

# Back to basics

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My name is Rupinderjit Dhaliwal and I teach English at the Government Girls Senior Secondary School, Dera Baba Nanak, Punjab, India. The school offers education from grade 6 to 12 and most of the girls are from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Soon after I joined, I realised that though my learners had studied English from grade 1, they could not read nor utter a single sentence in English. But I could sense a kind of curiosity from the look in their eyes. My story is about my grade 7 learners (11-13 year olds). The challenge I faced was how to get them to read. By reflecting on the strategies employed to help young beginners learn a language in school, I saw a ray of hope. At school, beginners recite rhymes before they learn the letters of the alphabet. This rhythmic and musical exposure to the language provides them with different learning experiences – sounds, actions and pictures – and learning a language is fun.



I took a poem, 'The Ice-Cream Man', from their textbook. I told them to keep their books closed and I drilled the poem with the whole class. Then I divided the class into groups of six to practise the recitation. I regrouped them three times. Throughout I monitored and offered support. After ten days I was amazed that every learner could recite the poem well, even the least able. Without reading a word, they had succeeded in memorising and reciting a full, page-long poem. They were really pleased with themselves and when I asked them to read the poem from their textbooks, they found it easy. Reciting before reading had given them confidence.

I am glad that now the majority of my learners engage themselves in English language learning with great interest and I feel proud when my learners compete and win inter-school Spell-Bees, Poem Recitations and Quiz Competitions.

### Reflection questions

Q1: Do you face similar challenges in the context where you teach? What approaches have you tried to help your learners read and speak?

Q2: We often associate using rhymes and songs with primary children. What do you think about using them with secondary students? What are the benefits to 'hearing and saying' before attempting to read and write?



See Rupinderjit telling her story on video:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/using-rhymes-help-students-learn-english>

Source: Smith, R., Padwad, A., and Bullock, D. (eds.) In process. *Teaching in the Low-resource Classroom: Voices of Experience*. London: The British Council.