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## UNIT 4 LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EXPERIENCES IN PRESCHOOLS AND SCHOOLS IN INDIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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More than often, language and literacy experiences are organized in a very limiting and restricted manner. Of course, there are some examples of preschools and schools which offer developmentally appropriate experiences to enable young children to acquire language and literacy abilities in meaningful ways. In this Unit, we will examine how early language and literacy pedagogy is typically provided or organized in Indian preschools and schools. The idea is to critically analyze the common practices rather than focus on exceptions.

### Objectives

After studying this Unit, you will be able to:

- critically analyze the language and literacy instruction typically provided in preschools and schools;
- discuss how the prevalent literacy teaching practices and beliefs affect children's language and literacy development;
- explain what makes it difficult for some children to acquire literacy; and
- describe the conditions for language learning that enable the acquisition of oral language and extrapolate how these can be applied to the acquisition of literacy.

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## 4.2 LITERACY TEACHING IN INDIAN CLASSROOM

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### 4.2.1 A Typical Language Classroom

What picture comes to your mind when you think of how young children are taught to read and write in our preschools and early primary classes? The typical picture that flashes across one's mind is children being taught the alphabet followed by simple words and then short sentences. This teaching is done in the following ways:

- In many cases, the teacher writes or points to letters written on the board or chart, says the letter names one by one, and the children repeat the letter names in sequence after the teacher in a chorus. This repetition is done daily, children usually recite letter names in a sing-song fashion, and over time, they learn the alphabet sequence.
- Many teachers, after naming the letter, also state a word that starts with that letter. So children learn to say – ‘*ka se kabootar*’, ‘*kha se kahrgosh*’ or ‘*A for apple*, ‘*B for ball*’. In Hindi and most regional languages, the letter names and letter sounds are the same. The name of the letter ‘ka’ is its sound as well. In the English language, as you know, the letter name and the letter sound are different. So, along with knowing the letter name, the child needs to learn the letter sound as well. When the teacher emphasizes the letter sound, she makes statements like ‘m’ says /ma/ or ‘t’ says /ta/ and may also add a word beginning with the sound and say ‘ta’ for tomato. She may ask the children to name some more words that start with the sound ‘ta’. Many teachers do not emphasize the letter sound and simply use the letter name and say ‘t for tomato’. Each day, the teacher selects a few letters and related words and through daily repetition, children learn to recognize letters and can say some words starting with the letter sound. They may or may not be able to identify the letter sound, depending upon whether the teacher emphasized the sound or not. The following two examples show how this recognition of letter names may be done typically.

#### Example 1

**Teacher:** *The first letter is ‘a’. The sound of ‘a’ is...?*

*Some children respond with the sound ‘ae’ as in “aeroplane”. Some others respond with the sound ‘a’ as in ‘but’.*

**Teacher:** *It is not ‘a’ sound; it is ‘ae’ sound. Tell me three things that start with ‘A’ (letter, not sound). “A for...”*

**Many Children (In the Chorus):** *Apple*

**Teacher:** *(repeats) “A for...”*

**Many Children (In the Chorus):** *Aeroplane*

**Teacher:** *“A for...”*

**A Child:** *ant; some pronounced ‘ant’ as ‘aunt’ and the teacher corrects them.*

**Teacher:** (repeats): “A for...”

Children do not come up with any word.

**Teacher:** (reminding them): “Axe”.

As children say these words, she draws their pictures on the board.

In this episode, the teacher identifies the sound of the letter ‘A’ only once and for the rest of the time uses the letter name. More confusing is the fact that she gives them words starting with different ‘a’ sounds without any explanation.

## Example 2

Individual letters of the Urdu alphabet are introduced using a primer. Opposite each letter, the picture of an object beginning with that letter is drawn in the primer. The teacher names each letter and states the word beginning with it and the children repeat after her. Like English, in Urdu, the name of the letter and its sound may be different. The teacher does not focus on the sound of the letter. The teacher does not point out where the letter being discussed is written on the page. Children are probably expected to understand this from the picture.

**Teacher:** Swad se surahi

Children repeat. The teacher does not ask the children names of any other objects beginning with the letter. In this way, the recitation continues.

**Teacher:** Swa se jag

(Children repeat)

**Teacher:** Ze se ziraf

(Children repeat)

**Teacher:** Seen se seb

(Children repeat)

**Teacher:** Sheen se sher

(Children repeat)

**Teacher:** Saaf se surahi

(Children repeat)

**Teacher:** Zoa se zaroof

(Children repeat)

**Teacher:** Toa se tifl

(Children repeat)

**Teacher:** Aain se aurat

(Children repeat)

- Many teachers, after this recitation of letter names and corresponding token words, ask the children to practice writing a letter or two in their copies. Usually, the teacher writes the letter on the board and the children copy the letter, writing it repeatedly in their notebooks. Children don't say the sound(s) of the letter as they write it.

