, then putting beads on the *akshara* shape, and finally, copying the *aksharas* in their notebooks. The teacher must have taught the sound associated with the *akshara* when it was first introduced. But, reinforcement and follow-up activities were “soundless” and focused on learning the *akshara*'s shape.

[Classroom Observation, Yadgir, Grade 1]

Teacher goes to a group where a second grader was sitting with an activity card with a *samyuktakshara* (or *vattakshara* in Kannada) /gg/ (ग़) on it.

Teacher (T): This is called /g/ pointing to ग, and the small /g/ written below it is called a *vattakshara*. What is it called?

Student (S): *Vattakshara*

Then the teacher asked him to place beads on the *vattakshara* and remember the shape of the *vattakshara*.

In this example, rather than teaching the sound of the *vattakshara*, what is being taught is that it is the symbol for a *vattakshara*.



Student Difficulty. Because it is the writing of the *akshara* that is stressed in these classrooms, children often end up confusing similar looking *aksharas*. This is because they do not have enough practice with sounding the *akshara* out aloud.

[Classroom Observation, Grade 1, Yadgir]

T shows the child the *akshara* ଥ /th/. The child reads it as /r/ (ଠ).

T: See this *idu madhya* [dot], pointing to the dot in the middle of the *akshara*. This is not there in /r/. Which *akshara* is this?

C: Madhya

T: “th” (/θ/)

C: “th”

Instead of just telling the child the difference between ଥ and ଠ, if we give them opportunities to sound out and sort words with these *aksharas*, to write and to play word-solving games with them, the children will become more familiar with these sounds. This could be done with individual children or with the whole class.

For example, split the class into two groups and ask children to read many words with ଥ and ଠ. Every time a child is able to read correctly give their group a point. During the game, tell the children the difference between these two *aksharas* (ଥ and ଠ) and their sounds. Now, because the children need to apply their knowledge during a game, this instruction may be more successful in engaging children and teaching them the difference between similar looking *aksharas*.

2. Rote and repetition are the only strategies used to help students decode.

A second pattern we saw in the classrooms was that students were taught decoding only through rote and repetition, as shown in this example.

[Classroom Observation, Grade 1, Yadgir]

The teacher (T) presents a set of *aksharas* for the first time. He introduces the *aksharas* in the following way:

T: ँ(Ai), ऋ(Ru), ऌ(Na), ढ(Cha), ड(O). Read these *aksharas*. Once you learn them, memorize them and write them down in your notebook.

Seetamma¹ starts to read: ँ(Ai), ऋ(Ru), ऌ(Na), ढ(Cha), ड(O) [and repeats]

ँ(Ai), ऀ(Ru), ऎ(Na), ण(Cha), ऒ(O)

She continues to say this out loud, without looking or pointing at the *aksharas*.

Here we see that the student is repeating the *aksharas* with no reference to the printed text that she is supposed to be reading. She does not seem to connect what the teacher has written and the sounds she is making.

Student Difficulty. What the sing-song droning of five sounds shows is that each individual sound is not segregated and understood as a part in itself; a sound that connects to a symbol, an *akshara*. The concept of an *akshara*, itself, seems unclear to the child.

Rote and repetition continue to be used as the strategy to teach decoding, not only at the level of learning the *varnamala*, but also while decoding larger chunks of texts, even stories in the textbook, as this example shows.

[Classroom Observation, Grade 1, Wada]

The Balbharti textbook has a lesson called *Ramilachi Sawali* (Ramila's shadow). In this chapter, the textbook suggests that teachers ask children to observe their shadows at different times during the day before they are introduced to the story.

In class, however, the lesson was transacted in the following manner:

T: Today, we have to read the lesson 'Ramilachi Sawali' (Ramila's shadow). [T reads the sentences in the lesson one by one. After each sentence, the children repeat after him.]

T: रमिला सकाळी शाळेत जायला निघाली. (Ramila set out in the morning to go to school.)

C: रमिला सकाळी शाळेत जायला निघाली. [The children repeat the sentence after the teacher.]

The entire story is taught in this way

¹ All student names have been changed to protect privacy of the individuals.

Student Difficulty. When children learn to read passages only through sentence-by-sentence repetition, they do not learn to search for meaning in what they read. They also remain unable to read individual words or passages on their own.

3. Children are not taught to blend sounds and syllables into words

A major part of the reason that we see children struggling to understand the difference between *aksharas* and words is because children are not encouraged to put together *aksharas* and form words when they read. As a result, children often read syllable by syllable, *akshara* by *akshara*. They read without meaning or expression. Teachers also encouraged this trend.

[Classroom Observation, Grade 1, Wada]

The teacher wrote some words on the board. She pointed at the word 'bulbul' (बुलबुल) and asked Priyanka to read it.

Priyanka - बुल - बुल

T: Arey! You are reading it so fast, rather than reading it slowly!

T: Read like this बु - ल - बु - ल

Here, we see that even though the child is putting the sounds together to make syllables as she reads, the teacher insists on her moving backwards and breaking down the word so Priyanka reads *akshara* by *akshara*. This meaning of the word is lost.

In our work, we have noticed many instances where children do NOT notice word "boundaries" (i.e., where one word ends and another begins). They read sentences and even passages *akshara* by *akshara* without blending them into words. The few words that are blended together are usually familiar words for the children.

