



MDA Newsletter

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Madras Dyslexia Association

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Happy New Year

Issues in Second Language Learning

"Ma, I am not going to school today." "Why, Ashwin ? Are you sick?" "No Ma, I have a Hindi test and I don't know anything. The teacher already thinks I am stupid and now I will prove her right."

Anand has a lot of spelling and reading difficulties in English. He has not gone beyond the alphabets in his second language, Tamil, which is also his mother tongue. The Tamil teacher was stumped by this as she saw that he is a Tamil speaking boy. Anand has taken a dislike for the teacher as well as the language. He was getting single digit marks when we tested him.

There are lots of children like Anand and Ashwin. While Ashwin has no learning difficulties he has come to hate his second language and has made no headway in it, Anand has a specific learning disability and this has manifested in learning a second language also. There are children like Anand who struggle in both their English and second language. In our experience, we have seen other children do very well in their second language despite having a difficulty in English.

India is unique:

Bilingualism, and, in fact, multilingualism are very common in India unlike in many of Western countries. Many children are able to pick up and speak upto 4 languages and learn to read and write in 2 to 3 quite comfortably. There could be a Telugu native living in Tamil Nadu who would speak his mother tongue with his family, and would learn to speak in Tamil to manage to communicate with the people around. He would be studying in an English medium school and have Hindi as his second language.

A look at when a second language was introduced shows that till a few years ago it used to be in Class 2. Today the belief in many schools is that the earlier one introduces the second language the better it is. There are schools that start teaching a second language even in the UKG with no thought about the memory overload caused by learning so many shapes and associations.

The other unique aspect of India is that it is one of the few nations which speaks different tongues but learns in English in English medium schools. So the second language that many children learn is actually their mother tongue. Yet there are difficulties in learning this.

Demands of language learning:

The depth of knowledge of a language required for school work is far greater than that required for social contact. People can make themselves understood with limited vocabulary and no grammar and similarly understand what others are saying even if it is not in complete sentences, be it Tamil or Hindi or any other language. Each language has some rules, conventions and orthography that are unique to it which need to be mastered. Whether it is English or any other language, oral language fluency is very important. With finishing the curriculum as the primary goal not much time is set aside for deliberate building of oral fluency. Children are thrown into learning a language formally without the adequate oral language skills needed. The fact that those with Tamil as their mother tongue also speak it differently from the way it is written needs to be considered and addressed.

The way the language curriculum moves is that it quickly becomes intensive and by class 5 onwards there is a lot of poetry, grammar and writing that a child has to do. So if the basics have not yet been acquired properly, it becomes very difficult for the child to cope and to move forward. Intrigued by these issues we decided to probe the various aspects of second language learning.

Difficulties often faced by children with Dyslexia

Dyslexia being a language disability often affects the learning of all languages.

- The dyslexic struggles to keep up in all departments- reading, spelling and writing and has to face consistent failure and negative remarks. Slowly the gaps widen and he/she lags behind.
- These children could have a problem with word recall in both spoken and written language. Dyslexic children have more difficulty coming up with the right word, especially under pressure. Problems with word retrieval make them less confident. Their problems in recalling words can occur in any language, and make their language abilities look poor. It may make it seem that their grammar is not in place.

- Since some children have a problem with memory both short term and working, they struggle even with the symbol, that is the letters of the Indian languages are quite complicated. There are too many letters to remember and so, many even find learning of the English alphabets easier and simpler with just 26 letters to contend with. A memory overload could happen in second language learning.
- Like in English, they could have a problem with sounds of the letters and this would affect both reading and writing. Phoneme-grapheme connections of the more confusing letters bring about reading and spelling errors.
- Pronunciation is also affected due to the many sounds and many forms. कि and रि in Hindi ள and ல in Tamil, the sounds have to be heard correctly.
- Directionality can be a problem especially with some of the Hindi maathraas.
- Some take more processing time and are slow in their work.

A look at the common second languages children learn here:

Tamil:

- Has 12 vowels, 18 consonants and 1 Ayutha letter
- The shape of some letters are difficult இ, கௌ etc.
- There is no straightforward rule like in Hindi and this could confuse some children. In Tamil, the letter form changes when we add a vowel to the consonant for example க் + ஊ = கூ, ப் + ஊ = பூ
- There are some letters that look similar but have different sounds and these also pose problems in pronunciation: ண ன, ல ள
- Others look similar and cause problems in writing: ஐ and ஜ
- Letters like ரா and றா could be confusing as to when they are to be used.
- Then some of the கொம்பு letters for short and long sounds can be confusing கே and கௌ, கொ, கோ
- The students often make mistakes in the use of letters for joining words like பார்த்தப்போகிறேன் which is actually பார்த்து + போகிறேன்.