- After children have learned to identify letters, teachers introduce children to two or three-letter words. Typical words in English include – bat, mat, rat, sat or sit, hit, pit or pot, hot, dot. When teachers introduce these words, some of them use letter names to spell the words, and some use letter sounds. As with the teaching of the alphabet, children are made to read and spell the words many times, reciting the list of ‘...at’ words or ‘...it’ words.

When teaching Hindi, teachers usually begin with words that are formed by consonants (*vyanjan*). The secondary vowel markers (*matras*) are not introduced in the beginning and so the two-letter words are formed such as *bas*, *ras*, *kas*, and three-letter words such as *kamal*, *phasal*, *badal*...

See the following two examples!

### Example 3

*The teacher asked the children to open their books to page 15. On this page were 20 words set in four columns of five words each, with a picture depicting each word. Three of these columns had words where the sound of the letter ‘A’ was as in ‘apple’ (short /a/ sound)*

*The teacher wrote the set of five words from the first column in the book on the board. These words were: bat, mat, cat, rat, fat.*

*She asked the children to name each letter in the word as she pointed at it. When a word was spelt, she would ask “kya bana?” The children would name the word. The children’s response was in chorus and all children did not participate.*

*After each word was thus ‘read’ by the children together, the teacher read it out in the same way – she named the individual letters of the word, stated the word and the children repeated after her in the same way.*

*Thus, each word was spelt out by the teacher followed by the children, and ‘read’ in the following way:*

*b-a-t – bat*

*m-a-t – mat*

*r-a-t – rat*

*f-a-t – fat*

*c-a-t – cat*

*Then, she took the next set of five words and wrote them on the board. These were: van, can, fan, man, and pan.*

*The same procedure as described above was followed to read them.*

*After the above words were read out lead by the teacher, she asked, “Who will now get the class to do the reading of the words?”*

*Some children volunteered to lead the reading. This procedure was as follows:*

*A child came up and read out the first column (bat-mat-cat -rat-fat) by spelling the words in the same way as described above. Thus, she spelt 'b-a-t' as 'bat' and all the children repeated after her. The child read all the words correctly and was sent back.*

*Another child volunteered and when she reached 'c-a-t', she stopped at the first letter, omitted it possibly because she did not remember its name, and spelt 'a-t' instead of 'c-a-t'. The teacher asked her to go back, without helping her to read the word or telling her what was wrong with her reading.*

*Another child volunteered but could not read at all. The child was sent back with the comment, "you do not know ...go back!"*

*The teacher does not explain any word meanings. Since the word list had been transacted earlier in the class the word meanings may have been explained earlier.*

*Then children are asked to do "reading in your mind." After some time, children start talking.*

#### **Example 4**

*The teacher asks the children to open another page. There are two-letter words on the page. The teacher tells that today for the first time two-letter words will be introduced orally. Since children are familiar with letter names (which in Hindi are also letter sounds), she says today she will introduce two-letter words. She begins to read the list of words without any preamble.*

**Teacher:** *Gh-ra ghar (teacher names individual letters and then combines the letters to read the word).*

*Children seem aware of the procedure, for as soon as she says this, children repeat after her.*

**Children:** *Gh-ra – ghar.*

**Teacher:** *(in the same way): Ba – sa – bas.*

*(Children repeat after her.)*

**Teacher:** *Ra-tha – rath.*

*(Children repeat after her.)*

**Teacher:** *Na-la – nal.*

*(Children repeat after her.)*

**Teacher:** *Ga-ja – gaj.*

*(Children repeat after her.)*

**Teacher:** *Ja-ga – jag.*

*(Children repeat after her.)*

*Children have been instructed to track the letters and words being read with their fingers. More than half the class does not know which word is being read. They keep their finger arbitrarily on any word. Some are looking at the teacher's face and reciting.*

*The teacher re-reads the list of words, now holding up the book so that the printed page faces the children but the book is at her own face level. She moves around the class, keeping her finger on the word she is currently reading – this is her attempt to show the children where she is reading so that they can follow along in their books. However, hardly anyone can see the word she is pointing to – both because the book is not at children's level and also because she is continuously moving.*

- After introducing two and three-letter words without *matras*, the teachers introduce *matras* in Hindi or secondary vowel markers. Often to read the words the teacher names the individual letters in the word and the *matras* separately (vowel sounds), and then combines the sounds to name the word. Thus, to read the Hindi word 'Ram', the teacher may say: *ra – ra mein aa ki matra – ma – ram*; to read 'kabootar' the teacher will say or *ka – ba- ba mein bade oo ki matra – ta – ra – kabootar*.
- By Grade 2, short texts and poems are introduced in textbooks. Typically, these texts and poems are transacted in the following way — the teacher reads a line or a few words from the story or the poem and the children repeat after the teacher until the entire text is read. Some teachers explain the meaning of the text once at the beginning in a general way; some do it at the end and some explain the meaning of each line as they read it. Typically, while the meaning is explained only once, the reading is repeated multiple times for a certain number of days. After a few days, when the teacher finds that some children can read the text fluently, she asks one such child to come to the front of the class and read aloud. The child becomes the leader and the rest of the class repeats as the child reads. The following is an example of how this reading may be done.