[Class Observations, Grade 2, Wada]

Teacher (T) asked children to read from small cards that had a few sentences on different topics. We saw one child (C) reading the brief cards one after the other without pause in speech.

The three cards were about the Kingfisher bird; a Maharashtrian snack, vada-pav; and about the Banyan tree.

T: खं...खंड्या (Kingfisher)

C (Reading from 1st card): खंड्या पक्षी मा से खा तो तो पा णे ज व ळ रा ह तो तो न दी का ठी बी ल ख ण तो बि ला त त्या चे घ र टे आ स ते ... (takes the 2nd card and without pausing reads): म ला व डा पा व आ व ड तो व डा ती ख ट व ग र म ह वा पा व र पा वा व र ल स नी ची च ठ नी ह वी म ग मी चा र व डा पा

4. *Maatras* are introduced late, or ineffectively.

Most words in Indian scripts use *maatras*. Of course, there are a few words in Marathi and Kannada that don't use any *maatras*. In Marathi, some of these words may be familiar to children, and may be in common use in their oral language. However, in Kannada, words without any *gunitas* (*maatras*) or *samyuktaksharas* tend to be very rare and uncommon words that are not likely to be in the child's oral vocabularies (e.g. *garagara*, *sarasara* etc.). The most common words- for mother, father, brother, sister, food, house — all use *maatras* or *samyuktaksharas*.

Maatras are introduced relatively late in Karnataka government schools (after about 6-8 months of first grade); and are taught ineffectively in both Karnataka and Maharashtra. This makes it difficult for children to read or write words, since most words contain *maatras*!

In fact, we found that many of the errors that children made in word reading were related to misreading the *maatras* in the words. Children's ability to read *maatras* was one of the most important predictors of their ability to read words correctly in both the scripts!

Figure 6 shows the percentage of errors in reading words that could be attributed to *maatras*.*

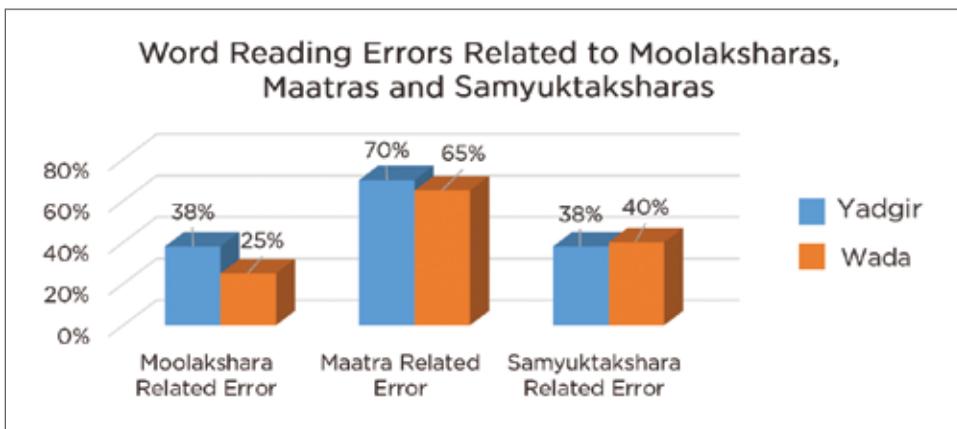


Figure 6. Percentage of Word Reading Errors Related to *Moolaksharas*, *Maatras* and *Samyuktaksharas*

*(The percentages don't add up to 100% because some words elicited more than one kind of error.)

How are *maatras* taught?

We found that *matraas* are presented to students with even less focus on sound than other symbols. Either, the teacher taught children to “add” the *maatras* to the *moolaksharas*; or, it was taught through rote and repetition, as described earlier.

Here is an example of a child learning to “add” the *maatra* onto the *moolakshara*:

[Classroom Observation, Grade 1, Wada]

The teacher (T) presented Grade 1 children (C) with several instances of “adding” *maatras* to the *moolaksharas*. Then he wrote the following *aksharas* on the board and asked the students to complete the task while he went to supervise another class:

फ+ए=

न+ए=

ट+ए=

One of the children completed the task in the following way:

प+ए= 1; न+ए= 2; म+ए= 3

Here is another example of a teacher teaching the *aksharas*, ग and गा.

Teacher (T): What is this? (a small pause) This is ग. What is it?

Children (C) (in chorus): ग!

T: And what is this?

C: गा!

T: गा. What is it?

C: गा.

T: गा. Now, गा-य. (Points to the word on his list. The same procedure is followed for all the words on the list).

C: गा-य.

T: ग-वा-र (cluster beans)

C: ग-वा-र.

T: You wrote the words, right?

C: Yes

T: गाँ-व (village).

C: गाँ-व.

In this lesson, ग and गा are introduced separately, as though they have no connection to each other. Although they are introduced in the context of many words, not just one, the similarity between ग and गा (ग) and what differentiates them (ऌ) is not clearly highlighted. This can introduce unnecessary complications in decoding.

Student Difficulty. Children may not remember the shapes and sounds of different *maatras* or remember how to join them onto the *moolaksharas*!

