



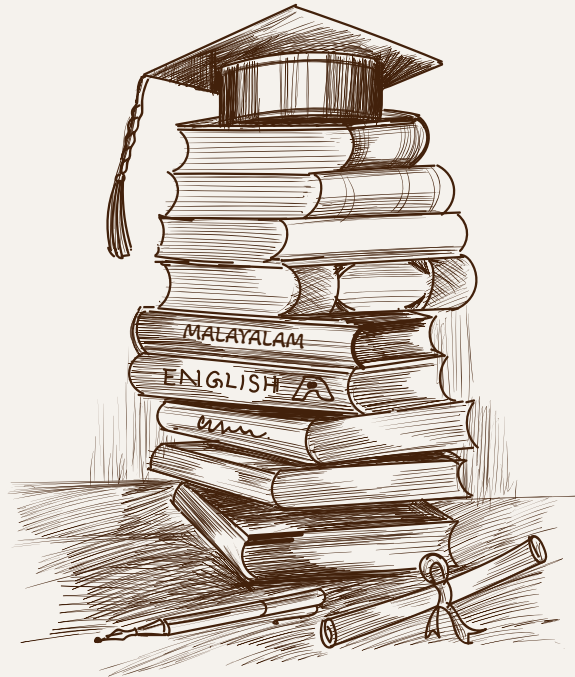
BILINGUAL READING PROGRAM

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Pilot Bilingual Reading Program



2025-26





Executive Summary

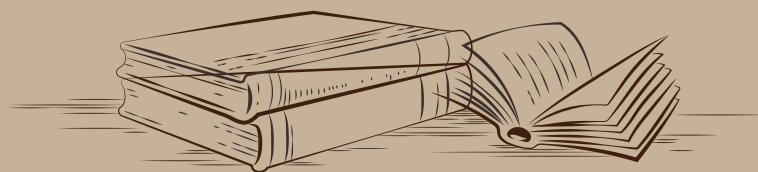
The Vakkom Moulavi Foundation Trust (VMFT) implemented a pilot Bilingual Reading Program for Grade 5 students in two disadvantaged coastal communities in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. The program had three objectives: to increase children's interest and enjoyment in reading; to improve reading comprehension in both Malayalam and English through a structured bilingual approach; and to test whether such a program could be implemented successfully as a practical and scalable model in schools and community learning centres.

The pilot was implemented between September 2025 and January 2026 with 60 students across two locations—Ambalathara, an English-medium private school, and Perumathura, a community-based after-school learning centre serving children from government, aided and private schools.

Students participated in structured reading sessions using levelled storybooks in Malayalam and English. The stories were different in the two languages rather than direct translations. Facilitators received training before the programme began and continued to receive mentoring, classroom observation and feedback throughout the intervention. Student learning and participation were monitored using multiple sources of evidence, including baseline, progress and benchmark assessments, classroom observations, facilitator progress reports, attendance records and parent feedback.

The pilot found encouraging evidence across all three objectives.

Interest in reading increased. Children became more interested in reading, engaged more actively with written texts and participated more confidently in classroom discussions and reading activities. Facilitators consistently reported improvements in confidence, participation and engagement, while parents observed children bringing storybooks home, reading outside the classroom and talking about the stories with family members. During the programme, students read 15 storybooks. Across both sites, 72% of children shared their reading experiences at home and read storybooks outside the classroom. This represents a substantial improvement over the situation at the beginning of the programme, when only around 20–30% of students reported reading anything regularly apart from their school textbooks.



Reading comprehension improved. Assessments showed gains in both Malayalam and English between the baseline assessment and the progress assessment across all four reading categories—Malayalam Narrative, Malayalam Expository, English Narrative and English Expository. Particularly noteworthy were the improvements recorded among students at Perumathura, despite greater socio-economic disadvantage, lower attendance and less academic support at home. The Benchmark Assessment, administered at the end of the programme using more demanding CEFR low B1-level texts, further demonstrated that students could comprehend material considerably above the level used during instruction. Students performed especially strongly in Malayalam, while many also demonstrated meaningful comprehension of English texts that were substantially more challenging than those encountered during the programme.

The findings support the bilingual approach. Students who demonstrated stronger reading skills in Malayalam generally also performed better in English. Classroom observations suggested that the strategic use of Malayalam during English lessons, without relying on direct translation, helped students understand texts, participate more confidently and gradually strengthen their English reading. These findings are consistent with the view that strengthening first-language literacy can support the development of second-language reading skills.

The pilot also demonstrated that a structured bilingual reading model can be implemented successfully in resource-constrained settings. Carefully selected learning materials, structured lesson plans, regular facilitator mentoring and continuous monitoring enabled meaningful improvements, despite the programme being shorter than originally planned, variations in attendance and differences in facilitator experience.

