AN INNOVATION IN THE KARNATAKA CURRICULUM:
TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS*

ABSTRACT: This paper traces the development of a new curriculum and design of
course books for young learners in Karnataka. Stories are the major input, but the
curriculum also includes dialogues, rhymes and songs, TPR activities and language
games. The focus of this paper is on the inclusion in the curriculum of stories for
narration, the training of key resource persons and teachers in the state for implementing
the new curriculum, and teachers’ perceptions of the innovation. While the majority of
teachers appreciated the new curriculum overall, they found stories the most difficult
component of the syllabus. Teachers were also of the opinion that lack of language
competence on their own part was a major handicap in the successful implementation
of the innovation.

KEYWORDS: innovation, second language, syllabus design, teacher training,
managing, stories, young learners, implementation, language competence, feedback
survey

0. A CURRICULAR INNOVATION

There are three reasons why educational systems might seek to create change (Levin 1976, cited in Fullan 1991:17): natural disasters, external
forces (imported technology or values, immigration) or internal contradictions (new social patterns and needs). It is the third reason that
is relevant to the educational context discussed in this paper. In response
to the spread of English as a global language and the need to equip
students with academic and communication skills in it, the government
of Karnataka decided to introduce the study of English as a compulsory
language in government schools at Grade I (pupil age 6 years plus) from
the academic year 2007-2008. Indeed, the decision was to introduce
English simultaneously in four grades: I, II, III and IV, as the prevalent
practice was to introduce English only at Grade V. Children in Grades I-

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the feedback survey.
IV now have to study two languages: Kannada as the first language and the medium of instruction, and English as the second language. Hindi is introduced as a third language in Grade VI.

Students who study in government schools are mostly first generation learners from lower socioeconomic groups. For many of them, the school language, i.e., Kannada is itself a second language. They get hardly any exposure to English and have hardly any access to learning resources at home. The decision to introduce English at the early stages of schooling aims to empower such children to achieve social and economic mobility. The process of implementing the decision, designing the syllabus and teaching materials and training teachers, is a classic demonstration of the complexity of educational innovation. The study reported here uses questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation and personal interaction to investigate teachers’ perceptions of the new syllabus.

Teachers at the primary level are mostly SSLC certified (the Grade X examination of the State Board), with one year of training in a professional course. They teach all the subjects, but in the Kannada medium. Their exposure to English and their ability to use it are limited.

2. CURRICULUM DESIGN AND COURSE BOOK PREPARATION

Consequent on the government’s decision, an expert committee constituted to develop curricula and course books adopted the following principles (The Karnataka Textbook Society 2007:6):

1. to learn a language, children need exposure to a linguistically rich environment;
2. children do not learn a language bit by bit, letter by letter or word by word. Language has to be looked at holistically and it is learnt through meaningful chunks;
3. children take a long time to absorb a language before production takes place; and
4. narrating stories and listening to stories is a natural way of learning a new language.
The committee decided on the following objectives for the first four years of teaching English (Ibid.):

1. to provide exposure to the English language, so as to develop in the learner the interest required to acquire the target language;
2. to develop the ability to communicate, using the target language in an environment that requires its use;
3. to develop the basic language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, over four years; and
4. to facilitate the acquisition of a broad level of vocabulary (say 250–1000 items) over four years, as also a few language structures / functions.

The syllabus consisted of five main components: stories; rhymes and songs; Total Physical Response (TPR) activities; dialogues; and language games. A Student Activity Book and a Teacher’s Resource Book were prepared for each grade; the latter had all the content (the stories, rhymes, dialogues, etc.). The teacher was to conduct the first three activities in that order during a 40 minute period:

- story narration for 10-15 minutes,
- rhymes and songs for 3-5 minutes,
- TPR activities for 10-15 minutes.

The last two activities, dialogue practice and language games, were to be treated as optional, but to be conducted at least once in fifteen days, to ensure more exposure to language. The story segment was to be the core of the syllabus. The stories came from different sources such as ballads, epics, panchatantra, fables, allegories, adventures, science fiction, etc.

The Teacher’s Resource Book states several reasons (p.10) for including stories as an important part of the curriculum for beginners:

1. Stories are easily told and listened to as an oral activity before literacy is introduced;
2. Listening to stories is inherently interesting to children and can engage their minds for a length of time;
3. Listening to stories is a valuable experience in comprehending a language and in receiving substantial input; and
4. Stories, if introduced at the beginning stages of learning, may prove to be a valuable base for language learning at later stages.
Fifty stories each were included for narration in Grades I and II. In Grade III, nine stories were included, and in Grade IV, five stories. In Grades I and II, the main focus was on the development of listening and speaking skills. In Grades III and IV, an attempt was to be made to develop reading and writing skills along with oral proficiency. There are simple texts for reading and also simple writing activities in both the latter grades.

