

Bridging home and school: language support for young children in Assam

Language support program for primary school children in Kokrajhar and Chirang districts .

Report April 2012- March 2013

Kokrajhar and Chirang are two districts in lower Assam that share an international border with Bhutan and a state border with West Bengal. Since 2005, they have been under the jurisdiction of the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC), a special territorial privilege under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution¹, the outcome of a decades long movement by the Bodo people for political autonomy. Though Bodo language speakers are the largest ethnic group in this region, many other communities live in the area and the various languages spoken are Nepalese, Rajbangshi, Santhali and other 'Adivasi'² languages; Rabha; and different forms of Bengali. Along with this diversity of languages, the region also has a history of conflict. The years of the Bodoland Movement marked a period of instability and violence with the insurgency of Bodo armed groups, violent Government repression and army operations, as well as inter ethnic conflict. The formation of the BTC did bring about a measure of peace, but conflicts between communities have continued to flare up. The year 2012 saw us go back to familiar scenes of the past with the Bodo–Muslim riots³, that effected lakhs of people with villages burnt and people still living in relief camps.

Home language/school language in Government primary schools

Despite the coexistence of multiple linguistic groups in this region, most government primary schools in the area offer a choice of only Assamese and Bodo as medium of instruction. A substantial number of children with diverse linguistic backgrounds go to Assamese medium schools. This leads to a situation where children in primary school struggle to acquire fluency in reading and writing in Assamese, a language that they rarely hear in their day to day lives. The language problem affects learning and retention levels, and the drop out levels of children from some of these communities is very high. Language continues to be a contentious issue in Assam.

Working to bring home language into the Classroom: We initially focused on 12 villages in Kokrajhar and Chirang districts (October '08 June '09). This involved documenting the school situation and engaging with the community of children, teachers and parents, as well

¹ The Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT), (one of several armed groups in the area) signed a Memorandum of Settlement (MoS) with the Indian Government and the Assam government on February 10 2005 to pave the way for the creation of a 46-member Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) in Assam. An amendment to the Sixth Schedule includes the BTC areas of Kokrajhar, Chirang, Udalguri and Baksa.

² Though the word 'Adivasi' is usually translated as 'tribal', there is a differentiation made in this region between the Bodos as 'tribals' or 'the original inhabitants' and the 'Adivasis', as an 'immigrant' population. The 'Adivasis' in Assam comprise of the Santhals, Mundas and the Oraons.

³ In July 2012, violence broke out between the Bodo and Bengali Muslim communities. The violence began with a few stray incidents, but spread to both Kokrajhar and Chirang districts. By August, 77 people were killed and almost 4 lakh people displaced in refugee camps. Though the riots affected the Bodo and Rajbangshi communities as well, the Bengali Muslim community was severely affected. The riots also lead to extreme polarization of communities, with issues of 'illegal immigration' also coming in. Eight months later, people are still living in relief camps.

as the larger community, to study the language politics of the area and the classroom. This was followed by an action research study conducted in twelve villages in these two blocks from July '09 - March'10. For the next three years, April 2010-March 2013, we extended our work to 50 villages, where we work in the school language Assamese as well as home languages like Nepalese, Santhali, Rabha and Bengali. This year, we have also started a small initiative in English learning for Bodo medium schools.

Our objectives are :

The main thrust of our current project is to provide specialized language learning support to children in primary school (STD.1 to Std. 4), and to work alongside the community to strengthen learning practices.

- The project seeks to provide home language and bilingual support to children whose home language is different from school language.
- The project intends to introduce children to the Assamese language (their school language) in a structured and child friendly manner
- Having a volunteer teacher from the community who is familiar with their home language also makes it easier for the children to learn and interact with him/her.
- The program emphasizes on oral language development in both the home language as well as the school language, and sees vocabulary acquisition, language use and comprehension as essential to the learning process
- At the same time, we intend to develop the children's competence in reading and writing skills, using both home and school language.
- This year, a basic math module (using both home and school languages) was also initiated.
- All our TLM is in the home language as well as Assamese, and we seek to develop material using local resources that the children are familiar with.
- Training and empowering our volunteer teachers and resource persons to not only teach children, but also be involved with other aspects of community life and the school such as preparing teaching material using local resources, community mobilization around education etc.
- Foster understanding between communities, by working with people from different communities

Our Classroom activities in the last year :

Oral language development

Oral language proficiency in both home and school language is an important goal of our language program. We have theatre, song and interactive learning programs in our classes, with particular focus on oral language proficiency, and listening and speaking activities. This includes role play and skits in the children's home language. These plays are often inspired by the folklore that is familiar to children. Training our volunteer teachers in role play has also increased their confidence, and empowered them to look at language creatively. The languages we worked in are Santhali, Nepali, Rabha and Bengali. We hope to use more local resources to enrich our classroom practices, as well as foster understanding and better relations between our volunteer teachers from various communities. We organised a special training program in February 2013 with storytellers from the local communities serving as resource persons. This sharing of cultural practices and stories has taken on a more urgent note with the divisive events of the last year.