The pilot also identified areas for further improvement. Some students entered the programme without basic decoding skills and required more intensive support than the programme was designed to provide. The experience highlighted the need for additional age-appropriate reading materials for older struggling readers, continued facilitator development and further refinement of student assessment and monitoring tools.

Overall, the pilot provides encouraging evidence that a structured bilingual reading programme can improve children's engagement with reading, strengthen reading comprehension in Malayalam and English, and provide a practical model that can be adapted for use in schools and community learning centres.



Introduction

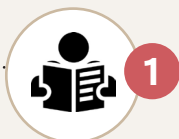
Reading is central to learning across all subjects. Children who struggle to read and understand texts often face difficulties throughout their education, limiting both academic achievement and future opportunities.

Although Kerala has high levels of school enrolment and literacy, many children continue to experience challenges with reading comprehension. Recognising this need, and building on its earlier research on reading as well as the seminar on language and culture organised over the previous two years, the Vakkom

Moulavi Foundation Trust (VMFT) developed a pilot Bilingual Reading Program to strengthen reading skills among Grade 5 students in disadvantaged communities.

The program was based on a simple principle: children learn more effectively when their home language supports the learning of a second language. Rather than treating Malayalam and English separately, the program encouraged students to use both languages strategically to build understanding, confidence and reading comprehension.

The pilot sought to answer three key questions:



Can a structured reading program increase children's interest in reading and improve reading comprehension?

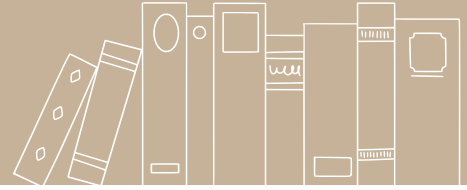


Can bilingual teaching support reading development in both Malayalam and English?



Can this approach be implemented as a practical, cost-effective model that can be replicated in schools and community learning settings?

This report summarises the design and implementation of the pilot, the evidence collected during the programme, and the key findings and lessons for future expansion.



The program was implemented between 15 September 2025 and January 2026 with 60 Grade 5 students across two locations in coastal Thiruvananthapuram.

The two participating sites represented different educational and socio-economic contexts:

- **Ambalathara:** An English-medium private unaided school.
- **Perumathura:** A community-based after-school learning centre serving children from government, aided and private schools.

Although the program was originally designed for 60 sessions, disruptions caused by holidays, adverse weather and a delayed start meant that 45 sessions were completed.

Classes were conducted three times a week, with each session lasting approximately one hour.

The programme used carefully selected levelled storybooks in Malayalam and English. The stories in the two languages were different rather than direct translations. Every lesson followed a structured lesson plan that encouraged students to listen, read, discuss stories and respond through conversation, writing or drawing. Throughout the programme, the emphasis remained on making reading enjoyable while gradually strengthening reading comprehension.

Each site had two facilitators—one for Malayalam and one for English. Both facilitators attended every session and worked collaboratively throughout the programme. Before implementation began, facilitators received structured training and continued to receive mentoring, classroom observation and regular feedback based on classroom observations, video recordings of lessons, student evaluations and facilitator journals.

Student progress was monitored using multiple sources of evidence:

- Baseline Assessment (conducted before the programme began)
- Progress Assessment (conducted after approximately three months of instruction)
- Benchmark Assessment (conducted at the end of the programme using more challenging CEFR low B1-level reading passages)
- Student Progress Reports completed every two weeks by facilitators
- Classroom observations
- Attendance records
- Parent feedback on children's reading habits
- Student background and socio-economic information



Together, these sources provided a comprehensive picture of student participation, engagement and learning throughout the programme. Background information on students and their families also helped explain differences in learning outcomes across participants.

Participants and Learning Environment

The pilot was implemented with 60 Grade 5 students, with 30 students at each site.

The two locations represented contrasting educational and socio-economic contexts, allowing the programme to be tested under different learning conditions.

Ambalathara was an English-medium private unaided school. Students generally came from comparatively better-off families with higher levels of parental involvement in education. At the beginning of the programme, about half of the parents reported regularly helping their children with homework, and all students had attended kindergarten.