Some titles of the stories included at different grades are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Stories included in the curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Grade I</th>
<th>Grade II</th>
<th>Grade III</th>
<th>Grade IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gajaraja the Elephant</td>
<td>Goldilocks and the three Bears</td>
<td>The Pied Piper of Hamelin</td>
<td>Rapunzel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The Trouble with Baby</td>
<td>Vladimir and the Fox</td>
<td>Jack and the Beanstalk</td>
<td>The Fisherman of Kinsale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The Boy and the Donkey</td>
<td>The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse</td>
<td>Hansel and Gretel</td>
<td>The Old Woman who Lived in a Bottle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Doctor Cat</td>
<td>The Miller, his Son and their Ass</td>
<td>The King of the Birds</td>
<td>The Great Hairy Unicorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Musicians of Bremen</td>
<td>Rip Van Winkle</td>
<td>The Cat with a Feathery Tail</td>
<td>Sinbad the Sailor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Hare and the Frog</td>
<td>How to Separate Sand from Sugar?</td>
<td>The Fern Girl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Henry Hippopotamus</td>
<td>The Stupid Monkeys</td>
<td>Thumbelina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Pinocchio</td>
<td>Doctor Knowall</td>
<td>The Children of Sky and Earth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Alibaba and the Forty Thieves</td>
<td>The Whistling Monster</td>
<td>East of the Sun and West of the Moon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Goat and the Lion</td>
<td>The Arab and his Camel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We need to bear in mind that many of the stories included in the syllabus were authentic texts, i.e., they were not abridged or simplified. Teachers were expected to “tell the story as naturally as possible, without being too self-conscious or formal or different” (Karnataka Textbook Society 2007:11). Children were expected to look at the pictures given in the student’s activity book. There were also activities such as colouring, sketching, matching or sequencing pictures, finding the differences between pictures, etc., for children to carry out after the completion of the story. The Teacher’s Resource Book suggests various techniques for narrating stories, such as puppetry, string pictures, miming, drawing diagrams on the blackboard, or involving students as characters in the story.

3. THE IMPLEMENTATION

3.1 Initial Teacher Training
We know that teacher training and support plays an important role in implementing an innovation, influencing teachers’ understandings and their classroom practices. As approximately 1,12,250 teachers were to be trained, a satellite (tele-) mode of training was chosen. This was conducted for three days, and followed by a face-to-face training programme in the same centres for another three days. The facilitators for these (tele- and face-to-face) programmes were more than 600 Key Resource Persons (KRPs), who were trained at the Regional Institute of English South India (RIESI) for six days. The purpose of all these training programmes was to thoroughly familiarize the teachers and the KRPs in using the Resource Books and the Activity Books.

3.2 Some teacher perceptions
In an informal discussion with me immediately after the satellite training programme, the teachers expressed the following views:

- ‘The syllabus is too heavy, it cannot be completed in the given number of classes’
- ‘It is not possible to do justice to the syllabus in a single teacher school’
‘Learners don’t have any background of English and may not understand the content at all’

‘Most of the teachers lack proficiency in English and so may not be able to engage the class in English for 40 minutes’

‘Teachers need a demonstration class as the syllabus is new and challenging’

‘The Department should provide audio cassettes / CDs of rhymes, dialogues with some pronunciation practice to all the schools’

‘A spoken English course for a minimum of one month should be arranged for all the teachers who are handling the new syllabus’

‘It would be difficult to assess or evaluate the students as the syllabus doesn’t suggest any way of doing it’

‘Why don’t we begin with letters of the alphabet in Grade I?’

‘Can the teacher use Kannada in the classroom while teaching?’

The training programme would have reaped better results if these issues had been addressed. It must be added that, in addition to the initial training before the implementation of the innovation, in-service training was also provided during its implementation, mostly in the form of teleconferencing programmes where KRP's were involved as trainers. However, the content of the in-service training was much the same as that of the initial training.