- Spoken Tamil is very different from written Tamil.
- Grammar can be difficult.

Hindi

- There are 48 letters (12 vowels and 36 consonants) to remember and many samyuktakshars (2 consonants together) which are difficult as well.
- Here the maathras are straightforward and the letters don't change as in Tamil. Children with dyslexia often have directionality problems and are not sure of their left and right, before and after. So when one maathra has a line before and one after the letter they often get confused especially for the long and short sound of e कि की.
- In the South, as the language is not spoken or heard much, the learning of it as a language becomes difficult even for those without learning difficulties.
- The 2 sounds stressed and unstressed for each of the letters makes it difficult for e.g ए ऋ, क ख and many spelling errors are seen.
- Grammar can be confusing. Hindi has genders for inanimate things. With spoken Hindi fluency the usage of these come more naturally but for others it is a struggle as it has to be memorized.
- Vocabulary and understanding are difficult as there is no exposure. They often learn something without knowing what they are learning.
- Samyukthakshars are difficult as the form itself changes, example श ख.
- Due to lack of exposure to the language, expression is difficult and is often learnt by rote without understanding. It becomes an overload and therefore a source of resentment.

French

The script is the same as that of English, the accents do pose a problem. Reading might be easier than an Indian language where the script is totally different. Pronunciation is a problem and not easy. Also the difference in pronunciation is there due to accents. French, with its silent letters and its heavy use of nasal vowels may seem to lack much correspondence between spelling and pronunciation, but its rules on pronunciation are actually consistent and predictable with a fair degree of accuracy.

Like the other students the children with difficulties find it easy in the initial stages but as the grammar gets more complicated, it seems more difficult than it

actually is. Understanding is not a problem but practice is important. Repetition helps to understand grammar rules. Basic concept of genders and numbers is there which does not exist in Tamil. The problem arises when it comes to expression and grammar exercises where it is not direct, for eg, answering questions, replacing nouns with pronouns, or finding the question. Straightforward grammar exercises are not so difficult. Simpler ones like fill in the blanks, conjugation, are easier. A lot of practice is needed for textual questions. This depends on the student's capacity to memorize. Expression is the field of difficulty and If they haven't been helped from the beginning in a concerted way the most they go upto is framing of sentences.

Teaching

Be it Tamil, Hindi, Sanskrit or French, learning a second language does pose problems for some children. It is crucial that difficulties are recognized right in the beginning and appropriate help is given. Innovative ways should be used to make language learning an enjoyable exercise from the beginning so that they look forward to learning the language.

Now let us look at ways second language learning can be made more appealing.

For parents:

- It is important for children to practice hearing and speaking in their second language. If it is their own mother tongue they should speak it often and insist the child also speaks in it. In cases where a language other than the mother tongue has been chosen like Hindi for a Tamil-speaking or Telugu-speaking family, the child can be made to watch some Hindi children's TV programmes and cartoons.
- Children need to be shown the importance of learning a second language and its future uses.
- Parents can read out stories in the second language so that the children start enjoying that too.

For schools

- Children with a specific learning disability have a problem with mastering letters, sounds and blending them together. When they are still struggling with English perhaps they can be allowed to start a second language later than others to give them time to settle with one set of alphabets first.
- Mixed with non-dyslexics who learn easily in an intuitive, global way, the dyslexic learner will only experience failure through not receiving enough positive feedback: under this pressure he will start mixing and confusing his words in an effort to keep up. If given sufficient structure, time and practice to

acquire the basics on all levels (reading, writing, speaking, comprehension) these children can make progress.

- A pod concept can be introduced in learning a second language where the child can attend a class lower than his /hers and acquire the basics which have been left out. This is surely better than putting a child through lessons that can't be understood resulting in hatred for the language and a struggle throughout.
- Children who haven't yet mastered the basics can still be made to study a second language instead of being exempt in the primary classes. They can be exposed to the oral aspects of the language and can be made literate in that language even if they aren't going to appear for tests and exams in it.