Most children are quite comfortable with interpreting a story that has been narrated to them in the form of a play (with the help of the volunteer teacher) in their home language. The next step has been to translate and recreate the play that they have done in their home language, into Assamese. This transition has been a challenge, and an interesting language learning exercise. We hope to continue this next year, and make a substantial difference in children's Assamese language speaking abilities and confidence. We see this as a critical foundational step for the children to succeed in their school education, where the medium of instruction is Assamese. Stories and role play we hope will boost their confidence and respect for their own stories and cultures, as also help them learn Assamese.

Reading and Writing

We begin with the very basics of letter identification, pronunciations, and letter –sound concepts, using home language vocabulary. This was necessary as we have seen that even after 3 to 4 years of school, children's concepts of letters and sounds was not clear, and many of them struggle with basic reading even in higher grades like Class 4. Many of the languages the children speak often do not have all the sounds of the Assamese alphabet, and it requires special attention to familiarize them to these sounds. The next step has been to encourage children to begin reading in Assamese. We begin with basic texts and take them to the next level. Introducing 'matras' gradually becomes an important step.

In a comparative study of children who have been a part of this program for three months and others who have been in the program for a year, we have seen that far more children can read words without matras in the latter group⁴. In another instance, assessment of reading abilities in Assamese of Santhali speaking children of 8 schools, 4 schools supported by our program and 4 without, we have seen there are a large number of children (51%) who cannot

⁴ In an assessment done in November 2011 of 4 Rabha villages, we have found that in the 2 schools where we have worked for three months, only 25 % of the children could read simple Assamese words without matras, while in the 2 schools where we have been working for a year , 57 % of the children could read simple words in Assamese without matras.

identify even the alphabets in schools without additional support, and fewer children (7%)who can read a simple paragraph. While in the schools supported by our program,49 % could read a simple paragraph, and fewer children(9%) were still not confident of their letters. Along with reading, we also work with vocabulary development in Assamese, as it is essential to higher levels of reading and comprehension. This year, we have strengthened our writing program, by providing worksheets combining drawing and writing, as well as letter and sentence formation. Since independent writing is not given much emphasis in school, we have also had to invest in training our own volunteer teachers to improve their writing abilities.

Math

This year, we initiated math activities along with language. We had a math workshop in the beginning of the year. (Due to the riots we were unable to effectively follow it up mid year). As the children's grasp on Assamese vocabulary and language improve with their oral language sessions, it will also make it easier for them to understand math problems in the school classroom.

Preparing the TLM (Teaching Learning Material) :

An important aspect of the TLM produced for the project is the community based curriculum. There are many challenges to working in languages that are not the medium of instruction. The Santhali community here does not use one single specific script⁵, and often ,the spellings and vocabulary have not been standardized. In the case of Rabha, the community has decided on Assamese as a script, but due to the divergent strands of the language spoken within the Rabha community, they are still in the process of standardization of the vocabulary and syntax. While preparing the material in these languages, we have consulted the communities we are working in, as well as academics and language experts, while prioritizing the day to day language variant and vocabulary of the village. We have found that involving the community and using local material in the classroom leads to children taking a greater interest in the class, serves to connect the community to the school, and ensures ownership of the project at the local level. We also document local folk stories and songs, in both home language and in translation, as we have found that children find it easier to work with material that they share a degree of familiarity with. In the next step, we also share this material with the children from our other classes, through translation from one language to another. We organised TLM workshops, where we worked with scholars from various linguistic communities, storytellers, teachers and our teaching volunteers, to produce two booklets for reading.

Assessment :

Children are periodically evaluated to chart their progress. There is a baseline, midterm and final assessment of their oral skill, vocabulary, reading and writing – the competencies the classes focus on. Our tests serve as indicators of the children's progress. A reading

⁵ The Santhali community is spread out across many states in Indian and the language is written in the Roman, Assamese, Bengali and ole chiki scripts.

assessment carried out in April 2011, tells us that of the children we are working with, more than 50 % are struggling at the letter level . In some language groups, more than 70 % of the children are not clear about their letter concepts. While for children who have been able to progress to reading words, our early tests also indicate that once the children are familiar with the alphabets and their sounds, they seem to be reading as well in their home language and in Assamese⁶. We have testing tools in Assamese, Rabha, Santhali and Nepali.

