



ENGLISH in ASER 2007

ASER 2007 PROCESS DOCUMENT

ASER CENTRE

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INTRODUCTION:

In most states in India, English as a subject is introduced early in primary school. At a conceptual level, whether in policy or politics, there has been tremendous debate in the country over when English should be introduced and what the implications are.¹ At the same time, there is high and growing popular demand for English. To a large extent, the perception that knowledge of English pays off in the job market in terms of improving access to better jobs and to higher paying occupations fuels the this rising demand.

In the development of the National Curriculum Framework 2006, a great deal of attention was paid to the teaching of English. The position paper of the national focus group outlines key issues for the teaching of English.² The paper stresses "communicative competence" and argues that teaching should aim to encourage the use of English language in meaningful contexts and develop children's ability to use the language in a variety of contexts spontaneously and appropriately (p.3). The national focus group acknowledges that the mother tongue of the child could be used for discussion and understanding along with an engagement with English (p 12). NCF position paper on Teaching of English includes a section on evaluation where it mentions that "measurement should be about language proficiency" and national benchmarks for language proficiency need to be evolved.³

At whatever stage it is introduced, the massive practical challenge across the country is how to deliver basic English effectively to millions of children. This task is even more arduous considering that close to 40% of children in the age group are not fluent in reading their own language (ASER2005, ASER 2006) and that over 50% of mothers of the children in this age group are unable to read simple text at Std 1 level in their mother tongue (ASER 2006). As far as adults in general are concerned there are no easily available national figures for how fluent Indian men and women are in speaking, reading or writing basic English.

To start building children's foundations in English, it would be useful know : Currently how much English do children in India know? ASER 2007 seeks to answer this question for the country and for each state and generate district level estimates for basic English by age.

¹ For example, see the debates and discussions around this issue in the National Knowledge Commission in 2006 and 2007.

² See National Curriculum Framework devotes an entire section to the teaching of English.

http://ncert.nic.in/sites/publication/schoolcurriculum/Position_Papers/english.pdf

³ The NCF position paper states .."it is how one evaluates that will decide whether a child will want to be evaluated. While even the most child centred methods of evaluation will be anxiety provoking for some, there is no question that a system of evaluation must be in place. The question is how and how much (p.16)."

It is with this background of policy debate and practical challenge in mind that the assessment of basic English was included as a key domain in ASER 2007.

DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT OF BASIC ENGLISH AT PRIMARY STAGE :

Currently in India, there is no national benchmark or any country-wide measurement of basic English competency for children in elementary school. Each state textbook indicates the expectations of the state with respect to children's learning. So, as a country we do not know how much English our children know (or for that matter how much English our teachers know).

To start, we analysed state textbooks for English across the country especially the textbook for the year in which English was first introduced in the primary grade. In keeping with the ASER approach, the English tool had to be easy to use and the tasks that children were being asked to do had to be simple. The entire set of tasks should not take more than five minutes per child. The tasks also should not be so difficult that children will be nervous to even try. Like in the case of other ASER tools (other languages and arithmetic), we attempted to see if the tasks could be progressive, at least as far as reading ability was concerned. Along with reading, we wanted to include understanding – whether a child understands the meaning of the word or the sentence that she/he has read. The challenge was to be able to do that in a way that was not complicated. The framework was developed with these few key elements in mind.

With basic English, like with the other ASER tools, the same set of tasks are given to all children from the age of 5 to 16. Given this fact and given that we do not have any other benchmarks to refer to, our challenge was to build in enough variation in the tasks such that the test could be given to children across the 6-14 age group. In order to do this, we did two things: First, we looked at what state textbooks required of children at different stages and second, we did a six stage pilot before the ASER 2007 tool was finalized. The basic framework is outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Framework for developing Basic English tool

Tools for assessment	Comments
A. Recognizing alphabets	Both small letters and capital letters need to be included
B. Reading simple words	Simple, easy and common place three letter and four letter words were needed
C. Understanding words	If a child could read a word then she/he would be asked what the word meant in the child's own language
D. Reading sentences	Could a child read a simple sentence
E. Understanding a written sentence	If a child could read a sentence then she/he would be asked what the word meant in the child's own language
F. Understanding spoken instructions in English	If oral instructions were given to a child could she/he understand what the instruction was and therefore could she/he do what was being asked.

At each stage of piloting, the tasks associated with each assessment were revised based on the experiences of the previous pilot.⁴

Is this a good beginning point in terms of a framework for assessing basic English?

How is children's ability to read and understand English measured in other non-English speaking countries?