For the teacher

- Label the things in your class like desk, chair, door, window, board, duster in the vernacular.
- Shape the letter in the air when they are saying the phoneme while introducing the phoneme. The whole class can have an air drill. The connections between the phoneme and grapheme can be easily made.
- Often the maathras pose a problem and a child forgets *की* or *के* and if funny stories are made up to remember them it would help. Antenna which say iii, or walking stick to say eee.
- A maathra chart can be made so that the child knows the alphabet and the corresponding maathra which he can use like a template.
- Use colour : one for the basic alphabet and another for the appendage. Blue for *क* and *in की* have the maathra in red.
- Build vocabulary with bean bag and other games, Play dumb charades to build language.
- Use pictures and have activities instead of just learning something by rote. These can be used for vocabulary as well as making sentences. Who do you see? What is he doing? Where is he?
- Use the multiple intelligences and VAKT (visual auditory, kinesthetic and tactile) methods. Let a lot of learning happen by doing. This will kindle interest as well as help them internalize what they are learning.
- Using phonemic awareness methods in class :
In the word, *ग्रहण*, count how many sounds you can hear, remove the first sound what is left, then remove the second and what is left?
In the word, *मरण*, remove the first sound and add *म*, what do you get?
In the word, *अन्तर*, count the sounds, remove the last sound remove the middle sound, remove the first sound.
In the word , *कमल*, remove the first sound and add *वि* what do you get?

Ask for the child's name, if it is Pramila then play in the same way. This can be auditory first and then visual too. If it is done with every child's name in the class it will keep the interest up.

Are *मरण* and *कारण* rhyming?

Are *कमल* and *गमल* rhyming?

- Constant practice is essential, like in Math.
- Over learning with reinforcements through the various modalities and games helps in internalising and makes learning permanent.

Examination concessions:

- The different Boards of education have recognized the fact that children with dyslexia find it difficult to learn a second language. On a case to case basis the ICSE and CBSE Boards have been allowing children who can't cope, an exemption from learning a second language. Another subject has to be chosen in lieu of it. The State Boards brought a GO much later allowing an exemption from second language and has no stipulation of doing an alternate subject. Those who drop it in the State Board appear for a total of 400 marks and those in Matriculation appear for a total of 900.
- This understanding at the Board exam level has not percolated to the lower classes. In some schools even if the Board grants an exemption the student is made to write the language paper upto the Model exams in school. Children with difficulties are not even given the concession of being marked for content and overlooking their spelling errors. At the other end of the spectrum, some schools which are more aware want to allow a language exemption as early as the 6th std.

In conclusion, if we could take a different perspective to second language learning then all children could be made to learn and enjoy a second language regardless of their difficulties. Instead of just working for marks children should be encouraged to enjoy learning a second language. When children learn through play-way methods and learn by doing, the learning will be fun as well as more permanent. It has become fashionable to have an English lab in a school why not a 'Tamil lab' or a 'Hindi lab'? So it is in our hands to woo children towards the second language. Unimaginative tuition classes where "write 50 times" is the order of the day could do more harm than good. If both parents and teachers could work in tandem second language learning needn't be a 'bug bear' that it is today.

Look out for some ideas with second language teaching based on the materials used in our Junior Project Day "Fun with second language" in our next issue.

PARENT CONTRIBUTION

Mrs. Lata Narayanan

I would like to share my experiences with all of you, as I am a mother, just like many of you here. A mother of two children, who have learning difficulties. My son is 26 years old and my daughter is 20. My son works as a Technical Manager with NIIT and my daughter is doing her III year, Visual Arts at Stella Maris.

As a baby, my son was hyper active. He was very communicative and intelligent. Trouble started in LKG when he could not write numbers 1 to 10 and the alphabets, though he could recognize them. Talking made sense to him. Writing only frustrated him. He could only draw sleeping and standing lines at the end of LKG and when his teacher said, "Make him write or he'll be kept back", the pressure of schooling hit us both.

In 1988, no one knew about Dyslexia. I taught him the letter 'L' first as it had a standing line and a sleeping line. He learnt not in sequence but he could write in 3 months and was sent to UKG. Math difficulties came later and the worst was Hindi. Then, and to this day, his frustrations are the same.

Thank God, language exemption came for him in the last term of his 9th standard. He would never have passed his ICSE if he had to write his Hindi papers. He was the first student in Chennai, in his school to get an exemption from II language. The school did not hand it out on a platter. We had to do a lot to get what the child rightfully needed.