5. Children are not given opportunities to read passages (connected text) at their level.

Decoding can be practiced at the level of individual words and sentences. However, to be learnt well, children also need to practice these skills while reading passages. Children have to use a variety of strategies to read passages successfully. They cannot just read *akshara-by-akshara*, or word-by-word. **In addition to decoding, children also need to use their knowledge of context, of grammar, and their previous knowledge about topics, in order to read and understand passages.** Also, they need to learn to read with expression and with proper pacing. When children are able to read words in passages correctly at an appropriate speed, with expressiveness and comprehension, they become fluent readers!



CHILDREN NEED ADULTS WHO MODEL EXPRESSIVE, FLUENT READING.

CHILDREN NEED TEXT AT THEIR LEVELS.

CHILDREN NEED PLENTY OF GUIDED OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE READING THESE TEXTS.

There is very little data from Indian contexts on the speed of reading, which, in the West, has been shown to be very strongly linked with comprehension. When children read very slowly, that is, *akshara-by-akshara*, or word-by-word, the child ends up calling out words, but does not really understand what is being read. Children need to read words correctly and with reasonably good speed (and expression). ***In LiRIL's work, we have found that if children are not able to read at least 40 words correctly per minute by Grade 3, they are not able to understand what they are reading.***

Hence, it is very important for children to learn to practice their decoding *during* passage reading.

Three things are important for effective passage reading:

One, the passage that the child is trying to read should be at approximately her level of decoding capability — if the child doesn't know how to read more than 1 or 2 words out of 10 words, then the passage may be a little too difficult for the child to practice reading with.

Two, the child should be given opportunities to read this passage either with guidance or independently, but not be “told” each word by the teacher.

And three, the child should be encouraged to read with expression and understanding.

In Karnataka, the Nali Kali curriculum provides story cards based on the *aksharas* that the children have been introduced to. But, our observations show that teachers read (and explain) the story to the children, after which, they are sent to “practice” the card on their own. How do they practice? Most often, children “practice” passages by copying the entire passage down — again, and again! This cannot help them to become fluent readers!

[Observation Notes, Grade 2, Yadgir]

Amit Kumar, a high performing second grade child is working on a “vacchaka” (story) card, “Mrugalaya”.

Amit reads a word from the card (he actually caps his pen when reading). He then puts his head down on his hand on the ground and writes the word in his notebook — which is lying on the ground. He does not copy *akshara-by-akshara*. He reads out the word (*akshara-by-akshara* and then blends it) and then writes the word down. This reading-pause-writing continues rhythmically. He is not distracted by the observer. The rest of the children are curious, but Amit is focused on his task.

After nearly 40 minutes of copy-writing, he is done with his card. He goes up to the teacher and waits to show her his work.

The teacher puts two ticks on his notebook and asks him to read out his card. He reads it out to her for a few minutes, after which, she sends him back. He resumes copy-writing the card for the second time in that class. By the end of that class, he has spent over 55 minutes (out of an 80 minute class) copy writing the same card two times, and only a few minutes reading it.

We saw many such examples, where children copy-write passages more than practice reading them.

Student Difficulty. Children don't become better at reading words and passages by copy-writing them. They need to practice reading them aloud, with support from the teacher.

We saw many examples where teachers read out passages from the textbook word-by-word, or line-by-line, and children followed along, repeating each word or line after the teacher. Why is this not an effective technique? Again, this does not require the child to practice her own decoding skills while reading passages. When the support given by the teacher is removed, these same children cannot read the passages that have just been read aloud by the teacher!

Student Difficulty. Support from teachers should not take away children's opportunities to try to read words on their own. They need to practice reading passages at their level by themselves, with only some guidance from the teacher.

6. Meaning is not used as a foundation to teach children how to decode.

The reading process needs to be anchored in meaning. Although *aksharas* do not have a meaning of their own and only depict sounds, children need to know that reading and writing are meaningful activities. They need to know that the language they read in print is like the language they speak – and can be used for expression and communication.

What happens instead, is that the language of the textbook is so completely different from the child's spoken language. Unlike speaking, writing and school language do not seem to have much meaning. Figure 5 shows the Sanskritized words in the Nali Kali curriculum. They are nothing like the words children use in their oral languages, and hence are not likely to be meaningful to them.

Table 1

The child's words and Nali Kali words: two different languages?

Picture	Child's Word	Nali Kali Word
Arrow	BaNa ಬಣ	shara ಶರ
Necklace	Sara ಸರ	HavaLa ಹವಳ
Trumpet	pipi ಪಿಪಿ	Oolaga ಓಲಗ
Circle	rutu ರುತು	Vruta ವೃತ
Phone	phone ಫೋನ್	dooravaNi ದೂರವಣಿ
Thread	dara	Nooloo
Dawn/Sun*	surya	Udaya

* Picture shows sun rising

If children are unaware of the fact that written language can be useful and meaningful, and instead are only aware that written language involves repetition and copying, their ability to understand or make meaning of passage for themselves will be almost absent.

Teachers also do not see children as meaning-makers and therefore, do not expect them to be able to complete meaningful tasks on their own.

[Classroom Observation, Grade 2, Yadgir]

The children were given a card. The instruction in the card said “Frame sentences using the given words and write them in your workbooks”.