### **Example 5**

*The teacher entered the class and, without any preamble, asked the children to open their textbooks on page 45. She held the book facing the children and read the title of the chapter, moving her fingers over the words of the title to show where she was reading. She did this standing in one place in front of the class. Children would have seen her moving fingers but would not have been able to see which word the finger has been placed at when a particular word was being spoken. She asked the children to keep their fingers on the words as they were being read.*

*She read out while moving her fingers with the children repeating after her. The children appeared familiar with the process.*

**Teacher:** *Mithu*

**Children:** *Mithu*

**Teacher:** *and the yellow mango*

**Children:** *and the yellow mango*

*(Note: The dashes above indicate the points at which the teacher stops and the children repeat the word or cluster of words after her; after which she speaks the next set of words.)*

**Teacher:** *Mithu – was – a – parrot*

*The teacher paused after each word and the children repeated the word after her.*

**Teacher:** *p-a-r-r-o-t*

*The teacher spelled the word with the children repeating each letter after her.*

**Teacher:** *Kya bolenge?*

**Children:** *parrot*

**Teacher:** *parrot*

**Children:** *parrot*

**Teacher:** *parrot; Mithu was a parrot.*

**Children:** *repeat*

**Teacher:** *A*

**Children:** *A*

**Teacher:** *green*

**Children:** *green*

**Teacher:** *parrot*

**Children:** *parrot*

**Teacher:** *with*

**Children:** *with*

**Teacher:** *a*

**Children:** *a*

**Teacher:** *red*

**Children:** *red*

**Teacher:** *beak*

**Children:** *beak*

**Teacher:** *red beak*

**Children:** *red beak*

**Teacher:** *One-day-Mithu-was- flying.*

*The teacher pauses after each word and the children repeat the word after her*

**Teacher:** *(now spells out 'flying' by breaking it into letter clusters); f-l-y*

*Children repeat the letters 'f-l-y'*

**Teacher:** *(spelling out the second cluster) i-n-g*

*Children repeat the letters 'i-n-g'.*

*'Flying' is spelled twice in this manner.*

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**Teacher:** (now reading the word as a whole)-flying

Children repeat.

The word 'flying' is repeated by the teacher and the children thrice.

**Teacher:** He-loved-to-fly.

The teacher paused after each word and the children repeated each word after her. In this way, the entire story was read. The teacher then explained the meaning of the story in Hindi. Explaining the meaning meant briefly telling the children the story in Hindi. Only in the case of a few sentences did the teacher specifically link the explanation/meaning with the sentence. When she linked the sentence with the meaning, she read out the sentence and translated it into Hindi. Often English and Hindi were used by the teacher while explaining the meaning, and so sometimes, the difficult word which should have been explained in the mother tongue was just repeated in English.

The above account shows that many teachers who teach young children believe that memorizing the alphabet sequence and being able to recognize letters is the first critical step in learning to read and write. Do you also think so? Write down your thoughts on this aspect in the space provided below.

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Of course, knowing the alphabet is important, but there are two points we need to think about:

- a) Should the alphabet be the first thing that children are taught when they are introduced to a language?
- b) How should the alphabet be introduced?

As you read this and subsequent chapters, you will engage with these questions.

Does this typical way of instruction help the children learn to read and write? Write down your thoughts on this aspect in the space provided below.

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Many of you may agree that such a pedagogy (method of teaching) helps the children to learn to read and write because you have seen children in your family become readers and writers through such an approach. However, the point is that while some children can learn to read this way, there is a large number of school-going children who don't learn to read and write even in Grade 5. It may appear that they are reading but they are not. How can we say so, you may ask?

There are two pieces of evidence for children not learning to read by this method.

**Firstly**, you will find that many children who can read a familiar text (that has been read in the class many times) cannot read an unfamiliar text. If you ask them to read another story from their textbook that has not yet been read in the class, they will not be able to read it. If they cannot read the new text, what does this tell us about them? The child can read the familiar text because the child has memorized it. If the child had learnt to identify the letters and know their sounds, then the child should have been able to read even the text that is unfamiliar.

The **second** piece of evidence that makes us claim that children are not reading, is based on the definition of what it means to be able to read (You have read about this in Unit 1). Being able to read means being able to understand/comprehend the meaning of what has been read. While many children can read any text fluently, they are not able to tell you the meaning of what they have read. Reading without understanding is not reading – it is simply decoding the text.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Which of the following is NOT the key characteristic of the typical/wrong literacy pedagogy?
  - a) The teacher makes use of repetition and rote memorization.
  - b) The teacher makes children learn the names of the letters.
  - c) The teacher makes learn the shape and sound of letters.
  - d) The teacher begins with teaching alphabetic series and does not move to another aspect of reading and writing until or unless the child memorizes it.