His aptitude for computer science got him where he is today. His college education was a big farce. His math difficulties stood in the way of his completing his graduation. Writing arrears only added to his frustrations. By joining NIIT, he could at last do what he did best.

Once our children find out that they can do certain things well, the taste of success brings out the best in them. Once schooling is over, the field is wide open for them to try out what suits them best. Keep praying that they find their groove and be patient.

The lesson I learnt from my son is this. Always stand by your children, because they sometimes make mistakes that cost time and money. They realize too late that they have made wrong choices. If we support them through the rough times, they are able to pick themselves up and they come out stronger from the life experiences.

Now, about my daughter, she was the exact opposite of my son. She was quiet, soft spoken and meticulous. School made me realize she had learning difficulties too. She was unable to write fast and catch up with the other children in class. What others did in half an hour took two hours for her. She found Math confounding and language frustrating. Luckily she got

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TRAINEE'S CONTRIBUTION

Priya Ragupathy

Warm greetings to one and all at MDA and Ananya.

I take the immense pleasure of proclaiming myself as the proud prodigy of MDA. It was only curiosity that paved my path to browse and find the Intensive Teacher Training Course conducted by MDA, as I had very little exposure to dyslexia, gained through my hands-on experience in teaching English for a few high-school dyslexic students. The urge for early intervention was much realized seeing their vulnerability in coping with the **Board pressure**, and their struggle to achieve in turn motivated me to learn the best practices in the respective field.

However, within a couple of days I realized through interaction with my batchmates the prominence of the Course, the reputation of its modules and the recognition of MDA all over the country and overseas. I also came to understand that my batchmates who work in different capacities such as counsellors and special educators from different provinces had been aspiring to take this course for six or seven long years. I could also envisage the parent - trainees' fire to carry

home VAKT methodologies followed at MDA, and witnessed their acquired knowledge and experience fostering the rest of the trainees with abundant resource of a special child's emotional and intelligence quotients.

The most significant constituent of the course was the faculty, who can best be expressed as the ignited minds brimming with knowledge, experience, innovation and compassion. Such extremely modest and easily approachable staff not only imparted their VAKT approaches but also taught us the essential humanitarian component 'psychological approach', which indeed was highly effective with my own daughter. Thanks to the facilitators for the immense patience and soul-soothing words that never made anyone feel small, but boosted up the morale. This gesture is of course reflecting in all my classroom teaching and assisted me to become a good facilitator and observer too. Their bountiful knowledge was so overwhelming that it is safely stored in our long-term memory.

True to the saying 'Practice maketh a man perfect', the follow-up session and one-on-one training schedule at Ananya aided in implementation and testing procedures. Any small initiatives attempted by the trainees were meticulously observed and highly appreciated by the well-trained senior faculty. The ultimate perfection of the coordinator in allocation of classes, and delivering genuine feedback and scope for improvement is highly commendable.

On behalf of all the trainees I would like to salute the magnanimous organization for being a transparent research centre whose motto, to my knowledge, is 'KNOWLEDGE SHARING' and for executing this cost-

effective course that clearly elucidates that 'Education is for life, not for a living'.

I would like to be an indigenous part of this magnificent educational group and would like to contribute remotely. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to all the faculty for making a paradigm-shift in the lives of trainees and children with learning disabilities.

In short,

MDA escalates the *teacher* in you.
MDA - The amalgamation of traditional and contemporary teaching.
MDA – The ultimate place for pedagogies

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her language exemption in her 7th grade. She had to repeat a year in 8th grade as she was lagging in her Science and Math. As parents, we were in a dilemma, whether we should move her to an easier Board or make her repeat the same grade in the same school.

She did not wish to leave her school. So, she studied in the same school and the experience only made her stronger. She was happy that we let her decide, though we pointed out the advantages and disadvantages. From the ninth grade onwards till her ISC, MDA remedial teachers from MDA helped her. Having right kind of tutoring helped my daughter to complete her ISC with good grades. I am grateful to all the wonderful teachers. Though tuitions took away all her free time, she never complained. In college, she has taken Art. She is able to cope on her own, has no tuitions and is very happy today.

Please give your children all the support they need.