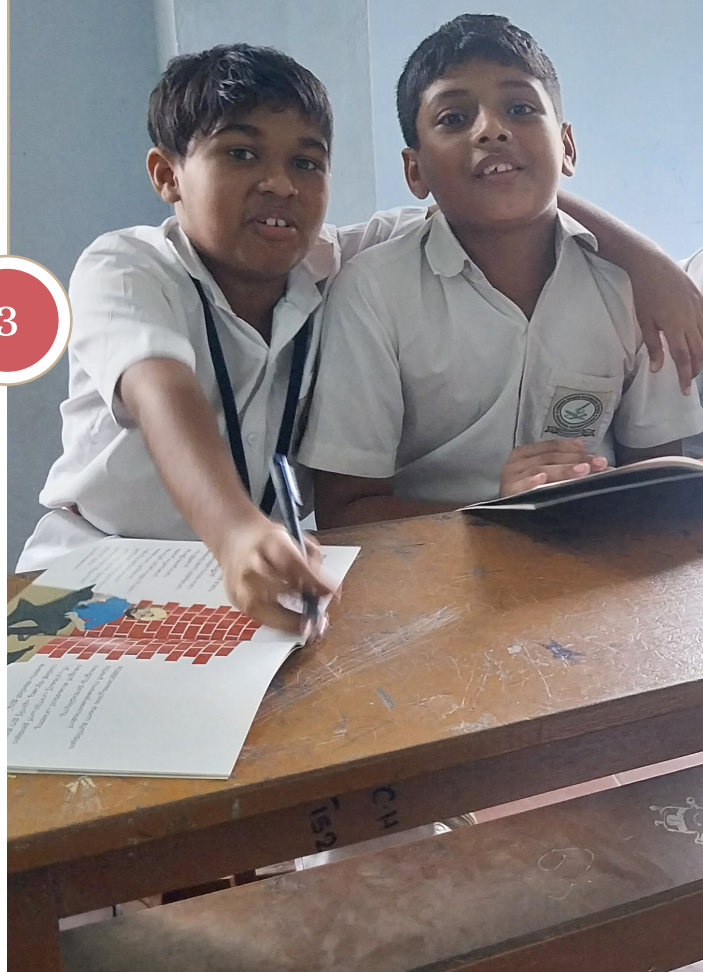
Perumathura was a community-based after-school learning centre attended by children from government, aided and private schools. Families faced greater economic challenges and parents were generally less able to support learning at home. Only 17% of parents reported regularly helping with homework, while many children studied independently.

Despite these differences, parents across both communities shared high educational aspirations for their children. Nearly all parents considered English to be important for their children's future education and employment.

Attendance varied across the programme. On average, students attended 68.3% of all sessions. Attendance was higher at Ambalathara (73.4%) than at Perumathura (63.3%). Family responsibilities, illness, travel and the after-school nature of the programme contributed to lower attendance for some students.

The programme was delivered by four facilitators—two at each site, one for Malayalam and one for English. Their teaching experience differed considerably. The Ambalathara facilitators were trained teachers, while the Perumathura facilitators were recent graduates with some experience conducting tuition classes but limited formal classroom teaching experience.

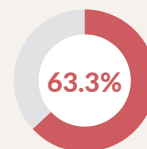
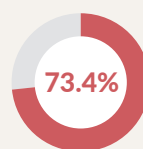
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On average, students attended **68.3%** of all sessions.

