

# Language Learning in Rishivalley Multigrade Schools

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## Background

Rishi Valley is situated in the rural interior of South India, in a chronic drought area in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The population consists largely of marginal farmers, shepherds who have tended their flocks since Neolithic times and daily wage earners on seasonal employment. For more than twenty-five years, Rishi Valley Education Centre has engaged in a variety of educational programmes that reach out to its neighbours in this impoverished countryside. These educational innovations have found wide application and are presently being adapted in several parts of India in programmes for universalising elementary education.

## Satellite Schools

The Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RIVER) maintains a network of "Satellite Schools" in sixteen villages in the vicinity of Rishi Valley. These schools have their source in an outreach programme that began more than fifteen years ago. It was founded on a conviction that community participation and landscape regeneration could bring about more effective and robust elementary education. These factors seem to be very important in a country like India, where the majority of the population lives at subsistence levels in village communities. Within a village, education can be a means of securing both livelihood and social capital. Based on these convictions, the Rishi Valley Satellite Schools have developed a community-based curriculum that is taught by village youth who have been trained in classroom management and multigrade methodology based on educational materials that have been specifically designed for multigrade classrooms.

## Motivation

The point of departure for RIVER in 1987 was a close study and analysis of elementary school curriculum. This study helped to identify several initial problems:

- The student population in a typical school was heavily concentrated in the earliest stages of learning. Half of the entire student body was at Class I stage, and enrolment tapered off strongly at higher stages, with many children remaining at the same stage from one year to the next. This indicated not only a high dropout rate but also a very low rate of learning among those who stayed in school.
- Most of the schools had only one or two teachers to handle all the five Grades. Within each grade, children were at very different levels across the learning continuum. In effect, this was a multigrade, multilevel situation. And yet children were being taught with monograde methodology. This turned out to be a very common and widespread mismatch.
- Children were not enjoying the learning process, as it was fully teacher-directed, with no provision for individual differences in learning pace and no scope for co-operative learning.
- Teachers were demoralised and often frustrated because they didn't have systematic support materials and methodologies to help them handle multigrade, multilevel situations in a meaningful and interesting way.

Having studied the status quo, RIVER aimed to work within the given constraints of financial and human resources imposed by the situation it faced. RIVER wanted to design a programme specifically tailored for one-teacher, one-room schools, to serve children in mixed-ability groups, using materials and methodologies that would be interesting, enjoyable, and locally conceptualised. At the same time, RIVER kept in mind the need for a programme that would be widely replicable.

## Community - based Language Curriculum

In order to sustain community interest and enthusiasm for education, opportunities have been created for various forms of interaction between the local population and the school. These interactions have helped to energise the schools as well as enrich the language curriculum.

In view of the rich folk tradition in which our villages are steeped, folk art, folk songs, local stories and legends have been incorporated into the curriculum. Drawing upon the rich knowledge of folk and oral traditions of mothers (and the fathers too!), several stories have been written down and "published" in the form of handmade booklets illustrated by children. Each booklet carries the name and photograph of the author. Children have shown a great interest in reading these stories "written" by people whom they know

and can relate to. This kind of input facilitates learning, reduces alienation, and plays a part in motivating the first generation learners in confidently facing the reading materials.

The Language curriculum is based on the recognition of the easy facility that young children have in absorbing and using their own 'mother tongue' for both oral and written communication. Hence, the programme allows ample scope for the child to respond to stimuli built into the cards/activities by expressing herself in her own specific dialect/local language. At the grade 1 level more time is spent on "readiness activities", and listening and speaking are the prime areas that need to be addressed. Reading and writing is introduced only in the later months of the grade 1 level and then developed steadily through a series of activities and exercises. Thus, Folk songs and stories form a storehouse of natural language learning materials and these are liberally incorporated into the curriculum, along with their enactment through puppet theatre. The movement from the local dialect towards the standard regional language is made gradually as the reading and writing skills are expanded, to enable communication with a wider circle.

Built into the very curriculum of mathematics is an activity of "Metric Melas", which are daylong community festivals. The aim of the festival is to convey to children and uneducated adults the concepts of mass, length and time and their units. Within a festive atmosphere, children record measurements and produce statistical and other findings that they later use in their classes. Similarly, the Environmental Studies curriculum includes extensive village surveys - of local flora and fauna, types of housing, festivals and farming patterns. Later, the data collected in this manner is categorised, systematically analysed, and attractively displayed so that this provides content for the Language Arts programme. In these and other ways, local culture is drawn into the language classroom. This interface of the school and the community at the curriculum level yields rich, authentic data about the whole community and its natural surroundings, which can be interestingly, used later, as language learning materials.