- 2) Many children don't learn to read if taught the typical way. Explain!  
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### 4.2.2 Who are the Children who Fail to Learn to Acquire Literacy?

A majority of the children who fail to learn to read and write when they are taught in the ways described in the previous Section have certain characteristics in common. Can you think about what these children may have in common? Write down your thoughts on this aspect in the space provided below.

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- .....
- .....
- .....
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- .....
- a) Often these children are **first-generation learners**. Others in their family do not know much about reading and writing, if at all. This results in many disadvantages as described further.
- Since they have no exposure to print in their homes and have not seen their parents or others in the community reading and writing as part of daily activities, they don't tend to see reading and writing as meaningful or useful for their life. Many of them are not able to develop an interest in these activities.
  - Since their family members do not read and write, they do not get support and help at home, as children of literate parents get, who may make efforts to supplement the work done at school.
- b) Another characteristic that the children who find it difficult to acquire literacy have in common with each other are that the **language they learn at preschool/ school is often different from the language they speak at home**. What they learn to read and write in preschool/ school is the official state language which could be very different from what they speak with their family members. Thus, they learn to read and write in a language that they do not fully understand and makes little sense to them. This, in itself, is a big barrier to learning to read and write. Making meaning is a universal human need and when children are asked to engage in something that they do not find purposeful, they begin to lose interest in it.

### 4.2.3 Analyzing the Typical Literacy Pedagogy

In light of the characteristics of children mentioned earlier, the way literacy instruction is carried out, as described in Sub-section 4.2.1, makes it difficult for children to learn to read and write. Let us analyze the gaps in this typical method of teaching children reading and writing.

- One of the most widely used techniques that teachers use to teach reading and writing to young children is **repetition and rote memorization**. The teacher simply writes down the symbols/alphabets on the board and reads it aloud several times. She also makes the children repeat it several times after her. Often, this technique also involves calling children out to the board and pointing out each letter/*akshara* and the sound it represents. Finally, the teacher asks children to write the letter down in their notebooks or slates. As the teacher accomplishes this task, the aim of teaching phonics is believed to

be met. However, this is not enough to develop a strong knowledge and understanding of the sound-letter relationship as we will discuss in Unit 8 of this Course.

- **Most teachers believe that until a child does not learn all the letters of the alphabet, she may not be able to learn to read at all.** Therefore, they do not expose children to texts, storybooks, or any other reading activities. They spend the first 3-6 months just ensuring that children learn the complete alphabetic series so that they can finally move to the reading exercises. However, there are several ways to engage children with reading and texts even before they master the complete script. For example, reading aloud from good children's books, shared reading of big books with the entire class a couple of times, or even children themselves reading sentences / small stories based on *aksharas* that they have been taught under the teacher's guidance (guided reading), and so on. These reading activities mentioned above are not just some of the general ways of engaging young children with texts. Instead, these are critical to the process of learning to read and, more importantly, to see reading as a relevant and meaningful exercise. Moreover, Indian scripts have a large number of written symbols. Research has shown that it takes children 3-4 years of schooling to master the entire script. But there is no need to teach them all the symbols in one go. One could start by introducing children to carefully selected groupings of *aksharas* (alphasyllables) and *maatras* (secondary vowel signs) that will give children the chance to read and write words they know and find meaningful from the very beginning.
- **Lack of building a clear and systematic understanding of sound-symbol relationships.** Teachers usually focus either on teaching the *aksharas* (the symbols of the script) or on the sounds of the symbols in the '*ka se kabootar*' manner. While children spend a good amount of time tracing and writing letters/*aksharas*, barely any time is devoted to matching these letters with their respective sounds. A child taught with this technique may look at the symbols but find it difficult to recall the sound it represents, thus, unable to decode the text successfully. Children need to focus on symbols and their sounds at the same time. Therefore, the teachers should spend a substantial amount of time ensuring that children have acquired the sound-letter relationship and that they can use it effectively as and when required.
- There are two possible ways to provide phonics instruction, one is by decoding, i.e. reading words, or by encoding i.e. constructing words. As far as the general practice of literacy instruction in India is concerned, it usually begins with **teaching decoding**. Thus, the child is firstly and primarily trained in the act of decoding words. For instance, to read the word 'mat', firstly, she looks at the first letter 'm'. She thinks about what sound it makes. Similarly, she reads each letter one after another and blends these to recognize the word formed by using a combination of these letters. If somehow, she manages to decode it successfully, she finally recognizes the meaning too. This kind of decoding based-reading is often difficult and confusing for many children. However, this is a

widely used technique teachers use to make young children learn and use phonics. Thus, barely, the teacher acknowledges and teaches the ability to read through encoding which may be a much more meaningful way to learn to read using the sound-letter relationship for many children.