In class, the teacher conducted the activity in the following manner:

The teacher dictated the sentences to the children. But the children could not write these sentences down. Then the teacher wrote the sentences in the space given in the workbook and asked them to copy them in the notebook saying,

“See, you have to read these sentences and write them in your notebook”.

When asked about the activity card transaction at the end of the class, the teacher said,

“The card asks them to frame sentences and write. But they can’t frame sentences because it is a very difficult activity. That is why I write it for them and ask them to copy.”

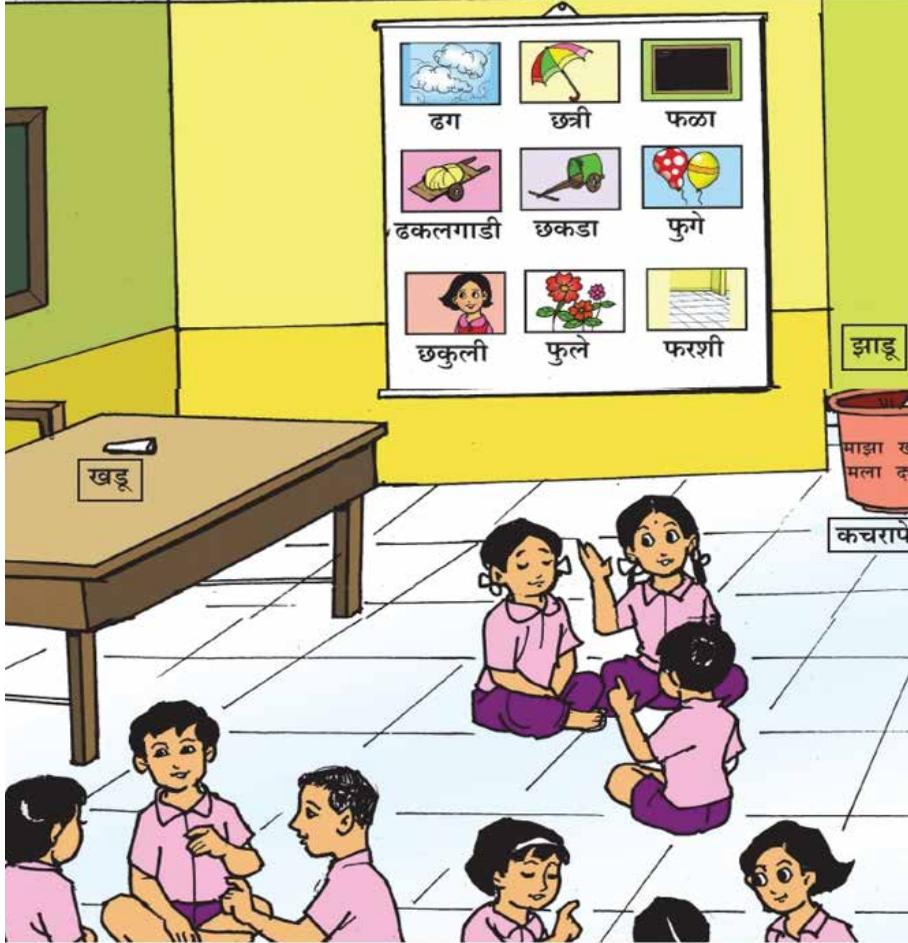
Student Difficulty. Since reading and writing are not taught as meaningful activities, it is easy to see why children were not able to suddenly begin writing their own sentences.

The following example shows how a teacher turns another activity which could be filled with meaning for the students, into an activity that is only related to the script, taking away the opportunity for students to connect written language with the world around them.

[Classroom Observation, Grade 1, Wada]

This is an excerpt from the Balbharti Grade 1 textbook. The box below the picture is an instruction to the teacher:

२३. माझा शब्दसंग्रह-५



Ask children to look carefully at objects in your classroom and name them. The teacher should write the names of the objects on the board. Ask children to read along with you. After that, make name cards for the objects. The teacher should read the cards for the children. After that, ask the children to place the cards near the corresponding objects in the classroom. Then, ask the children to look at the pictures on the right-hand corner of page. The teacher should finally read words to the children. And the children can repeat.

Figure 7. Lesson from Grade 1 Balbharti Marathi textbook.

The idea of this activity is to link word reading to objects in the children's worlds.

What actually happened:

Teacher (T): What can you see in the picture?

Children (C) (in chorus): Clouds, umbrella, slate, balloons, flowers, girl.

T: Which are the words that have “kaana” (/a:/ *matraa*).

One child: छात्री.

T: No. छात्री has “velanti” (long e /i:/ *matraa*).

And the class continued in this manner, with children being asked to identify *maatras* in words.



Section III

Phases of Word Reading

Section III: Development of Word Reading Abilities in Children

In Section I we showed you how poorly children in our sample performed in decoding the script. In Section II we gave you glimpses into ways in which they are taught the script. Since ours was a longitudinal study, we could track how children learned to decode words over the first three years of schooling. In the West, a well-known scholar called Linnea Ehri (1998) noticed that there were observable “phases” that children go through as they learn to read words in English.