### **Teaching Learning Materials**

The Rishi Valley elementary school programme has been developed over the past fifteen years to address the educational needs of first generation learners. Here the academic curriculum is graded for individual levels of learning, grounded in up-to-date information, and framed in the local idiom.

The learning resource materials designed by Rishi Valley are the material basis for a systematic and comprehensive education programme encompassing a variety of enrichment activities and community participation. It provides more than one thousand systematically designed study cards and activities, together with a default task planner or what we call the 'Achievement Ladder'. This is a wall chart that pictorially displays all the cards/activities in a clear sequential organisation that permits every child to progress at his or her own pace, with a clear understanding of their movement through the curriculum.

### **Categories of Language Activities**

The Rishi Valley programme scales down the learning process into a meaningful sequence of concrete and manageable steps or tasks. These multiple steps of the learning process are gathered into units called "milestones". Each milestone is reached through a sequence of five types of activities - "Introductory activities," "Re-inforcement activities," "Evaluation activities," "Remedial activities," and "Enrichment activities". These five types of activities leading to a milestone make up a unit of learning. Milestones are organised into an ascending order, beginning with the first rung of the Learning Ladder and ending with the topmost rung, which denotes the end of a class. This whole learning continuum - an ascending series of milestones, with steps leading up to each milestone - is visually represented in a "Ladder of Learning". Four such Ladders cover the entire language curriculum from Class 1 to Class 4.

### **Classification of Language Cards**

Each of the learning cards/activities carries an identifying picture or logo. There are Bull logo cards, Elephant logo cards, Monkey logo Cards, and so on. Each logo symbolizes an activity. Rabbit logo cards are flash cards for introducing words. Tortoise logo stands for dictation. Monkey logo represents matching pictures with words. Bull logo represents story cards to introduce the sounds associated with letters. Elephant logo cards reinforce reading and writing skills. Dog logo cards contain evaluation materials. In addition to logos, each card has a number to represent the ascending levels of learning. Thus, a yellow card marked 'Elephant 3' represents the third level of reading and writing activities.

### **Core & Local-Specific Materials**

Sixty percent of the materials are fixed in advance to provide a "core" for the curriculum. The remaining forty-percent is left in a schematic form, leaving details to be supplied locally by teachers with the help of students. A set of 'Preparation formats' is provided to facilitate creativity among young trainee teachers and to help them design some of their own materials with the help of resource persons during the training programmes. Trainee teachers are made keenly aware of the key principles on which the system is based. Materials designed on these principles are further refined and modified on the basis of field tests carried out by teachers in their respective schools.

### **Value-Based Model**

The programme covers four main subject-areas: Language, Mathematics, Environmental Studies and Integrated Arts&Crafts with an achievement ladder in each area. Children at different levels share the same materials across the grades (grades 1 to 4) within a single classroom. This methodology promotes self-learning, co-operative learning, and self-evaluation. It makes it possible for one teacher to guide learning for each child at his or her own pace within a mixed-ability group. Respect and tolerance for other cultures, and concern for the natural environment are values woven into the material. This model of education uses the school and its curriculum to communicate good personal habits of cleanliness and hygiene, and social values of caring for the natural environment, preserving local knowledge and medicinal traditions, and sustaining cultural heritage. The material and the methodology has been especially designed and tested for first generation learners, and has sufficient flexibility of approach and richness of content to make it suitable for use in all primary schools.

### **Integrated Approach**

A key feature of the approach is that subjects are not strictly compartmentalised. Wherever possible concepts and skills from various subjects are co-ordinated and woven together. With this in mind, many materials have been designed for multi-purpose use, so that a given set of materials may find use across subjects and across different grade levels. This design helps to build confidence in children who meet familiar materials in differing situations; each one building different skill based on familiar stories, pictures, and other content. A final but important advantage of this Multiple-usage not only facilitates learning but also streamlines the materials and makes it more economical.

### **Classroom Processes**

Students learn in groups, at their own pace. Each child knows his or her current place on the Ladder and with the help of the Wall Chart can identify the appropriate card for the next learning activity. Students actively participate in the learning process, with older students helping younger ones. They work either in groups or alone. The teacher intervenes when new concepts are introduced, when work is to be evaluated, or when a student needs special attention. Thus, the classroom management is an essential part of the RIVER approach and is considered to have both administrative and pedagogic significance. The children are divided according to the level of the teacher's role and the child's autonomy in a particular cognitive task. Normally, there are five groups in each classroom. They are as follows:

- Partially teacher-supported  
The teacher initiates the children into these activities and then lets them work on their own, making a picture, introducing words, completing sentences, sorting letters etc.
- Completely teacher supported  
Identifying words in a song, Tracing the rubber letters, writing, situational stories etc
- Partially peer- supported  
Children initiate/support each other, largely working on their own, like sight and sound games, threading cards, matching words and pictures etc.
- Completely peer- supported  
Children teach and learn from each other, include picture words, abstract words etc.
- Self-Learning  
Children practise reading and writing and test their own abilities, using the cards containing evaluation materials.