3.3 A survey of teachers’ perceptions

In spite of such efforts at systematic and continuing teacher training, the feedback to the Directorate of State Educational Research and Training (DSERT) suggested that the innovation was not implemented completely. The story segment in the syllabus was abandoned in many schools. The incongruence between the intended curriculum and the implemented one was obvious. Many teachers were still teaching in ‘the old way’. For example, letters of alphabet were taught and memorisation of spelling was encouraged. In addition to problems arising from the teachers’ lack of proficiency in English, there were infrastructural delays and limitations.
For example, most of the training centres had not received the Resource Books and the Activity Books in time for the training programmes. Even later, Resource Books had not reached many schools. In some schools, Activity Books were not distributed to the students.

This was the background against which I decided to conduct a teacher feedback survey, using a written questionnaire (see Appendix 1). The survey was conducted at the end of the academic year 2008, i.e. about 10 months into the implementation of the innovation. 219 teachers from 90 primary schools located in the suburbs participated. The teachers had varied amounts of teaching experience but no experience of teaching English prior to the innovation.

The majority of teachers agreed that the Teacher’s Resource Books and Student’s Activity Books were innovative. However, many teachers found the Teacher’s Resource Books difficult; moreover, 86.3% of them found the stories the most difficult segment in it. Most of them reported that their abilities in speaking and reading in English were not adequate to comprehend the stories and narrate them in the class. 49.6% of teachers felt that the stories should be simplified, 25.1% suggested that the difficult areas should be deleted and 30.1% of teachers felt that more training/support should be provided. Also, 70.3% of teachers admitted that they used the mother tongue while narrating stories to explain the content and help children understand the meaning. As for language competence, most teachers were of the opinion that the innovation helped them improve their own proficiency in English only to some extent.

As a follow-up, I visited some schools and observed a few classes. Classroom observation (see the observation sheet, Appendix 2) revealed that in some schools teachers abandoned the Teachers’ Resource Book and resorted to their own content for teaching, using more familiar stories such as ‘The thirsty crow’, ‘The greedy dog’, etc. In addition, and contrary to the principles of the curriculum set for grade 1, teaching the alphabet – reading and writing the letters of alphabet – was a common practice in many schools. Recall that the objective of teaching English in grade I was to develop basic language skills orally before introducing to literacy; the teaching of the alphabet was to be delayed until Grade III. An interview with a select group of teachers confirmed these findings.
3.4 A revision and teachers’ perceptions revisited

Based on the feedback from the field, the Teachers’ Resource Book and the Student Activity Book were revised by the DSERT in the year 2009. The overall design of the books was retained, some difficult stories were replaced by simpler ones, and meanings for some new words were supplied in Kannada. To study the impact of the revised books, I conducted a similar study at the beginning of the year 2011.

The study revealed that though the Teacher’s Resource Book was found to be easier, classroom practices did not change much. Teachers were still teaching in ‘the old way’; letters of alphabet were taught in Grade I, teachers were moving from letters to words to sentences in the following way:

_This is a ball; that is a cat._

_These are balls; those are cats._

Teachers still had no clarity about the integration into a classroom methodology of various curricular components such as stories, dialogues, or TPR activities.

During interviews with them, some teachers expressed the following views:

- ‘We cannot go on teaching listening and speaking for the whole year.’
- ‘Don’t compartmentalize listening, speaking, reading and writing. Let everything be there and let the teachers decide. Some children may like to do writing in Grade I.’
- ‘73% of teachers don’t have even three books of their own.’
- ‘Involve teachers in the process of bringing change. Materials production should take place at the district level. Use expert teachers and others from the district.’
- ‘Make teachers experts. Change should begin from the classroom.’
- ‘Teachers should change their attitudes and beliefs first. They should think that they can do and they have the ability to do.’
It is clear that the innovation has not been implemented in the desired way even after the revision of the course books. One contributory reason is a new project for the teaching of Kannada and other subjects, ‘Nali-Kali.’ Teachers were engaged in this new project; they were required to attend training programmes, prepare materials in the ‘Nali-Kali’ way, etc., and all this was at the expense of the teaching and learning of English.

Being part of the curriculum design committee, I strongly feel that the innovation has the potential to succeed. However, the existing syllabus may be revised to combine story telling with reading and writing skills at grade I as some teachers have suggested. Along with listening and speaking skills, an attempt may be made to develop literacy skills at grade I itself.

Also, what is crucial is to make sure that the innovation can be handled by the intended users. In this respect, the primary issues such as teachers’ language abilities must be addressed without further delay. Reinventions by teachers such as the use of more familiar stories in place of the ones given in the Teacher’s Resource Book should be encouraged because what is important in adopting any kind of innovation, as Markee (1997) points out, is the extent to which an innovation can be carried out in incremental stages.