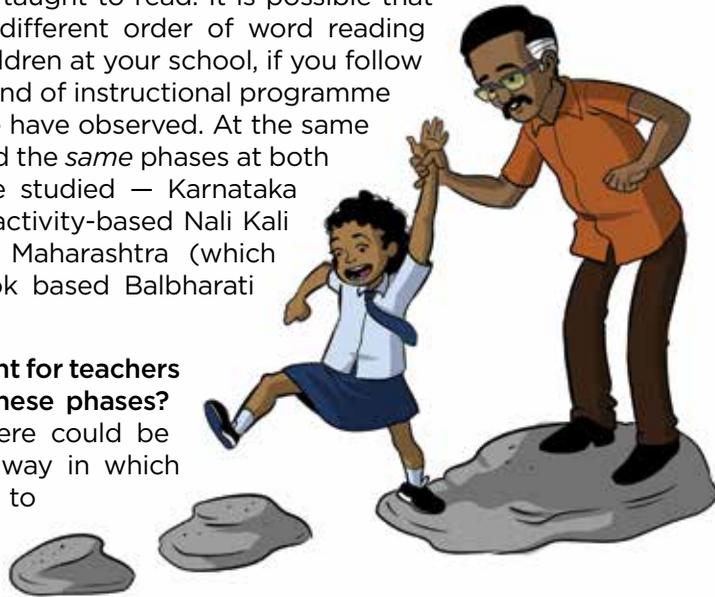
What are phases? Phases can be thought of as sequences that learners go through as they develop the ability to read. Phases can vary depending on *how* children are taught to read. It is possible that you may find a different order of word reading abilities in the children at your school, if you follow a very different kind of instructional programme from the ones we have observed. At the same time, we observed the *same* phases at both the sites that we studied — Karnataka (which uses the activity-based Nali Kali curriculum) and Maharashtra (which uses the textbook based Balbharati curriculum).

Why is it important for teachers to know about these phases?

Knowing that there could be an order to the way in which children learn to read words is very useful for assessing and

understanding children’s capabilities. It helps us as teachers to plan our teaching based on where the child is. Phases, therefore, help us to understand the *pattern* of strengths and needs that a child demonstrates in word reading (and spelling). It helps us plan specific activities for one child, or for a group of children in our class.

The phases we noticed as children learned to read Kannada and Marathi are very similar to what Ehri noticed for word-reading in English. But, because Indian scripts are quite different from the English script in many ways, we also noticed some differences. These are presented in the following pages.



Each of these phases have implications for teaching. These will be discussed in the recommendations section.

Pre-Akshara Reading

Reading

- During this phase, the child does not attend much to the *aksharas* or print presented.
- The child may use other cues to read. These cues could be pictures, or may be drawn from the child's background knowledge (e.g., common words the child hears), or from the context of the classroom.
- The child may recognize a few *moolaksharas* when presented separately, but is not able to recognize them during word reading. We found that children are able to recognize an average of 6 *aksharas* during this phase.

Spelling

- If given opportunities to write freely, children write in scribbles, wavy marks, circles, etc.
- Sometimes, children write known *aksharas* or numbers all over the page, in no particular order.
- Some children may refuse to write.

Partial Akshara Reading: I

Reading

- The child begins to attend to *aksharas* while reading words in this phase. In the beginning, some characteristics of the pre-*akshara* phase might still be seen. This means the child will sometimes attend to, and sometimes ignore text.
- The child seems to understand that for each symbol, there is a sound.
- Children in this phase are able to segment, or break up, spoken words into syllables.
- In reading words, the child may not maintain the order of *aksharas* from left to right, and may omit *aksharas* entirely (e.g., माकड - कम). In this example, the child has recognized 2 *aksharas* in the word and made up another word with those *aksharas*.
- If *aksharas* look or sound similar to each other, this poses a challenge during this phase.
- In reading words, children in this phase still focus almost exclusively on the *moolaksharas* and omit reading the *maatras* (e.g., कैलास - कलस).
- We notice that children in this phase begin to decode simple words when they can recognize between 20-30 *moolaksharas*.

Spelling

- Children are able to write a few *aksharas*. To write a given word, the child may represent only a few *aksharas* for a word, or may write incorrect *aksharas*. For e.g., माकड - मकन.
- Children group together *aksharas* when writing words. So, they have realized that letters need to be grouped together to form words.

Partial *Akshara* Reading: II

Reading

- The child continues to attend to both cues from the context and from the *aksharas* in decoding words.
- The child typically recognizes 1-5 *maatras* (ॠ, ॡ, ॢ, ॣ and ।) during this phase.
- The child can read simple words with a few *maatras* during this phase.
- Differences between the long and short vocalic sounds (*raswa-deergh*) of the *maatras* may not be recognized at this phase.
- Some *maatras* that are read correctly in one word may not be identified correctly in another word — that is, recognition of *maatras* is inconsistent.
- While reading, the child may not blend syllables into words, but may read syllable by syllable across words in a text without recognizing word boundaries.
- When given longer words to read, the child may not be able to attend to all parts of longer words.
- The child in this phase cannot yet recognize most *samyuktaksharas*, or the *maatras* that are taught late.
- In reading *samyuktaksharas*, many children either identify both sounds in the *samyuktaksharas* as separate syllabic sounds, or only identify one of the sounds and omit the other.