Here is an example of a early grade assessment tool being used in several countries in Africa. Research Triangle Institute in the US is in the process of preparing a set of tools called EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment). The aim is "to develop a limited but scientifically rigorous and well informed pilot or test intervention in reading improvement, develop remedial interventions and measure results" (p.5). These tools are being used in a number of African countries with the support of the Aga Khan Foundation, World Bank and USAID. The actual tool and results described below are from a recent pilot in Kenya.⁵

⁴ Details of the evolution of the tool is summarized in the next section

⁵ Extracted from Early Grade Reading Assessment: Kenya baseline assessment. Work in progress by RTI International. July 2007.

Table 2 Early Grade Reading Baseline Assessment

EARLY GRADE READING BASELINE ASSESSMENT : A SUMMARY (From work in Kenya)		
1	Letter recognition (small & caps)	10 letters in 11 rows 1 min to read.
2	Familiar word identification	Common words. 6 words per row. 10 rows. 1 min to read. Acceptable formal pronunciation needed
3	Unfamiliar non-word decoding	5 words per row. 10 rows 1 min to decode
4	Reading a passage	60 words. 9 sentences. 1 min to read. Incorrect & omitted words are marked.
5	Comprehension of passage	Child is asked the comprehension questions only if she/he is able to read at least 3 sentences in the passage. Child is asked questions. The questions can be asked by the surveyor in the child's own language especially if the child shows hesitation. The child can also answer in their own language but child cannot re-read passage 5 questions. Mostly one word answers.
6	Phoneme segmentation	Children listen to words being read & have to say what sounds they hear in the word. Surveyor can pronounce each word twice. Child has 10 seconds to respond. 2 mins for 10 words.

EGRA puts a lot of emphasis on tasks accomplished within a given time period – usually one minute or two minutes. For example, the analysis of what children at the end of Std 2 in the Kenya schools could do includes :

“In the one minute timed randomization letter recognition task, students were able to name 22.7 letters in English in one minute, out of a possible 110 correct answers. For the sake of comparison, in the US some of the leading reading assessment experts have normed that a child at the end of a pre-unit (kindergarten) reading at less than 40 should be considered at some risk, and reading less than 27 definitely at risk. Thus the average level of letter reading fluency in this study was, in the middle of Std 2 at half of what in the US would be considered to put the child at some risk at the end of pre-unit (kindergarten).” (p.4)

STATE TEXTBOOKS IN INDIA AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

When is English introduced?

Currently, in a majority of states in India, English is included as a subject as early as Std 1. In 16 major states, English is introduced in Std 1. In Orissa, English starts in Std 2. In Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tripura, Assam, Arunachal, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, English is brought into the school curriculum at Std 3. And Gujarat is the one of the last states to introduce English; there English is brought in at the end of the primary stage in Std 5.

Table 3. Standard in which English is introduced in the primary stage in India

WHEN IS ENGLISH INTRODUCED?	
Std 1	J&K, HP, Uttarakhand, PN, HR, RJ, WB, JH, CH, MP, MH, Goa, Karnataka, TN, , Mizoram, Nagaland
16 states	
Std 2	Orissa
Std 3	BH, UP, AP, Kerala, Assam, Arunachal, Tripura, Manipur
8 states	
Std 5	Gujarat

Note:

Apart from English as a subject, English as a medium of instruction from Std 1 is currently the case in Jammu and Kashmir and in Nagaland.

What do states want their children to learn in English:

In the first year in which English is introduced as a subject, the learning goals for children are centred on basic abilities of listening, speaking and reading. Although the format, design and layout of the textbooks vary, most textbooks follow a similar pattern as far as content is concerned:

Table 4 : Learning goals in English in the first year of English

ALPHABETS				WORDS				SENTENCES			
Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking		
Small & capital letters introduced with words and pictures. Many textbooks are like workbooks where practice writing can be done in the book itself.				Building up of vocabulary is done with sets of words from familiar contexts like home, animals, family, school etc. Sets of similar sounding words are often used. In most cases, the introduction of alphabets is done with words and pictures so that pictures facilitate letter and word recognition.				Practice writing words. Usually copy and write.		Number of different activities including recitation of poems so that children can listen and repeat. sentences after the teacher. Greetings. Instructions and a few basic sentence structures are practiced.	

Basic alphabet recognition, basic word vocabulary and the ability to say and understand simple sentences are the basic learning goals in the first year that English is introduced at the primary stage. Interestingly, whether English is introduced early (Std 1) or late (Std 3 or later), the learning goals expected of children do not seem to vary too much.