4. CONCLUSION

Havelock (1971 cited in White 1988) describes three main models of innovation development and implementation:

- the research, development and diffusion (RD and D) model
- the problem-solving model, and
- the social-interaction model.

Also, there are three innovation strategies proposed by Chin and Benne (1976, cited in White, 1988):

- power – coercive
- rational – empirical and
- normative – re-educative.
The model used for the introduction of English from Grade I in Karnataka was that of RD and D. The Government of Karnataka, with the help of Regional Institute of English South India Bangalore, conducted a state-wide survey to find out the opinions of parents, teachers and students on the teaching of English to young learners. In addition, there were debates in the newspapers about the benefits of teaching English to young learners. Seminars were conducted in different parts of the state raising awareness among teachers and the public about the importance of acquiring academic and communication skills in English.

Similar attempts could have been made to share evidence for the relative advantage of the innovation in question. Also, evidence could have been provided for the easy trial-ability of the materials produced. Teachers could have been made to observe the implementations of the new syllabus in select schools across the state. In other words, use of rational-empirical strategies would have been more effective in the diffusion of the innovation.

As Goh (1999:12) points out, it may be naive to assume that receiving training in teaching a new syllabus would naturally lead to adopting and implementing it. Introducing innovation requires careful planning, systematic dissemination and effective management of the adoption process. The following are a few suggestions in this regard:

- Before an innovative syllabus, such as the one under focus, is introduced into the educational system, it is crucial to develop teachers’ language competence.
- Training programmes could focus, not only on the ‘what’ but on the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of innovation. In this respect, teacher ‘education’ rather than teacher ‘training’ may be more effective. Teacher education programmes encouraging transformation of attitudes, values, skills and significant relationships as well as cognitive and perceptual changes may be useful.
- The responsibility of managing and monitoring the innovation may be placed in the hands of schools. Head teachers or school principals could be made personally responsible for the success of the innovation.
• Learning and its management may be delegated to teachers and schools.
• School-based training programmes and effective systems for supervision and on-site support of teachers may have a positive impact on managing innovation successfully.

Nevertheless, the government policy of introducing English as a compulsory language has succeeded to a large extent at the macro level as English is now taught in all the primary schools from grade 1.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1: FEEDBACK FROM THE TEACHER

Name of the School: Name of the Cluster:

Name of the Teacher:

Put a tick mark against the appropriate option.

1. (a) Do you find the "Teacher's Resource Book"
   i. easy?  
   ii. not so easy?  
   iii. difficult?  
   iv. very difficult?  

(b) If you find it difficult, mention the areas of difficulty.

(c) What should be done to overcome these difficulties?
   i. should be simplified  
   ii. difficult sections should be deleted  
   iii. more training/support should be given  
   iv. Any other (please specify) ..........................................

2. Do you find the "Student's Activity Book"?
   i. very interesting  
   ii. interesting  
   iii. satisfactory  
   iv. needs improvement. Specify..........................

3. Do you think your own competence in English has improved after introducing English from Grade I?
   i. to a great extent  
   ii. to some extent  
   iii. not sure  
   iv. not at all  

4. (a) Do you require more support in teaching English from Grade I to IV?
   Yes  
   No  

(b) If yes, what kind of support do you need?

5. (a) Do you use mother tongue to teach English?
   a) Always  
   b) Sometimes  
   c) Rarely  
   d) Never  
(b) If yes, for what purposes do you use mother tongue?
   i. to explain the content and help children understand the meaning
   ii. to give instruction
   iii. to appreciate
   iv. any other
   v. Specify............................................................

Date:...................................................
Signature of the Teacher

APPENDIX 2: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION SHEET
ON STORY TELLING

Name of the School: Name of the Cluster:
Class: Name of the Teacher:

Techniques adopted by the teacher:
Choose the appropriate description given below the table and put a tick mark (✓) under the respective letter in the column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of the Story</th>
<th>a</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>c</th>
<th>d</th>
<th>e</th>
<th>f</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

a) Easy to understand the story because the language used is simple.
b) Difficult to understand the story because the techniques or methods used are not appropriate.
c) Mother tongue is used to explain a few things.
d) Students are involved actively during story telling.
e) Difficult to understand as the story is not relevant to our culture.
f) Children respond to the story in words and phrases.

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