Spelling

- Children are able to write a few simple words without *maatras*, like घर, वन.
- When writing longer and more difficult words, children write phonetically using invented spellings, with the *aksharas* representing a sound close to the sound in the original word. For example, डौल - डऊल.

Partial *Akshara* Reading: III

Reading

- While decoding words, children still make use of cues from the context and from *aksharas*.
- More self-corrections (that is children correcting themselves when they make word-reading errors) can be seen during this phase.
- The ability to blend or put together syllables into words improves, although some children may still not be able to do this yet.
- The child may succeed in decoding long words by breaking them into syllabic chunks.
- Commonly used *maatras* (ॠ, ॡ, ॢ, ॣ and ।) can be recognized within words and the child reads these *maatras* consistently.
- *Maatras* that are introduced later in the curriculum are still not mastered fully.
- Words with multiple *maatras* can still pose challenges for the child.
- The child can read *samyuktaksharas* in commonly occurring words, for example, आपल्या, तुमच्या, माझ्या (Marathi); ಅವ್ವೆ ಅಮ್ಮ, ಹಬ್ಬ (Kannada).
- But, *samyuktaksharas* continue to be difficult and challenging for children, overall.
- During this phase, children are able to read a simple passage with frequently used *maatras*.

Spelling

- Children are able to write simple and frequently used words correctly. Words with the *maatras* ॠ, ॡ and ॢ are written correctly.
- While writing long words all *aksharas* are represented correctly, but there may be errors related to *maatras* that are taught late.

Full *Akshara* Reading

Reading

- All the *moolaksharas* that are used commonly in the Kannada and Marathi script are recognized. Some *aksharas* are used very, very rarely or not at all — these may not be recognized (Eg., ॥ and ३).
- Most of the *maatras*, with few exceptions, are recognized consistently. Some errors may still be seen on rarely used *maatras*, or on *rasva* vs. *deergh maatras* (long and short versions of the same vocalic sound).

- Commonly occurring *samyuktaksharas* are read consistently and accurately. Sometimes, when a *samyuktakshara* is accompanied by a *maatras*, the child may omit reading either the *samyuktakshara* or the *maatras* (e.g., चंद्रादय instead of चंद्रोदय).
- Children may struggle with reading *samyuktaksharas* in longer words that have more than three *aksharas*, and in words where there is more than one *samyuktakshara*. In other words, children could still struggle with reading complex or unfamiliar words during this phase.
- At this phase, most of the words read in isolation are blended. In connected passages, there may be a small percentage of words which are not blended. These are mostly the longer words which are still sounded out syllable-by-syllable.
- Children are able to read passages with simple words with *maatras* and a few simple *samyuktaksharas*.

Spelling

- We could not see much improvement in children’s writing during this phase.
- Children at this phase can write simple words correctly, but make mistakes with words with *maatras* that are introduced late, and with words that have *samyuktaksharas*.

Consolidated Word Reading

(Very few children in our sample at each site reached this phase by the end of Grade 3, hence we have a relatively smaller set of data to describe this phase.)

Reading

- Children have mastered *akshara* recognition (including *maatras* and *samyuktaksharas*) for the most part during this phase.
- Blending is consistent and the child is able to read with expression.
- Children read faster and more easily.
- Children use strategies to “word-solve” with difficult/unknown words—both while reading and while spelling.
- On an average, children are reading passages at the Grade 2 and Grade 3 level at this phase.

Spelling

- No improvement in writing could be seen across the last 3 phases of reading.
- Simple words are spelled correctly. But children still struggle with words with *maatras* that are introduced late, and with words with *samyuktaksharas*.
- This lack of improvement could be due to the nature of the instructional programmes that do not give children many opportunities to write, other than copy-writing.

Section IV

Recommendations for Your Classrooms

Section IV: Recommendations

Decoding is a process that requires the combination of many sub-skills:

- A. You have to know the symbols of your script and their sounds.
- B. You have to know how to blend *aksharas* together to form words.
- C. You have to know and be familiar with many words.
- D. You have to know ways to read words that are unfamiliar to you.
- E. You have to make meaning as you read different words and passages.
- F. You have to learn to read passages “fluently” — that is, accurately, with reasonable speed, appropriate expressiveness and comprehension.

As we have seen in this Guide, decoding is quite a challenging process for most children! So, what can we do? In this section, we present a few recommendations. But, first -

Don't forget! Decoding is only one part of your early language and literacy curriculum!

The biggest mistake we make in our schools is to spend most of the language learning time in early grades on teaching children the script.

But, children don't learn language sequentially. They DON'T first learn to decode, and later to comprehend. Children are active learners and meaning makers, hence it is important to keep meaning-making at the centre of the curriculum.

Children should be taught the script clearly and systematically. But, this should take up only 20-30 minutes per day out of the language learning curriculum. ***The MHRD's Padhe Bharat, Badhe Bharat document recommends that 2.5 hours per day be spent on language learning tasks in Grades 1-3.*** If this time guideline is followed, then decoding should only take up one-fifth of the total time for language! ***Even if you cannot give language learning that much time, make sure that decoding tasks do not take up more than one-third of the total time available.***

Recommendation 1: Teach reading and writing as relevant and meaningful activities.