- Only you know what your child's pluses and minuses are. Guide them accordingly.
- Go by your gut instinct. It is never wrong.
- Talk to people who can help your child. Don't hesitate to ask for help.
- Put your children in colleges that are sensitive to their needs. Please ask around; my daughter's college has given her language exemption and extra time for writing her theory papers. It has made her life so much better.
- Last but not least, don't be too hard on yourself. Take family vacations and enjoy being a parent with your children. They grow up fast and marks and exams all become a thing of the past.



Alumni Meet



Project Day

NEWS AT MDA/ ANANYA

Parenting Workshop

The IC and SR auditorium at IIT was full. It had 200-odd parents and it was noteworthy that there were many fathers. They were attending the parenting workshop organised by MDA. The two eminent speakers of the day had a lot to share with the parents. Dr Jayanthini spoke about the medical aspect of the disability and how parents could cope with it. She answered a lot of questions which were asked by the parents. The practical approach would surely have provided answers to many.

Usha Ramakrishnan spoke about the emotional aspects of the child. She had many useful tips to offer on parenting which will surely help. Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis was beautifully brought out in understanding the different kinds of transactions. Parents also got a glimpse of Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences.



Mr. Chandrasekhar, Sushila Natraj and Mrs. Sumathi who were part of the parent panel shared their experiences and showed us the different ways in which one could understand and support their child. Mrs. Lakshmi Radhakrishnan who coordinated this Parent forum brought in many anecdotes of parents who had done a wonderful job of supporting their children.

Alumni Meet

On the 12th of November, an Alumni Meet was arranged at Infosys hall, RKM School, Bazullah Road. It was also a special day as Mr. Kalyanaraman, Maths teacher, who has been with Ananya from the first batch of the Board exam class in 2000 till 2011 was honoured. He has waved his magical wand and turned many children from hating Maths into becoming engineers. Many of the children reminisced how they had come in hating Maths but went out beaming as they got very good marks in Math in the Board exams. 42 of the alumni over 10 batches attended the event. Animation, catering, lecturer in college, working in a bank, fashion design were some of the avenues they were in.

It was thrilling to hear them contribute to society in their own special way.

Project Day

A small internal Project Day was put together by our Junior School children. The special guest of the day was Ms. Jayashree, the Director of SPASTN. "Fun with language" was the title and it just showed that if languages are taught in the play-way methods using multi sensory techniques, every child would go a long way.

Announcement

The next 2-month Teacher-Training Course commences on 30th Jan. Those interested can contact the MDA office.

Attention Past Trainees

Remedial teachers are needed for the MDA Remedial Centre at 15, Sambasivam Street for after school classes on weekday evenings and Saturdays. MDA trained teachers with some experience or those who haven't been working but have the time and are willing to learn are also welcome to apply.

MDA News Snippets

- 10.10.11 to 12.10.11 Conducted 2-day Parent-Training Workshop with half a day practical session with individual children.
- 17.10.11 Participated in Helping Hands Mela organized by HSBC Adyar Premier Branch.
- 12.11.11 Alumni Meet at Infosys Hall, RKM school, Bazullah Road, T.Nagar.
- 17.11.11 Awareness programme on Dyslexia for teachers of English Language at British Council with Ability Foundation – by Subha.V.
- 23.11.11 to 26.11.11 Conducted a training of Master Trainers for Dyslexia at SSA Office, Chennai, by Subha . V and Geetha.R.
- 03.12.11 Parenting workshop at 'IC & SR' Auditorium, IIT Madras, Adyar at 9.45 to 4.00 pm.
- 17.12.11 Conducted a half-day workshop for mainstream teachers from CBSE schools in Andaman who are going to be SSA Master Trainers organized by Vidyasagar- by Geetha.R.
- 19.12.11 Conducted a one-day workshop on classroom techniques for Junior teachers at Lalaji Memorial Omega International School, Kolapakkam by Sujatha.R and Gowri.R.
- 21.12.11 Conducted Capacity building training on "Learning Disabilities Among Children with regard to Reading Skills" under the auspices of Reading Skills Enhancement Network at Brother Siga Animation Centre, Vyasarpadi- by Sujatha.R and Geetha.R.
- 21.12.11 Conducted a one-day Study Skills workshop for Senior School Teachers of Lalaji Memorial Omega Kolapakkam by Harini.M and Priya.V.
- 22.12.11 Visit of the team of master trainers from Andaman schools under the SSA.
- 22.12.11 Juniors Project day: "Fun with second language" at Ananya.

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