But towards the end of the year, assessments carried out in February 2012 of a comparative study of schools with and without our program shows us that there has been a fair amount of progress. In the 4 Santhali schools in Chirang district, where reading abilities were assessed, about 49% of the children were able to read a simple paragraph in Assamese, as compared to a mere 7% of the 4 schools with Santhali children , not supported by our program.

Training programs:

This year, we have had to adapt to the violence in the BTC area, by organizing more all day programs so that volunteer teachers were able to go home at the end of the day. Though our classes continued through the year, even in times of curfew and violence, our training schedule suffered. The training programs took place in two phases, from April – June 2012 after which we had to take a four month break when the situation was too volatile for meetings or travel, and begin our trainings again once a semblance of normalcy returned to the area, from October 2012 to March 2013. The trainings focused on oral language resources, writing and reading, storytelling and role plays as well as math and TLM workshops.

For many volunteers, they have now been through two years or more of working in our program. Their confidence, ability and language and teaching skills have improved very much. Since most of our volunteers come from the villages we are working in, often having gone through the same school system that we are attempting to improve, strengthening their skills sets and confidence building exercises are very important. Interacting and engaging with children, as well as working together as a team with other volunteers, community members and resource persons are also emphasized on.

Training workshops are essential to our volunteer teachers performance in the classroom, and next year, we hope to have more workshops and refresher trainings. We also plan to have our teachers visiting each other's classrooms and sharing practices. This will further strengthen our program, particularly for volunteer teachers in forest villages, more remote areas, or areas that still struggle with the long term legacy of violence.

Monitoring and support :

Our monitoring and support system for the classes in the village as well as producing TLM has also been working well. The volunteer teacher works with a group of students from class

⁶ In one Santhali language cluster (of five villages), 14% of the children tested could read basic non matra words in Santhali, and 15 % could read words in Assamese at the same level. While in a Nepali language cluster (5 villages) too, we saw that 20 % of the children tested could read basic words in Nepali vocabulary and 15 % could read words at the same level in Assamese.

1 to 4, six days a week. For every group of 4 or 5 villages of the same language group, we have one resource person. He looks after the day to day monitoring, ensuring that the classes take place and also supports the volunteer teacher in working with the children. He visits each class, at least once a week. The resource person also holds monthly meetings with all the volunteer teachers of the 5 villages. We have two district coordinators, with 20 to 25 villages and 5 resource persons working under them. The district coordinator is expected to visit the classes, and support the teaching and supplement it. Regular village meetings, connecting with parents, the school and the community are also a part of his responsibilities. This structure works well, providing support and feedback to the volunteer teachers, and also keeping the TLM team abreast of developments in the classroom, and the day to day use of teaching material that has been provided. Songs, translations, plays are often undertaken by volunteer teachers or resource persons on their initiatives, who then share them with the coordinator, and ensures their dissemination to the rest of the group.

Some challenges on the way ahead:

One of the unexpected challenges that faced us last year, and whose unresolved tensions continue to periodically disrupt life in the areas we are working, was the sudden burst of violence in June- July 2012. The Bodo- Muslim violence lead to widespread fear and tensions between communities, bandhs and curfews. Though none of our villages were directly affected, it was a time of difficulty for everyone, particularly the affected communities. With people from both communities still living in relief camps, particularly the Muslim community, there remains many unresolved tensions. For a project like ours, that works across community lines, inter ethnic problems pose particular challenges. At the same time, despite the problems, we were also able to work on the strength of our relationship between various communities, and foster an environment of understanding and exchange in our trainings and workshops.

On the academic front too, there are many challenges. Our assessments, supplemented by class observations and visits, have showed us that there are a few villages where we have not been able to make as much progress as others. Further study of this shows us that for children who come from schools where teachers come in time, and there is some minimum level of support, they are able to make far more progress, and work at a faster pace as compared to children from villages that are more remote, with high levels of teacher absenteeism and poverty. Villages closer to the highway or important towns, often have more access to work, less poverty, and are more likely to have teachers who come to school. As a result, our volunteers from such areas are stronger, and pick up techniques faster, while volunteers who come from more remote areas often have to struggle against great odds in their day to day lives. In the next year, we would like to set up more collaboration between villages where children are making more progress, and others where children are struggling, within the same linguistic community. We would also like to give special emphasis on villages where children are not making as much progress as they should, with more support, specialized TLM and village mobilization.

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