- Another difficulty with the traditional method discussed in Sub-section 4.2.1 is that **children are introduced to words without context**. When the teacher introduces words like 'bat', 'cat', 'rat' and 'mat', she introduces these words because she uses the commonality in the sounds of the words as the principle for teaching reading. When introducing Hindi words, the teacher chooses simple two-letter or three-letter words like 'bal', 'kal', 'chal', 'pal'. Now, these words have nothing in common with each other except their common end sound, i.e., the sound of /al/. These words are not meaningfully linked to each other. Contrast this with how children use spoken language. Do they utter words that are unrelated to each other? No, they speak a sentence that makes meaning. Besides, often teachers limit the early literacy instruction to activities such as memorizing alphabetic series, visually analyzing random unrelated words or sentences and counting the letters in these words, copying these words from the board, and so on. Children are not given opportunities to read texts that are of interest and are at an appropriate level of difficulty for them. They are not given enough opportunity to understand how learning phonics is related to the act of reading. Therefore, memorizing and copying some abstract random letters take away the meaning and joy of learning phonics and so does reading from the children.
- **The separation of the consonant and vowel sounds** in the teaching of Hindi and other Indian languages is yet another problem. The secondary vowel markers (*matras*) are introduced after the *varnamala* (consonants). This greatly reduces the number of daily-life words that teachers can introduce to children as most commonly used oral words have *matras*. Instead, those words are introduced to children that can be formed using particular letters; words that have no use of *matras*. No wonder the early words taught to children are neither familiar nor very meaningful to them. Words like 'जल' (versus पानी) and 'गज' (versus हाथी) that have little meaning for most young children in the Hindi-speaking belt are taught. Therefore, teaching *maatras* with *aksharas* as one unit ('की' instead of क + ई) makes more sense.

Another difficulty that is associated with the way consonant and vowel sounds are taught separately in Hindi is that children find it difficult to blend the sounds to form the word. Typically, the child is taught to read the different sounds in the word as follows: For 'skool' - *adha sa, ka, ka mein bade oo ki matra, la – skool*. By the time the children name the last sound, they forget what the earlier sounds were. So they create a word based on whatever they remember and this is usually incorrect. For example, a child had copied the word, 'bulbula' correctly from the board. When asked to read what she had written the child read as follows: *ba, chote oo ki matra, la, ba, chote oo ki matra, la, aa ki matra*; on asking what the word was the child said – 'ban'.

- Another chief difficulty with the traditional method of teaching literacy is that it **does not appear meaningful to the child and is boring**. Children are too young to say this explicitly. To understand how boring and purposeless it can be to learn a language by learning a letter at a time, just try learning any unfamiliar language. Get yourself an alphabet primer in any language which you do not know and now practice 2-3 letters a day – memorizing their name, sound, and shape and practice writing each 20 times on a sheet of paper. Did you find it boring? Did you feel a sense of purposelessness in this activity? Now imagine doing this for the next 3-6 months (the usual time a child takes to master all the letters of the language). This may give you some idea about how children may be feeling when we ask them to memorize letter names and their sounds one by one and ask them to practice writing. They cannot see where all this will lead to. On the other hand, most of the activities which children spontaneously and naturally engage in are meaningful for them – they immediately lead to something. For example, when children play by themselves (naturally and spontaneously) their play has a beginning and an end; it has meaning – they know what they are doing and why. This meaning is missing when the children are taught to read and write in this way. This does not mean that children do not need to be taught the letters of the alphabet or their sounds. They certainly need to learn it but not in the manner literacy instruction is carried out as described above. Children find it tedious and lose interest as they do not find immediate meaning in it. Hence, not only this kind of literacy teaching is highly boring, but it also fails to do justice to the cognitive needs of the child.
- Even when short texts like stories and poems are introduced **children do not experience reading as a holistic experience**. It is because children are simply made to call out a meaningless series of the alphabet which makes no sense to them. For instance, Example 5 shows how the reading of a sentence is fragmented with the teacher saying a word and the children repeating after her. In many places, the teacher begins to spell a word, by dividing the word into two or three parts and the children repeat the spelling after her. What possible meaning can be derived from such a ‘reading’? It is because as children learn through this technique, they are deprived of the opportunity of practicing reading unknown words. They are not taught to blend different letters/*aksharas* to form new words. Due to this, they fail at the decoding aspect of the reading, or they are only able to read words that have been learned by rote. Also, it reinforces a child’s dependency on the teacher rather than learning independently.

The five examples discussed in Sub-section 4.2.1 of this Unit show that teachers typically teach all languages in the same way. This means that whether we teach the child’s mother tongue (which the child knows orally very well) or whether we teach the child the state language (which for many children is different from the mother tongue and so the children do not know it at all and they may be hearing it for the first time in school) or English, we use the same strategy. The typical language teaching in a preschool or school starts with the teaching of letter names and in some cases letter sounds, recognition of letter names, and writing these. Thus, we begin with reading

and writing activities and do not focus on speaking and listening to the language.

