

The sounds represented by a letter of the alphabet or by a phonogram, when once they are associated with this, may be better determined in their analysis and finally projected into the composition of the word...

Phonemic awareness and emergent literacy in Indian languages

In any school with an alternative education program that differs vastly from the 'traditional' method, there is often a conflict between what the teacher wants to follow, and the expectations of other stakeholders such as parents. This is certainly true of the Montessori method. Should the teacher go with the Montessori prescribed sound – symbol association and oral phonetic analysis or should she switch to the work sheets, varna mala and the standard route? This issue gives a logical explanation for the work of the Montessori teacher in Hindi, so that she can make informed choices.

What the scholars say about emergent literacy in Hindi

In the world's literature about promoting literacy, the importance given to emergent literacy, or language development in Early Childhood, has increased. Reading and writing are meant to be joyous experiences related to the child's life. The booklet '**On the threshold of reading**' by NCERT gives an analysis of the lacunae in text books, particularly in Hindi. Thus, a successful Pre-Primary class requires more than textbooks based on varnamala and barakhadi or worksheets.

When we use the term 'traditional' in this article, we mean mainstream education.

In the case of Hindi, the number of symbols a child has to learn in a traditional school is as follows:

Vowels from a to aha – 12

Consonants from ka to jya – (25 classified and 11 unclassified) 36.

The barakhadi for these consonants, with each vowel symbol – $36 \times 12 = 432$

This does not include the symbols for samyuktakshar, reph, anuswar and chandrabindu.

Thus, the total number of symbols would not be less than 450. It generally takes several years for the child to be able to write and read independently, according to Sonali Nag. Her work is on Kannada, but the same applies to many other Indian languages.

Once this association of signs with sounds is established, it is possible to reconstruct with the alphabet all the words which exist in the mind of the child and those which he hears pronounced...

Hence there exists only one real difficulty, one single thing to do, one which is wholly internal – the mental analysis of sounds. - Discovery of the Child, Maria Montessori

Phonemic awareness

One of the key factors in promoting emergent literacy is phonemic awareness. That means children should have the ability to recognize that words are made of sounds, and to associate these sounds with their symbols. Children who do not get exposure to this aspect of language may continue to struggle in mastering reading at primary levels. The work of Sonali Nag and others has clarified that this is as relevant to Indian Languages as it is to English.

Recommendations in developing phonemic awareness

The site <https://www.teachervision.com/phonemic-awareness> provides information on what are phonemes and how they relate to emergent literacy in very clear terms. We are giving a list of recommendations for helping children develop phonemic awareness, which we have extracted from that site. It is interesting to note that they match the Montessori Method:

1. Phonemic awareness must be offered in an ordered sequence from the easiest to the most difficult.
2. It should involve the manipulation of symbols.
3. Offer one or two types of manipulation at a time.
4. Give small group presentations with participation from students.

Phonemic awareness in Indian languages

Indian languages such as Hindi and Kannada are alphasyllabic in nature. That means, letters in words often stand for a syllable containing a consonant – vowel or consonant – consonant – vowel combination. Phonemic awareness in such languages requires both the awareness of a syllable like 'ka' and the awareness of the sounds 'k' and 'a' in it. The traditional view of phonemic awareness and its assessment can be seen in the Final Report of FRAME-India (Facilitating Reading Acquisition in Multilingual Environments in India).

Montessori perspective on Phonemic awareness

All Montessori programs introduce activities for oral phonetic analysis, or identification of sounds in words, which are non-traditional and unique. As long as the symbols for consonants are used to represent pure consonant sounds, the number of symbols in Hindi are as follows:

Vowel sounds – 10

Consonants – 36 or less

Total – just 46!

Using charts like the ones for mathrayein and samyukthakshar will eliminate the need for ritualistic learning of barakhadi. Thus, it is easy for children to read and write multiple languages in a Montessori Pre-Primary, even if the school is an English medium one.

Levels of orthography in Hindi

The levels of presentation of letters and the reasoning behind them are given in the following list:

1. Long vowel sounds (they are easier to listen to) - आ ई ऊ ऐ ओ
Consonants of the first level (they are the most basic ones): क ग ड त द न प ब म य र ल व स ह
2. Vowels and the consonants of the second level (Whatever is similar to the ones given already are given later.) अ इ उ and ट ड ण
3. Vowels and consonants of the third level (following a grading sequence, as discussed earlier): ऐ औ and च ज श
4. Consonants of the fourth level: महाप्राण - ख घ छ झ ठ ढ थ ध फ भ
5. All the others such as संयुक्ताक्षर अनुस्वार रेफ रिफला (ऋ) ष विसर्ग (ः), क्ष त्र ज्ञ follow.

Introducing each set of sounds and their symbols have their own set of materials and activities. They can be shared in person.

Dr. Montessori's perspective on Phonemic awareness

Dr. Montessori recognized the value of phonemic awareness all those many years ago, as shown by the quotes from Chapter 18, The Speech of the Child, (Discovery of the Child) given here. The work of analysis is can only be done by the child in his/ her mind, when the sensitive period is right. Once the ability to analyse is obtained, the teacher has to merely offer the orthographic complications and the child will take over.

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