A detailed state by state analysis of textbooks is in Attachment 1.

DEVELOPING THE ASER TOOL:

The movement from the framework to the final tool required substantial number of pilots in different parts of the country over a period of three months. For the development of all ASER tools, especially new tools, a period of field experimentation is essential. The pilot provides the opportunity to experiment with a number of different tasks, assess the use-ability of the tool, design data collection formats, grading instructions and also figure out the best way to analyze and present data.

From June to September 2007, six pilots were done in different parts of the country. Apart from content, pilots are also very useful for understanding from the point of view of use, what is the optimal design and layout. For example, how much text should be on each page, how large should the font be, should the instructions for the surveyor be on the actual tool or should it be in a separate sheet. To focus children's attention on the task at hand, the test paper is often folded to the relevant section. The layout of the tool should allow this to be done easily. Choice of font too turned out to be an important issue – with some alphabets like "a" or "g" being easier or harder to read depending on the font.

In any discussion about ASER tools, it is always important to keep in mind the basic objective of ASER : ASER is primarily a local citizen's attempt to understand the status of schooling and basic learning of the children in her/his district. The tools are aligned to achieving this objective. ASER tools are used by thousands of volunteers and hundreds of thousands of children are assessed in the household/community. While more sophisticated measurements may be possible with more qualified and more trained surveyors and more time, the challenge in ASER is to make the tool as simple as possible without losing rigour.

There was another major reason to keep the English tools for ASER 2007 simple. Across the country, it was hard to predict what would be the English ability of the surveyors.⁶ At the district level orientation, all surveyors were given this test as well. This was done to assess surveyors' competency in English. Based on this assessment, a session was done to train the team further to ensure that all surveyors were able to at least use all four samples of the given test.

The next set of tables provides a bird's eye view of the evolution of the ASER tool based on successive pilots. Pilots were done in different parts of the country not only to see how children in different parts of the country responded to different English tasks but also to judge the capability of adults to administer the test.

⁶ ASER surveyors are volunteers from local district institutions and organizations.

TABLE 5. EVOLUTION OF ASER TOOL FOR ENGLISH

A separate table is presented for each task in order to outline the kinds of changes that were made at each stage of the pilot phase.

Attachment 2 gives the sample tools used in each of the pilots.

TASK ONE

A. Recognizing alphabets		Can the child recognize/read small letters and capital letters ?	
No.	TASK	GRADING	COMMENTS
Pilot 1 and 2	2 tasks : 10 alphabets in small letters and 10 alphabets in capital letters	Child was asked to recognize any 5 of each. The number of correctly recognized alphabets were recorded	There was no significant difference between children's ability to recognize small letters or capital letters
Pilot 3, 4 and 5	Only had 8 small letters	The child was shown 5 random alphabets. If the child could correctly recognize 4 then the surveyor recorded that the child could recognize alphabets	Different fonts were used in each pilot. Depending on the font used the letter "a", "g" look different and there fore sometimes children made mistakes due to unfamiliar font. Pilot 5 had the detailed instructions on the tool itself.
Pilot 6	2 tasks: 8 alphabets in small letters & 8 alphabets in capital letters	The child was shown 5 random alphabets. If the child could correctly recognize 4 then the surveyor recorded that the child could recognize alphabets	The small and capital letters were brought back. This was done so that children's ability to recognize alphabets could be comprehensively covered. Instructions on the tool were kept to a minimum.
FINAL			Times Roman was the font used. Analysis of textbooks across states indicated that this was the most commonly used font in textbooks.