This causes a big problem when the child is learning a language that the child is unfamiliar with. Since the child has no vocabulary in the language, the letters and words we introduce seem meaningless to the child. It does not become evident to the child why the child should be learning those letter names or words. The understanding which needs to be built in the child is that the written form of the language is an extension of the spoken form of language. This is the chief motivation for the child to learn to read. Developing this understanding requires two things:

- a) First, the child should be helped to learn to speak the language so that when written words are introduced they represent to the child words and meanings that the child already knows orally.
- b) Secondly, the child has to be explicitly helped to see the connection between spoken and written language. The child has to be able to experience that the written word is the extension of the spoken word. However, this does not happen as reading is introduced as isolated letters and words. While the child is speaking in full sentences, what the child is writing is isolated letters and the child cannot establish the link between the spoken and the written.

Often teachers' own knowledge of the language is limited affecting how they teach a language. Teachers provide incorrect meanings and explanations, they explain a difficult word by using another difficult word and may have faulty letter-sound correspondence themselves.

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### **4.3 THE TREATMENT OF ORAL LANGUAGE IN THE PRESCHOOL**

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Till now, we have spoken about the way literacy teaching is typically carried out in preschools. Let us now look at the opportunities for the development of oral language itself in preschool and the quality of such experiences.

However, a few of you may be wondering why a teacher should even bother oneself with creating opportunities to enhance a child's oral language skills. Doesn't the child already come to school with the ability to listen and speak? Shouldn't a teacher simply care about teaching children to read and write? Isn't literacy development more important than oracy development for the child's language development? So, let us understand why the strengthening of oral language during preschool years is important.

#### **4.4.1 The Significance of Oral Language Development during Preschool Years**

- a) **Talk is a chief way of interaction and it enables the child to form a relationship with others and feeds into her social development.** Using talk, the child enters into a relationship with others and learns to use different words, tones, and gestures while talking to different people.

- b) **Similarly, the child's cognitive development is also closely related to her oral language development.** You have read that we construct knowledge about the world through our actions and thinking. As we experience the world, what we already know becomes transformed through the processes of assimilation and accommodation. So learning is a process of retrieving what we know and transforming it based on our present experience. So in a way, learning can be seen as 'working on existing understanding' and in this process, talk has a central role. When children learn words for events and objects through oral language, it helps them to make sense of the world around them. They develop concepts this way, and their thinking is fostered. A child thinks in a language and also speaks out her thoughts by using language.
- c) **The development of oral language is important for acquiring literacy.** It is the foundation upon which the child's literacy skills are formed. A child needs to have the vocabulary in the language and know the usage of that language to be able to learn to read and write in that language. You may recall the Japanese sentence example from Unit 1 where we asked you to read the given line: "*Hana wasakuragi, hitowabushi.*"

You could read it but not understand it. It is because what you read is written in the Japanese language. Unless you know the Japanese language (vocabulary, grammar, etc.), you would not understand what you read. Reading without understanding the meaning is not reading at all. It is only the mechanical act of saying aloud the sounds in the words as we mentioned in Unit 1 as well. So, without oral language, written words are simply symbols with no meaning.

Therefore, you will understand that when we start to teach children the alphabet of a particular language without developing the child's oral language, the letters and words we teach to a child do not appear meaningful to her. She may be able to copy those letters and words correctly, or may even say the names of the letters and speak out the words you have taught her often, but she does not understand much of what she is speaking or writing. Imagine how frustrating the child must feel when she is made to do activities she cannot understand.

**So developing the child's oral language is the first step in supporting her to read and write.** You have read that the oral language development of children takes place naturally in a social setting. We, adults, do not deliberately teach oral language to the child. We talk and when the child is around people who talk to her and with each other, the child's mind is stimulated to acquire language.

While this process of oral language acquisition is spontaneous, this does not mean that adults have no role in the development of the child's oral language. The adults need to provide a stimulating and language-rich environment at home and preschool by offering relevant material and opportunities, which we will also discuss in the coming Units. The richer the child's home language environment, the more developed will be the child's oral language.

In fact, it is this difference in the spoken language environment at home that causes differences in the oral language of children when they first come to preschool. Some children have a good vocabulary and can use language for a variety of purposes, whereas others have a limited vocabulary and can use language effectively only for some purposes. Nonetheless, each child comes with some language experiences in preschool. This knowledge that the child has already acquired, in terms of concepts and various abilities, is referred to as ‘prior’ knowledge. Here the role of the teacher is to acknowledge this prior knowledge and competencies of the child and build upon these to further develop and strengthen a child’s oral language.

Therefore, special focus should be given to the development of oral language; enough opportunities should be offered to the children to witness, experience, experiment, and practice oral language skills. However, in reality, in many preschools and schools, the child’s oral language is not nurtured – rather, talk by the child is discouraged as discussed in the coming section.