In addition, there are whole class and small group interactions for several of the activities connected with language expression through oral and written exercises. The composition of the groups is dynamic, with the children moving in and out of groups, depending on their activity. This system is based on the strong belief that real and meaningful learning takes place through the dynamic interaction between teacher and children and among children themselves.

In this approach, rote-learning and dry reading-writing exercises are replaced by activity-based learning. Work cards supported by learning aids are designed to require serious involvement from the child. Children are to be actively engaged in the learning process. Learning becomes a joyful experience, raising motivation levels and using classroom time more effectively. Apart from the obvious effect of raising academic standards, RIVER classroom processes have contributed to a dramatic reduction in dropout rates. The present dropout rate in the Rishi Valley Satellite Schools is negligible - less than two percent in the worst case.

### **Evaluation and Assessment**

The RIVER programme uses a variety of evaluation procedures. Materials and methodologies are provided to help teachers identify learning difficulties, and to direct students to address specific problems. Child level monitoring formats and ongoing/terminal evaluation materials allow parents, teachers and children to monitor learning achievements in a simple way. Subject wise milestones designed by the practicing teachers themselves, along with an approximate time-range indicate within which a child is expected to learn certain concepts. When the child compares the time she has taken with the average time indicated she could gauge

for herself the pace of her learning. Teachers too could have a clear idea of the pace of learning of each child; of selected groups of children, or of an entire class. At the administrative level, these procedures enable monitoring authorities to track the progress of all students and to compile statistics comparing different schools so as to evaluate the achievements of their students, the effectiveness of their teachers/trainers and the quality of their curriculums.

### **Role of Teacher**

The mechanics and contents of the RIVER multilevel programme have to be actualised into learning interactions between teacher, students and the learning materials. This involves a specific kind of dynamic, which is unique to the multigrade multilevel situation. Here the teacher's role shifts from being a purveyor of knowledge to a facilitator of learning for a group of children who are each at a different level in their learning and thus often involved in diverse tasks and activities at any given time. On a wider scale, he must also see himself as rooted in the community, willing and able to draw upon local resources, and create local-specific materials of his own to supplement the common educational materials. The teacher has to organise the classroom, seeing to the appropriate storage of materials and display of teaching aids and data from field trips. He also needs to make a timetable and a weekly plan and orient students initially in how to use the learning materials and how to take care of the classroom and its surroundings.

On a day-to-day basis, the teacher would find himself involved in a variety of actions: initiating children into their learning tasks, creating groups for peer supported and participatory learning, evaluating students who have completed a certain stage in their learning and helping the slower ones in understanding and completing their tasks. He would need to keep an eye open to see that every child is profitably engaged, even as he involves himself with the learning of specific children. More time needs to be spent with children at grade 1 and 2 level, while older students who can read should be able to follow instructions on cards and move ahead more easily on their own. The teacher should also plan and make time for whole-group activities such as singing songs, doing craft-work, presenting puppet shows, conducting the mime and mimicry activities, and undertaking the village survey and the metric mela. In a well-managed multilevel classroom, disciplined learning for all should arise from the very sense of joyful engagement that children experience in their learning.

For a new teacher, yet inexperienced in the dynamics of the RIVER multilevel programme, this multi-faceted role may indeed look daunting and almost impossible to fulfil. That is the reason why observation of actual classroom dynamics is given so much stress in the RIVER teacher training programmes. "Seeing is believing", and it is through introducing the trainee as an observer into the classroom that his initiation into the RIVER methodology is envisaged. A frank discussion forum is then organised for any questions arising from this experience, related to classroom discipline, groupings and much else besides. Through dialogue and discussion, the trainee is empowered to feel more confident about his role in the multilevel classroom. Thus the training programme is not envisaged so much as one for imparting "knowledge" as one where the trainee discovers within himself the confidence and the wherewithal to meet the challenges of his new role.

