

Boosting Literacy One TV Set at a Time – If Only the State Spares the Funds

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A billion people in India watch three hours of TV a day, on average. Same Language Subtitling, an idea born at IIM Ahmedabad 22 years ago, could guarantee that people read for at least 30 minutes every day, but only if the bureaucracy stopped resisting it.

“No army can resist an idea whose time has come.” When Victor Hugo wrote these words in 1852, he had not encountered India’s bureaucracy.

Twenty two years ago, an idea was born at IIM Ahmedabad which guaranteed that a billion people would engage in reading for at least 30 minutes every day, throughout their lives, without them having to put in any additional time and effort. Literally, reading engagement would be in the air, or on the airwaves – inescapable and automatic, just like breathing.

That idea is Same Language Subtitling (SLS). SLS simply recommends subtitling audio-visual content on TV, in the ‘same’ language as the audio. Word for word, what you hear is what you read. The biggest bang for the buck is to add SLS on all song-based content already shown on TV, in all Indian languages. Sounds simple? Just think of the quantum of reading it unleashes nationally.

A billion people in India watch three hours of TV a day on average. Song-based content – songs in films, devotional and folk songs – constitute at least 30 minutes of daily viewing. A policy requirement that all songs on TV should carry SLS would ensure half an hour of reading

practice, daily, for a billion people.

Several eye-tracking studies from Europe and the US, including a recent one with school children in government schools in rural Rajasthan, have established that subtitles in the 'same' language just cannot be ignored. The brain cannot but match known letters with matching sounds. The innately associative power of the brain, combined with prior knowledge of the lyrics, makes reading skill acquisition through SLS, effortless, fun and most importantly, marked by success, not failure. Reading along to songs is inherently motivating, even for the weakest readers.

Studies in India are at the forefront of establishing that regular exposure to SLS on mainstream TV, especially on songs, can result in substantial improvement of reading skills among in and out-of-school children, youth and adults, or anyone who watches song-based content on TV. "A small thing that has a staggering impact on people's lives," said Bill Clinton of SLS back in 2009.

India's reading and literacy challenge is massive and older than the 70 year republic itself. There has been good progress in raising the literacy rate but there is a catch. Over 60 percent of the "literate" are very weak readers. In many countries they would not be considered to be readers at all. Under the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework, India needs to "Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning," by 2030. But quality education and lifelong learning cannot be achieved without quality reading skills.

The Annual Survey of Education Report (ASER) 2017, and previous reports, have highlighted the grim state of affairs in India's primary and secondary education sector. Our education system has consistently, across all grade levels, been behind when it comes to meeting students' learning achievements, and more worryingly, their aspirations. While we need to credit policy institutions in India for raising schooling enrolment rates, the quality of schooling has to be our next priority. It is here where SLS can contribute in augmenting quality learning in schools and providing people deprived of reading skills, a basic functionality to interact in their environment.

In a country where half the school children cannot read simple texts by Class 5, one would think that any proven idea that can get a billion people to read every day, at an extremely low cost of 10 *paise* per person per year, would have an enthusiastic reception in policy. Alas, that is not how policy has handled SLS over the years.

To its credit, policy has gone from outright rejection of SLS in the late 90s, to resistance in the 2000s, to growing acceptance since 2010, after the Prasar Bharati Board considered SLS and formally acknowledged that it is a good idea "in-principle" and could be considered for a national scale up. "In-principle," it seems, is a code phrase for good-idea-but-no-funds, as a number of high-level policy meetings with ministries and policy institutions have implied, over the last eight years.

For SLS to successfully exit the policy labyrinth and become a reality on all TV channels, it might need the intervention of a higher power. Fortunately for SLS, in 2013, then Chief Minister of Gujarat and now Prime Minister, heard a presentation, even following it up with a positive mention. Globally too, Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education, has endorsed SLS.

Ironically, the policy breakthrough for SLS in India might come if another country becomes the first to run with the idea. Recently, Justine Greening, UK's former Education Minister exhorted parents to turn on the subtitles on TV to boost children's reading skills. TOTS (turn on the subtitles) may just be taking the shape of a campaign there.

It would be a bittersweet day if an idea conceived, researched and developed in India, where it has languished in policy for years, is actually scaled up in another country, first. Individuals apart, so far India's bureaucracy as a whole has been apathetic to SLS.

But we do hope that Victor Hugo was still right. No army, not even India's bureaucracy, should be able to resist an idea whose time has come.

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