#### 4.4.2 Undermining Talk in the Classroom

Talk is one of the cheapest yet most valuable teaching resources for a teacher during preschool years and early grades. However, the development of oral language is not given much importance in many schools. One of the key reasons for this is that educators have a very narrow understanding of ‘talk’. So, before you read about strategies to strengthen the child’s oral language in Unit 7, let us read about how children’s talk is treated in a typical preschool/school.

As we proceed to discuss how oral language is treated in schools, let us first explain two important concepts/terms which will support your understanding.

- a) **Mother Tongue:** *This is the native language of children which is spoken in their home and immediate surroundings. For instance, Braj is likely to be the mother tongue of a child living in Mathura (Uttar Pradesh). This is the first language that a child acquires. When a child joins a preschool, she is fluent in the mother tongue.*
- b) **State/Standard Language:** *This is the language that is agreed upon by the government as the language in which communication is to take place, e.g., Hindi is one such language for the Indian sub-continent. However, this need not be the language that is usually spoken by the majority of a state or region. For example, states like Jharkhand have made Hindi their standard language though it is not widely spoken by the people there. The medium of instruction for children is likely to be the Hindi language and the language that they speak.*

- **Silencing of the Child**

Silence is seen as a positive quality in the child. Talking by the children is treated as a problem, and it is discouraged. You would have often heard teachers say to children, “Be Quiet! Don’t talk!”, “Listen to me and do not speak in between!”, “*Baat cheet nahin karne aate school mein. Padhne aate hain, Padhne aatein hain to baat mat karo.*” Talk is seen as an unnecessary distraction, and not as anything leading to learning. This is because learning is not seen as being constructed through action and dialogue. Learning is seen as imparted by the teacher and the children’s job is to only imbibe what has been told. They are not



expected to discuss or question what has been told. At best, they are expected to seek clarifications and this requires minimal use of language. While teacher-child talk is accepted to some extent, child-to-child talk is not accepted at all. Teachers are quick to admonish children with a strict “why are you talking amongst yourselves?”

- **Teacher Dominates the Conversation with a Limited Focus**

The teacher speaks and dominates the conversation most of the time. Also, the teacher’s talk is generally limited to giving instructions to the children, controlling their behaviour, and teaching them factual knowledge. Children are not given enough opportunities to initiate conversations, ask questions, and share their experiences and ideas in the classroom. A culture of dialogue is not evident. When children can talk and what they can talk about is highly regulated. Children who can quickly respond to the teacher’s questions are given a quick opportunity to speak, while others are not even included in this limited regulated talk. In addition, the child’s questions and clarifications are ignored or she is humiliated for raising queries. Remember the Example 3 of this Unit. When the child came up to read and could not, the teacher simply said, “you go back ....” Confusion, doubt, and lack of clarity are usually not addressed by the teacher.

- **Rejection of Child’s Home Language and Experiences**

The child comes to school with a good understanding of her mother tongue. The child is most comfortable in this language; it is the language in which the child thinks. However, often the child is not allowed to use her mother tongue in the classroom. Many teachers may not show sensitivity to children whose language is different from the language of instruction in the classroom, or worse, ridicule their home language. The child is asked to speak in the school language which she may not know. This way, the teacher rejects the child’s identity and all the experiences and thoughts of the child. Also, the child becomes quiet as she fears being scolded for speaking in her native language or speaking incorrectly in the school language.

- **Excessive Focus on the Use of Grammatically Correct School/ Standard Language**

There is an over-emphasis on teaching the correct usage of school language. The teachers constantly correct children’s speech – they keep pointing out mistakes in pronunciation and grammar. Further, the teaching of the school language starts by teaching the child to write letters and words, instead of first helping the child to understand and speak that language.

- **A Shift of Approach Regarding Teaching Language**

The approach of the adults towards the infant who is learning to speak is very different from the approach they use with a child who is learning a new language during preschool years. When the infant is acquiring a language, we follow the child’s pace of learning, waiting patiently as the child goes through the various stages of language development.

However, as the child enters preschool, we want her to learn and use an unknown language with the correct grammar as soon as possible. In our daily interaction, we correct her quite frequently so that she picks up the right pronunciation and the right use of grammar. We assume if we don't do this frequently, it will affect the child's reading and writing abilities too. On the contrary, during infancy, we simply speak the language around the infant and she picks up the grammar rules as she hears them being used by others constantly around her. So immersing the infant in the language is the strategy that is used to help her to acquire the mother tongue. However, in preschool and early primary grades, we focus less on developing the child's oral abilities in a new language and more on teaching her to read and write that language. Moreover, we introduce reading and writing in a new language in a way that is not meaningful for the child.

