



Research Insights on
Study of Early Literacy

Literacy Research in Indian Languages (LiRIL)

Project Abstract

It is well-known that children, especially those from economically disadvantaged communities, have poorly equipped with reading and writing skills in early primary grades. This leaves a large number of individuals with a permanent handicap through their lives. To understand what could be the reasons behind this, the LiRIL project, jointly supported by the Tata Trusts and Azim Premji University, deep dived into teaching learning of reading writing in two Indian languages—Kannada and Marathi--and to document the challenges faced by learners in this process. The project was conducted in two socio-economically disadvantaged regions – Yadgir block (Yadgirdistrict, Karnataka) and Wada block, (Palghar district, Maharashtra). It followed 360 students per site as they moved from Grades 1-3 (2013-2016) through longitudinal research design. The schools in Karnataka followed the NaliKali (Multi Grade Multi Level– MGML) curricular approach and the schools in Maharashtra used the Bal Bharati textbooks for teaching language and literacy.

METHOD

A variety of quantitative and qualitative data were collected over a period of three years, including children's performance on a variety of literacy tasks, classroom observations, teacher interviews, in-depth child studies, and curricular analyses. The advantage of using such a design is allowed us to gain insights into nature of challenges that students faced while learning to read and write – but, it also permitted us to gain specific insights into why learning outcomes are poor and what we could possibly do to address it.

FINDINGS

The LiRIL project confirms what is well known – children in both sites perform very poorly in a variety of reading and writing tasks. It was clear

that children are not just unable to read words and passages at an appropriate level of difficulty, but that, even those who are able to read the script, are often unable to comprehend it. Higher order skills like comprehension and composition are alarmingly poor.

Specifically, we found that:

Finding 1

The scripts—Kannada and Marathi—like most Indian scripts– take several years to master. This is because the number of symbols in the varnamala and barakhadi is extensive and complex. Even in Grade 3, students have not completed the process of script acquisition. This is not factored in the curriculum, and cannot be attributed entirely to poor instruction.

Finding 2

Even though lower-order skills occupy much of the time in early language classrooms, children perform poorly on tasks related to decoding the script. Word and passage reading are not automatic outcomes of learning to read the aksharas. Even children who knew aksharas often failed to be able to read words and passages successfully. Children need access to a well-thought out phonics/word-solving curriculum that goes beyond copy-writing.

Finding 3

Comprehension and composition are not automatic outcomes of learning to read the script. Even students who performed well on script-reading tasks, performed poorly on tasks assessing their understanding of what was read, and their ability to communicate ideas through writing. This is because the processes that are currently used to teach reading and writing are disabling relevance and meaning-making.

Finding 4

Curricular approaches matter. While both curricula result in poor outcomes, MGML poses further unique difficulties and challenges to language and literacy learning. The self-paced nature of MGML curricula severely restrict opportunities to engage in oral language activities, or to access meaningful texts and social interactions.

Finding 5

Teachers are prepared generally and not specifically to teach language and literacy teaching. The rationale for curricular reforms are rarely explained to teachers. Most teachers in our sample did not possess clear understandings about aims and purposes of early language curricula, approaches to teaching early language and literacy, or ways to address specific student difficulties.

This work has important implications for curricular and pedagogic reforms and for teacher education curricula. We need to urgently move beyond general understandings of “child-friendly” and “activity-based” reforms in early language education, and draw upon conceptually sound and empirically valid principles and practices that support early language and literacy learning. Select recommendations as outlined below:

Balanced approach to literacy – time and organisation

Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) PadheBharat Badhe Bharat document recommends that approximately 2.5 hours per day be spent on language and literacy learning during the first three years of school. We recommend that this time be organized into

“blocks”. At a minimum, 4 blocks of time are necessary to adequately support different aspects of early reading and writing – Read Aloud Block; Phonics and Word Work; Guided Reading (where students practice reading passages/books at an appropriate level of difficulty); and Guided Writing (for compositional efforts).

Teacher Education

Teachers should be provided with domain specific expertise in teaching early language and literacy. Currently, they are taught more about how to handle materials and groupings, than about the underlying principles of language teaching and learning. Teachers should also be encouraged to develop themselves as readers and writers if they are to teach reading and writing in rich and meaningful ways to children. Supportive formats should be created for examining strong beliefs that many teachers hold about the capabilities of marginalized children and communities; and about the nature of language teaching and learning.

Early Intervention

Children who are not progressing adequately should be supported in an early and comprehensive manner through well designed intervention programmes. In some countries, “three tiers” of responsive teaching are provided – good first teaching for all; small group interventions for 15-20% of students who are not progressing adequately; and intensive individualized interventions for the bottom 4-5% who do not respond even to the small group interventions. At a minimum, we should be able to provide the first two of these three tiers – i.e., good first teaching for all, and well-designed small group interventions for those who struggle.

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