

This is how a Class 4 student reads a Class 2 text in his mother tongue



Manash Pratim Gohain · TNN
Feb 24, 2020, 12:31 IST



There are more children going to school than before, but most are unable to even read their mother tongue. A recent report shows that reading skills are poor across states

Behen, tum kahaan se aa rahi ho?

(Sister, where are you coming from?) It probably took you 3-4 seconds to rattle off this sentence if you know Hindi, all of seven words and none of them more than two syllables long.

TOI took this task to Abhishek and his friends, Class 4 students of an NCR government school, as they walked home, about a kilometre away. They were laughing about what a teacher had told one of them in class earlier in the day. Asked if he could read aloud a couple of sentences in Hindi, Abhishek was more than happy to step up while a senior came running behind us, telling him this was a “survey” and he should do his best.

Abhishek, whose mother tongue is Hindi and speaks the language fluently, was given four sentences to read, the first of which was sentence mentioned above.

He started reading, not word by word, but letter by letter, tagging along the vowels. “*Baha-na, behan...ta ke aage oo, tu...*” and so on.

It took him 30 seconds to get to the last letter, but the words were yet to sound right or make any sense even to him though he speaks the language at home and with his friends.

Last month, a government teacher of Ballari in north Karnataka was suspended for posting a video online of a Class 2 student struggling with a single word — ‘*pakkalebu*’, meaning ribs. Over three minutes, the boy grapples with breaking up the word and stringing along the syllables, while the teacher taunts him and beats him with a stick.

These children with learning issues are no exception, they make up half of the school-going population at their age in the country. According to data from 2018 released recently by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), oral reading fluency in the mother tongue in Class 2 is zero for 76% of the students in Uttar Pradesh, 62% in Rajasthan and 53% in Karnataka. USAID collected data from government schools seven states, including Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. Maharashtra had the best score, with 96% of students managing some level of proficiency in reading.

Percentage of students who failed to read even one word correctly

STATE	LANGUAGE	(IN %)
Uttar Pradesh	Hindi	75.9
Rajasthan	Hindi	62.5
Karnataka	Kannada	53.2
Odisha	Oriya	38.8
Uttarakhand	Hindi	30.1
Chhattisgarh	Hindi	23.2
Maharashtra	Marathi	3.8

Source: 2018 USAID study conducted in seven states

A zero ORF score indicates the child is not able to do any of these: translate letters into sounds, sounds into words, make the connections, relate the words and meaning or intuit and fill in the blanks.

The findings are supported by the government’s own National Achievement Survey (NAS), Pratham’s Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and a recent World Bank report which have pointed to a serious “learning crisis” in government schools in the country. Their conclusion: around 50% of children lack basic literacy and numeracy skills despite spending five years in school. The World Bank report said nearly 55% of 10-year-olds are unable to read and understand a simple text.

Without basic proficiency, 97% school enrolment and robust attendance statistics would be meaningless. Abhishek, who TOI spoke to, in fact, said he enjoyed school though he did not pick a favourite subject. “School is fun as all my friends study here. All subjects are good,” he said.

Across India, 25 million children are admitted into Class 1 every year and by this grim prognosis, 17-18 million of them will not be able to do basic maths or reading in five years. In 10 years, this lagging group would have swelled to 100 million and many of them would have joined the workforce, becoming part of the country’s so-called “demographic dividend”.

“ A large proportion of students currently in elementary school estimated to be over 5 crores — have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy ”

- Draft National Education Policy 2020

The draft National Education Policy 2020 admits as much: “... A large proportion of students currently in elementary school estimated to be over 5 crores — have not attained foundational literacy and numeracy... If action is not taken soon, over the next few years, we could lose 10 crore or more students from the learning system to illiteracy.”

The “very highest priority” of the policy, expected to be placed before the Union cabinet soon, is foundational literacy and numeracy for all by 2025. Educational experts say this will require concerted efforts over the next decade or so, given the challenging numbers at hand.

“ While we have achieved universalisation of education, the learning outcome is dismal and has not improved in 14 years ”

- Ashish Dhawan, founder and chairperson of Central Square Foundation

“While we have achieved universalisation of education, the learning outcome is dismal and has not improved in 14 years,” said Ashish Dhawan, founder and chairperson of Central Square Foundation, a non-profit working in school education. “Learning breaks down early. The ASER reports show by Class 3, 75% of students can’t do simple maths or read a Class 2 textbook. The top quartile is essentially middle-class and upper middle-class children who go to private schools.” The problem only compounds for the students left behind, making it difficult for them to catch up, he points out. “If you can’t read, you can’t transact the curriculum thereafter. If you can’t do basic mathematical operations, you cannot do fractions and algebra.”

Ashok Kamath, chairperson of Akshara Foundation, welcomed the stress on foundational learning but said efforts must be stepped up from the student’s home. “At a potential 100 million children getting through school without basic learning, we cannot afford to underestimate the problem. It has to be a reshaping in the classroom, community and home.”

“ At a potential 100 million children getting through school without basic learning, we cannot afford to underestimate the problem. It has to be a reshaping in the classroom, community and home ”

- Ashok Kamath, chairperson, Akshara Foundation

The organisation worked with 4.5 million government primary school students in Karnataka, helping them negotiate maths with a kit that included games on smartphones. “In six years, the students have achieved a 10% edge over others in the state. Our method has been to train teachers and engage the community in the performance of the schools. It’s also important what the child does at home as not all parents are literate. So our last bit was the building blocks which is 250-odd games on smartphones where we tried to immerse the child in a learning environment at home as well.”

Graphics: Sajeew Kumarapuram