Teach children that just as spoken language uses meaningful words, reading and writing are also ways to express ourselves and communicate meaning. The ritual of learning a script should not be absent of meaning. Teach your children that while *aksharas* convey many different sounds, when they come together to form words, they have meaning. This meaning can let us hear a story and even let us tell our stories. To make meaning a part of the entire decoding process, you can:

- Use words children use in their spoken language while teaching *aksharas* and words
- Encourage children to write down the words they use in everyday language. Print these words on cards and put them on the classroom walls at a level that the child can easily read and touch.
- Read out the words on the word cards around the classroom. Ask children to run and touch the word you read.
- Give children time to look through or read simple picture story books of their own interest and talk to you and each other about what they've read.
- Ask the children to tell you a story. Write down their stories and make books of the children's stories. Read these stories to the class.
- Ask children to write stories. Ask children to make drawings about what they write. (It is OK if there are spelling mistakes. Let them imagine and tell you the story. You can help them with the spelling later.)
- Ask children to make books of the words they want to remember. Give them cards to write on and paste in their books. Whenever the child likes a word or uses a word a lot, ask him/her to write it on a card and stick it in their book. They can draw pictures next to the word to help them remember it. At the end of each day, ask each child to look through their books and read all their words. Encourage children to ask you for help if they do not remember a word. Like this, children might be able to read meaningful words that they like and become used to recognizing these words.

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- The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is a powerful way by which children are taught to see reading and writing as meaningful activities. In LEA, the class shares a joint, meaningful experience (e.g. a walk around the village or learning how to make something together).



The class then talk about and discuss the experience and decide which aspects of it they would like to write about. Even though the text is co-created orally, the teacher can take the responsibility of writing it down on a large chart paper or poster in large print that is easy for children to read. The class can then “read” it together, usually several times, and discuss it some more. It could be used to make a presentation to the rest of the school, and could remain as “meaningful print” in the classroom. Children can write their own versions of their experience in their notebooks, adding special details (through drawing or writing) that the group may have missed. In this way, children learn that there is a larger purpose to learning how to decode words.

- Shared reading of predictable texts is another way to invite beginning readers to meaning-making. Use texts with large print, which are short, and have repetitive sentence patterns. Rhymes, or texts generated during Language Experience Approach can be used. Read this text aloud many times and invite the students to read *along with* you, and NOT after you.

You can stop and show the child various aspects of reading — for example, how to read with expression, what a “word” is, which words sound like other words (rhymes), which words begin or end like other words.

Recommendation 2: Extend opportunities to learn and practice the script through the first four to five years of formal schooling.

Researchers who have studied how children learn Indian scripts have concluded that these scripts are not very easy to learn! They have a very large number of *aksharas*, and many ways to combine *moolaksharas* with *maatras* and *samyuktaksharas*. This takes children time to learn.

Hence, we recommend that curricula be designed with ample opportunities for learning and reviewing the script throughout the first four to five years of schooling. If only one-third to one-fifth of the total time available for language is spent on decoding instruction, there will still be enough time for other kinds of language learning opportunities.

Recommendation 3: Encourage children to attend to the sound of the symbols they are learning.

There is no natural connection between any *akshara* and its sound. It has taken people years to come up with these *aksharas* that represent different sounds. Nobody is born knowing how to read. The more chance you give children to practice saying different sounds and identifying different *aksharas*, the better they will be able to make the connection with what is written and the language that is spoken.

- Ask children to run around the classroom and touch as many objects as they can find starting with the sound (“muh”). Keep changing the sounds you call out.
- Start showing students *aksharas* for these sounds
- Make students pay attention to the beginning and final sounds of words. Teach children to play word *antakshari*. When one person says a word, the next person needs to say a word beginning with the sound that the previous word ends in. For example *kamal*, *ladka*, *aam*, *matka* etc.
- When teaching *aksharas* ensure that you model the sound sufficiently. When children are practicing *aksharas*, make sure that they are also attending to its sound.
- Give children picture cards of words with everyday objects and ask them to identify words with the same beginning sounds.
- Ask children to take apart words that you present orally and say what sounds they find inside each word.

- Encourage children to give their own word suggestions beginning with the sound/*akshara* they are learning. Make word and picture cards of the children's words.
- Encourage children to write stories with drawings, labels and invented spellings from the very beginning. Trying to write their own words (instead of copying "taught" words) will force them to attend to the sounds of the *aksharas* they are learning.

Recommendation 4: Introduce *matras* early.

In order to help children master *matraas* and their sounds, introduce *matraas* with *moolaksharas* early on. Keerti Jayaram and her team, in the Organisation for Early Language Promotion (OELP) worked on a method of introducing *moolaksharas* and *matraas* in groups (2008).

This is how they made groups that were easy for children to learn, read and use.

- The *moolaksharas* and *matraas* that are **most common in simple words** were in the early groups.
- They made sure that the **sounds were different** and distinct from each other in each group.
- They made sure that the *aksharas/ matraas* looked different from each other.

This gave children the chance to use, write, read and say words that they knew. The grouping also made it less likely for children to get confused between sounds and symbols that were similar.

This is the table of OELP's "varna-samooaha" groups that have been shown to help students learn the script for Hindi language with success (Jayaram, 2008, p. 178).

Table 2

The first varna-samooaha group introduced by OELP in Grade 1.