TASK TWO : READING AND UNDERSTANDING SIMPLE WORDS

No.	TASK	GRADING	COMMENTS
	<p>B. Reading simple words</p>	<p>Simple, easy and common place three letter and four letter words were needed</p>	<p>If a child could read a word then she/he would be asked the meaning of the word in the child's own language</p>
<p>Pilot 1</p>	<p>PICTURE Look at picture and say the name of the object in English</p>	<p>Six pictures were given. The child had to choose 5. If the child could not choose, then the surveyor would point to 5. The number of pictures for which the correct answer was given was noted. (The pictures were of : cat, bed, chair, candle, tap and comb. The pictures were black and white.)</p>	<p>There was significant variations in children's responses to the pictures. For example, the responses for cat ranged from tiger to dog etc. Many children could not respond to the pictures of comb, candle or tap. It seemed either that much more experimentation was needed with pictures or it was better to drop this item.</p>
<p>Pilot 1 to Pilot 4</p>	<p>There were a list of simple words. In the pilots from 1-4 the words were a combination of three and four letter words : dog, cat, tea, bed, kite, man, pen, fish, egg, ha. Moon, hand, crow, ring. Children had to read the word and then say its meaning in their own language.</p>	<p>In pilot 1 and 2, the child was asked 5 and the number of correct responses were noted. In pilot 3 and 4, children were asked 5 and if the child could correctly read at least 3 then the child was marked as "can read". If the child could say the meaning of at least 3 words, then the child was marked as "can say meaning". How a child pronounced a word was not a consideration in the grading process.</p>	<p>Each of the English words in this list had to be (a) familiar objects that children were likely to know (b) easy to read in English (c) the equivalent word in their own language had to be easy as well. These three criteria had to be met for putting a word on this list. After each round of piloting, the responses of children to particular words was noted and words were changed based on the experience of the pilot. Words which had 2 different consonant sounds one after the other like crow, ship, cold, star, gold were dropped.</p>

<p>Pilot 5-6 and final</p>	<p>The words in the last 3 pilots were simple basic three letter words that followed the criteria outlined above. Examples of words are: box, red, big, bus, cup.</p>	<p>Child was asked to read and say the meaning of 5 words. At least 4 had to be correct for the child to be marked "can do". The format of the tool changed in each pilot. The reason for this was to assess how much of the instructions to the surveyors (whether in English or in Hindi) should be on the tool itself and how much should be on a separate sheet for instructions.</p>	<p>In each set there was a least one three letter word which was an English word but commonly used in the local language too. Example, pen, bag, bus. Since the tool was meant to become progressively difficult, we ensured that the words in the word list were simpler to read than the key words in the sentences.</p>
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TASK THREE : READING AND UNDERSTANDING BASIC SENTENCES

Read basic sentences AND understanding basic sentences			
No.	TASK	GRADING	COMMENTS
Pilot 1	<p>There were a set of instructions: Examples are</p> <p>Turn around. Touch your feet. Show me your nose. Clap your hands. Close your eyes.</p>	<p>The surveyor read out the instructions and noted down if the child could do what was being asked.</p>	<p>A lot depended on the gestures and the body language of the surveyor. Also children did a variety of actions on hearing the instructions. For example for touch your feet – a child would touch his knee. Was that to be marked correct or wrong. This task seemed to be complicated.</p>
Pilot 1	<p>The set of sentences here were all 5 words: Examples are</p> <p>Today I went to school. This is my brother. Where is the market? It is very hot today. The cat is on the table.</p>	<p>The child was asked to read each sentence. Then s/he was asked to say the meaning of the sentence in their own language. The number of correct responses was noted.</p>	<p>There were several issues for designing tasks in sentence reading and understanding. Should there be variations in the types of sentences (sentence construction) that were asked? Should sentence patterns be similar but vocabulary be more advanced that in the word list? How to assess the child's ability to understand from the child's response in his local language.</p>
Pilot 2	<p>The set of sentences used here were simpler than the previous pilot: Examples are</p> <p>The boy is fat. The car is read. The sky is blue. The tree is tall. The water is cold. The dog is big.</p>	<p>The child was asked to read any 5 sentences and say the meaning .</p>	<p>In most cases, the child was not translating word for word or replicating the sentence structure in his language.</p>
Pilot 3 and 4	<p>Sample sentences....</p> <p>This is a book. That is a cat. The boy is big. The girl can run.</p>	<p>The child was asked to read any 5 sentences and say the meaning .</p>	<p>Tenses, singular, plural were getting mixed up. If the English sentence was "This is a book". Would a Hindi response of "Voh kitab hai" be acceptable or was the correct answer "Yeh kitab hai".</p> <p>"The" seemed to be causing difficulties in the meaning of</p>

<p>Pilot 5-6- 7</p>	<p>Sample sentences: I like to read. What is your name? Give the boy a pen. The man is rich. (Four different sentence type including one question and one instruction)</p>	<p>Child asked to read all sentences. At least 2 must be correct. Similarly for the meaning of the sentences. Key words were underlined and at least the meaning of those words had to be correct.</p>	<p>the sentence. For the meaning of "the girl can run" how to mark "ladki bhag gayi" or "ladki daud ti Hai" or "ladkhi daud sakti hai"?</p> <p>By the final tool, it was decided that to keep the interpretation of meaning to a minimum across surveyors, the child had to be able to at least say the meaning of the 2 main underlined keywords in the sentence.</p>
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