### **Teacher Training**

RIVER has developed teacher education programmes rooted in hands-on practice; exposure to Satellite Schools, teaching in actual schoolroom situations, all transacted with the help of the self-learning materials. The trainee teacher learns by Mr. K Padmanabha Rao's discipline through an idiom that is familiar. The Programme demonstrates how complex concepts can be communicated in concrete terms, in a step-by-step process, from the simple to the complex. Initially, potential teachers are required to reproduce teaching/learning materials by hand and use them in practice sessions. They are encouraged to examine the materials critically and to suggest improvements. Colour coding and Logos on different materials enable trainee teachers to work with children of different age groups and mixed abilities in one class. Here they learn to handle vertically grouped classes, where children are at many different levels. Diagnostic materials in the Programme help them to identify the ability level of individual students, and place them correctly on the Ladder of Learning. Schematic Formats in the programme encourage trainees to develop local specific materials by creatively interacting with the community where they will teach. The Programme also includes Art Education resource pack that aids trainee teachers in learning the basics of school Arts and Crafts programme. Training programmes stress the primacy of "how to learn" over "what to learn" in each subject. Trainees develop skill in "how to learn" and a general understanding of how learning can be facilitated through the Ladder of Learning with its associated materials and activities.

### **Scale of Operations and Current Status**

RIVER has been working for the past 15 years in the area of multi-grade/multi-level education. In collaboration with various state government agencies, it has helped establish multi-grade programmes in Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. In addition, the Institute has provided resource support to Government and Non-Government Organizations from Maharashtra, Assam, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Pondicherry, Orissa, Haryana and more recently, from Ladakh and Jharkhand. The interactions

with educational agencies across the country have greatly enriched RIVER's experience in the field and helped evolve programmes that are flexible and sensitive to the great variety of cultures India has.

### **International Initiatives**

RIVER has been approached by agencies in Ethiopia, Spain, Nepal, Bangladesh, Columbia and Maldives, to study its materials and methodology for its potential applications in their countries. Collaborative Education Projects modelled on the RIVER approach are being explored to initiate similar programmes for primary school children in Southern Ethiopia and in the 22-school project of Maldives to provide child entered quality education. A core group consisting of two educationists from Ethiopia and two administrators from their sponsoring group in New York and the core group from the Maldives Education Ministry visited Rishi Valley, to draw up plans for adapting the self-learning Multi-level approach, training teachers, and supervising their projects through the initial stages.

Each of the above programmes has thrown up a variety of innovations to the basic methodology as each programme has adapted the basic elements of the methodology to suit their local/particular needs. The leaders of these innovative processes have been very often the teachers themselves, along teacher trainers and academic resource persons. The work initiated in these programmes has helped RIVER enrich its own programmes and to evolve constantly finding solutions for difficult situations as well as to introduce and cross-fertilize ideas among various programmes.

## **ADAPTATIONS FOR OTHER LANGUAGES**

### **Designer Workshop Concept**

There was no way to automatically transfer this materials and methodology, which existed mainly in Telugu, to Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, or Hindi. A meaningful transfer of this methodology involves a radically new way of looking at the pedagogical situation<sup>3</sup>right from the physical organization of the classroom, to the roles of the teacher, the student, the interaction between them, as well as at the content of the subject matter itself. All these factors would have to be understood and internalised by new teachers. In sum, there is a whole spectrum of attitudes that had to be unlearned and another set learned. A process of "transcreation" through capacity building had to therefore to be initiated with the help of a team of resource persons, educators, storytellers, writers, and illustrators. The entire focus of the capacity building process is to make respective groups understand the cardinal principle of the whole exercise, namely, that the content should reflect local contexts, which really endow the programme with vibrancy.

An exact replication of the programme in a new socio-cultural and linguistic milieu would in fact detract from the very warmth and vibrancy of the programme. That is why one needs to strengthen the network of teachers who come from a different geographic, linguistic and cultural zone and start a process of exchange in which the basic concepts and principles underlying this methodology were explicated. For the teachers who are new to the principles and practice of multi-grade learning, it is necessary to communicate and develop a wide range of new concepts, skills and attitudes. As these often go against the grain of traditional teaching practices in mono-grade classrooms, inculcation of this new methodology is by necessity a process that involved experiential learning in a context where this approach is already in use. They would be invited to observe the multi-grade classrooms of the satellite schools and encouraged to adapt what was the most suitable for their own context. Eventually, depending on the interaction time available to respective teams a range of activities would be planned to promote an active, integrated learning on the part of the participants, while also focusing on individual elements of the multi-grade approach. It would also be necessary to leave ample room for raising doubts and seeking clarifications. The core of the capacity building programme would broadly consist of field observations, intensive discussions, as well as simulation and actual creation of materials and activities, covering the whole ambit of the multi-grade, multi-level learning programme of Rishi Valley.

### **Conclusion**

The Rishi Valley language materials and methodology has evolved as part of an educational programme designed for multigrade education based on local culture and supported by active community participation. This programme has been able to produce a sense of ownership and pride in the village community and to nurture a sense of ease with their school. At the same time, subjects are covered rigorously so those students perform well in State examinations and are fully prepared to enter Government schools at the middle level. The last fifteen years' experience has shown how this integrated vision can be scaled up and also adapted or recreated for other languages and cultural contexts.