Varna Samooaha No.	Consonants					Vowels				Secondary vowels (matras)				
1	क	म	ल	न	प	अ	आ	ई			।	ी	ँ	
2	च	र	स	त	ग	अ	आ	ई	ए		।	ी	ँ	
3	ज	य	ह	ब	ड	घ	अ	आ	ई	ए		।	ी	ँ
4	ध	द	थ	भ	ठ		अ	आ	ई	ए		।	ी	ँ
5	ट	व	श	छ	फ	ड़	अ	आ	ई	ए		।	ी	ँ
6	ढ	झ		ष	ख		अ	आ	ई	ए	ऊ	।	ी	ँ

Make your own *samoochas* with teacher colleagues in your school for the languages you teach.

Keep points A, B and C in mind when you are making groups.

Remember: Children must be given many opportunities to word solve (see Recommendation 5) with these *aksharas*.

Try this in your school!

Recommendation 5: Encourage children to become word constructors and word solvers.

When children are taught decoding only through rote and repetition, they lack strategies to read or write unfamiliar words, and their ability to read and write even the “taught” words is not very strong. Instead, teach children to “problem-solve” words:

- Make children play games in groups. Give each group 10 *aksharas*. (*Matraas* must be included and paired with *an akshara*, for example: मि, बा, ली etc.) The groups must come up with as many meaningful words as they can.
- The word antakshari game can be extended to the written form — where children make words beginning with the same *akshara* as the previous word ended with.
- Many games, such as Scrabble, Word Ladders, etc. can be played to build children’s ability to read and write words.
- Give plenty of opportunities for children to write to express and communicate. Allow them to use invented spellings, even if these spellings are “wrong” by adult standards. It is only through such experimentation that they will learn to “solve” words.
- Encourage children to use a variety of cues to “solve” unknown words while reading:
 - o ask children to see if the word looks like another word they know.
 - o encourage children to think about what words would make sense in that sentence.
 - o ask children to check whether their word fits grammatically in the sentence.
 - o ask children to check individual *aksharas* within that word.

Recommendation 6: Give children regular opportunities to read passages at their own level of reading competence.

In many Western countries, teachers use a format called “Guided Reading” to help children become fluent readers. In guided reading, children are grouped according to their reading ability and are given texts/passages to read that they can read with 90% accuracy.

The teacher works with each group. Here’s how:

- Select the right text for the group based on their reading level and interests.
- Introduce the text: Tell the group the title and the summary of the story.
- Page through the book showing the group members all the illustrations. Briefly mention what is happening in the pictures.
- Introduce 2-3 words in the text that are new to the children or hard to read out.
- Ask students to read the text by themselves. Children in Grades 1-3 can read in whispers. Children in Grades 3-5 can read silently.
- Teach children strategies to process what they read:
 - they can sound out each *akshara* and put it together to make words.
 - they can sound out the first few *aksharas* and guess the word, based on the story so far.
 - they can be familiar with a word because they have seen it and written it many times.
 - the word may remind them of another word they’ve read or seen before.
- Discuss the text with students once they have finished reading. This is not an activity to get the “right” answers. Rather, try and understand where children were able to make meaning as they tell you about what they read. Ask them questions that will help them think about the story and relook at the story to help them understand:
 - They can tell the sequence of events in the story, in their own words.
 - They can try to find out the meaning of new words or ask the teacher.
 - They can reread the story if they forget or did not understand something.
 - They can discuss what happened and what was confusing. Did the book remind them of something in their own lives or remind them of another book they’ve read?

-
- o They can discuss characters in the story, or their own reactions to the story.

The teacher's job through this process is to guide the child to read and understand better. Don't explain the text. Let the children think and talk it through.

Closing Comments

Why teach and learn the script?

Remember the story of Suman? It feels very crippling for the child to be expected to write conventionally in the early days of school, when many students in classrooms across India have not even seen print ever before in their lives.

Remember that the written word should allow children to express themselves and communicate. It is crucial to establish that written language is like spoken language. However, unlike spoken language, written language can go very far, it can reach people on even the other end of the world, who we have never seen; or, people living in a different time period. Written language, and reading and writing, gives us a chance to talk and listen to people from all over the world. We can tell them our stories by writing them. We can hear brand new, different stories when we read.

Let your children know that reading and writing is far more than just learning a script, it gives you the chance to talk, to know about the WORLD.



We hope that our research work on decoding will be of help to you in the classroom. Happy reading to you and your students.

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Why Teach and Learn the Script?

It feels very crippling for a child to be expected to write conventionally in the early days of school, when many of our students have not even seen print ever before in their lives.

Remember that the written word should allow children to express themselves and communicate. It is crucial to establish that written language is like spoken language. Unlike spoken language, however, written language can go very far- it can reach people on even the other end of the world, who we have never seen; or, people living in a different time period.

Let your children know that reading and writing is far more than just learning a script, it gives you the chance to talk, to know about the WORLD.

In this Teachers' Guide, we summarize learnings from the LiRiL project related to the teaching and learning of the script in classrooms in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

Teachers can prepare to teach decoding effectively by understanding the phases that children go through as they learn to read. In this book we give specific recommendations to you to put to use in your classrooms.

Happy reading to you and your students!