#### 4.4.3 Typical Oral Language Pedagogy

Opportunities for oral language development involve singing rhymes, storytelling, picture reading activities, and conversation activities. Let us analyze how these are carried out and to what extent they help in the development of oral language.

In most preschools and early primary grades, children get opportunities for singing rhymes and songs. At such a young age music, rhythm and songs have a special place in development and education. Its value can be enhanced for language and literacy if we also engage them with the meaning regularly.

However, children usually memorize the rhymes and songs and many may not understand their meaning. This is particularly true if the song is not in the child's mother tongue. Often the rhymes are sung as one continuous sentence and the children probably cannot make out where one word/ sentence ends and where the next word/ sentence begins. Mostly, the teacher explains the meaning of the rhyme perhaps once, when she has introduced it, and then, it is expected that the children will remember what had been explained. Often children are told the general meaning of the rhyme and not the meaning of the individual words. So the rhyme does not contribute to building vocabulary building. When the rhyme is first introduced, the teacher may ask the children a couple of questions related to the rhyme but in the repeated recitations thereafter, questions are not asked. The initial questions are also usually rhetorical – they do not serve the purpose of dialogue but are asked simply as fillers. For example, before beginning the rhyme related to the lion, the teacher may ask the children, *“Today we will sing a song about the lion. Everyone has seen a lion, haven't you?”*

There is an opportunity for oral language development when a teacher asks questions based on the story after its narration. Typically, these story-based questions are factual and based on recall. Rarely does the teacher ask questions that stimulate children's higher-order thinking skills like problem-solving, predicting, and reasoning. Usually, the questions asked are *“What was the colour of the lion?”*, *“How many legs does it have?”*, *“Where was he going?”*, *“What did the frog say to the duck?”* Rarely are questions asked such as, *“What could have happened if Ramu had refused to go to the market?”*, or *“What would have happened if Ramu had gone by boat instead of swimming across the river?”*

Sometimes, the teachers also carry out picture reading activities. When this is done, usually teachers ask the children to describe what they see. For younger children, this begins by naming what they can see depicted in the scene. This is fine but gradually the teacher must ask questions that require the children to infer from the pictures what is not evident. Questions like, “*Where do you think they are going?*”, “*Why is Shyama looking unhappy?*” Such questions foster children’s higher-order thinking skills.

In the primary school years, the teaching situation becomes more formal. Largely dialogue in the classroom is teacher-directed and teacher-controlled.

What we need in a language classroom is to help the child to develop the ability to reflect on their thinking and feelings and articulate these. Children need to be given a voice, yet what happens is the opposite – they are silenced as we also discussed in Sub-section 4.4.2 of this Unit. Direct commands by the teacher to “be quiet!”, the dictating pedagogy employed by the teacher, the attitude of the teacher toward the child’s home language (as we have discussed earlier), and the ridicule and shaming many children experience cause the children to learn that it is better not to speak to avoid humiliation.

On the contrary, the teacher needs to give space to children to talk with each other and her as well. A culture of dialogue is required. Children must get opportunities for expressing their thoughts to each other and the teacher. The classroom should not simply be a place where children imitate the teacher or only certain children in the class are allowed to talk only to give the ‘right’ answers. It must be a place where the teacher invites children to express their ideas even though these are not yet fully formed and clear to themselves. Of course, the teacher needs to be conscious of when such dialogue is needed and decide how much time is to be allowed for it.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) How is the teacher undermining children’s talk in the given scenarios?

Sr. No.	Scenario	Way of Mistreatment of Oral Language
a)	In an English class, Sabina listed out names of fruits in Bangla and the teacher corrected her by naming the English names of the fruits.	Dismissing the child’s mother tongue
b)	The teacher asked the children to respond to her questions using ‘Yes’ or ‘No’.	
c)	Hindi-speaking children were given an English poem to remember and recite it word to word.	
d)	The teacher often makes use of expressions such as “Quiet”, “No more words”, etc. during her classes.	

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## 4.5 SUMMING UP

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The role of the school is crucial in the development of the literacy skills of the child. However, the traditional practices that have been widely used to teach children to read and write are quite problematic. To begin with, children are usually made to memorize the alphabetic series, barely any letter-sound correspondence is established to them, no whole reading and reading and experiences are provided, and use of oral language is not made to teach children to read and write. While some children do learn to read and write this way, may lag and find it difficult to read and write even in later grades too. First-generation learners and children whose mother tongue is different from the language they are expected to learn to read and write are the ones who are severely affected by the traditional method. The traditional method is problematic because it does not take the child's natural and holistic learning and developmental pattern into account. Thus, making the process of learning to read and write boring and non-meaningful exercise.

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## 4.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) c
- 2) Having been taught the typical way, children can read a familiar text (that has been read in the class many times) but cannot read an unfamiliar text. Or they may read (decode) but not comprehend what has been decoded. Thus, reading does not take place.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) b) Teacher dominates the conversation with a limited focus
- c) Rejection of child's home language
- d) Silencing the child