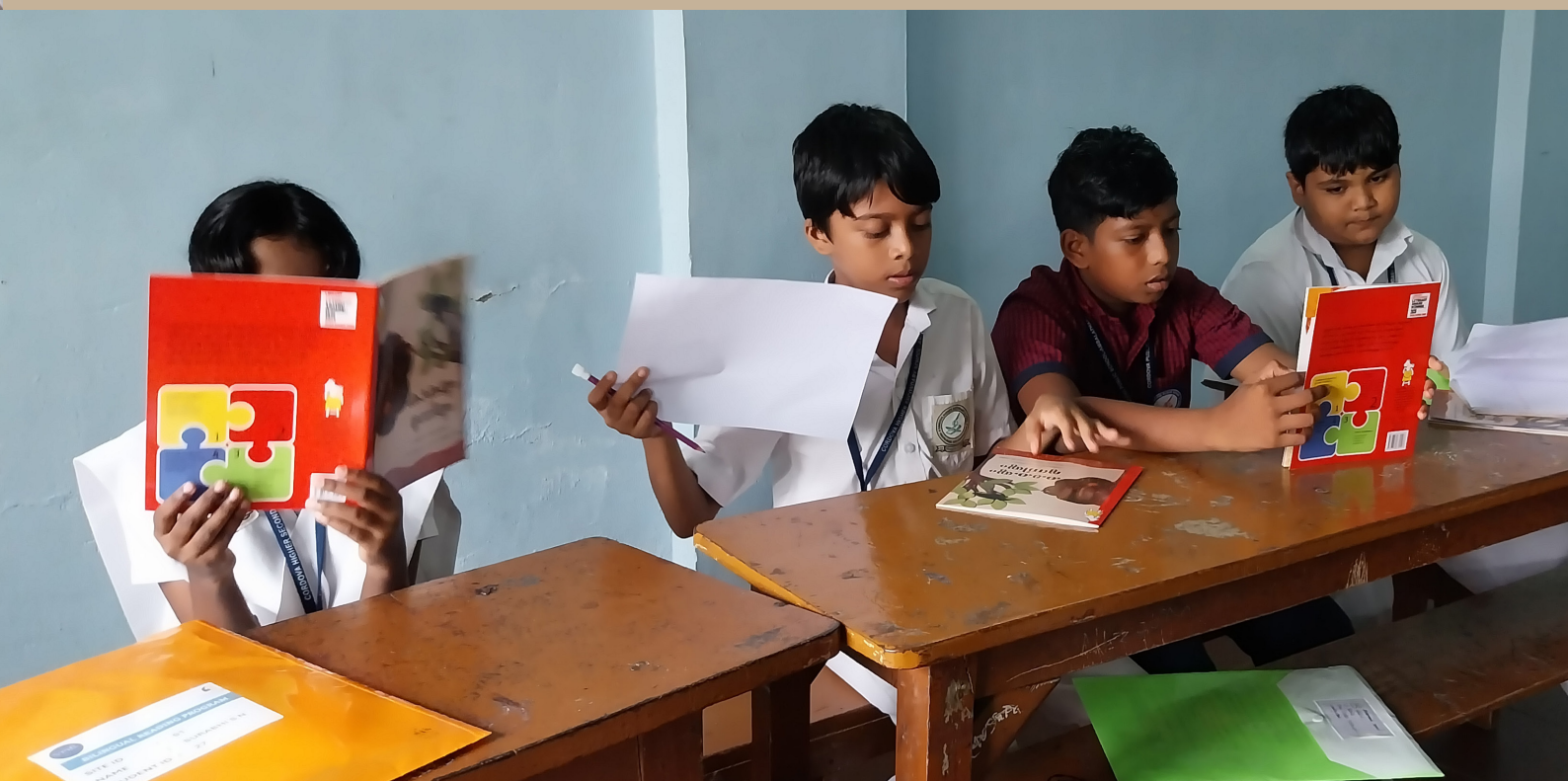
Ambalathara

Perumathura



A key finding of the pilot was that **structured lesson plans, continuous mentoring and regular classroom feedback enabled facilitators with different levels of experience to implement the programme successfully. This demonstrates that the model can be delivered effectively even where experienced teachers are not always available, provided appropriate support systems are in place.**

Student Engagement and Enjoyment of Reading



One of the primary objectives of the programme was to increase children's interest in reading and encourage active participation in reading activities. Evidence from facilitator observations and parent feedback indicates that this objective was successfully achieved.

Facilitator Observations

Facilitators completed Student Progress Reports every two weeks, documenting each child's participation, confidence and reading development throughout the programme.

Across both sites, facilitators consistently observed that students became more confident and engaged as the programme progressed.

Many children who were initially reluctant to read aloud or participate in discussions gradually became more comfortable answering questions, sharing ideas and reading independently. Facilitators also reported noticeable improvements in students' concentration during reading sessions and their willingness to participate in classroom activities.

In Malayalam sessions, most students participated confidently from the outset. As the programme progressed, facilitators increasingly reported that students were asking questions, discussing stories and expressing their own interpretations of what they had read.

Progress in English was more gradual. Many students initially lacked confidence when reading English texts. Over time, however, facilitators observed steady improvements in participation, oral responses and students' willingness to attempt independent reading.

Although the pace of progress varied across students, the overall pattern was consistent across both sites. Reading became a more enjoyable classroom activity, and students demonstrated increasing confidence in participating.

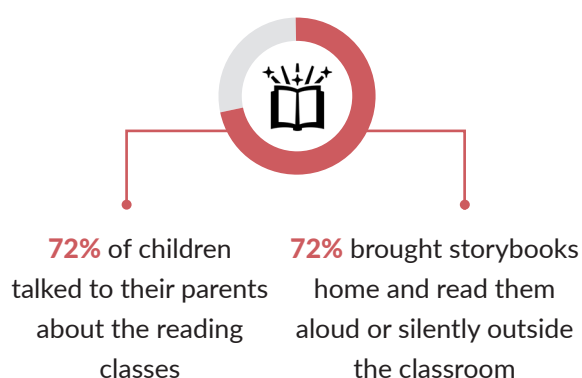
Facilitators also identified a small group of students who entered the programme without basic decoding skills in either Malayalam or English. Since the programme assumed that students could already read simple words and sentences, these children required more intensive individual support than the intervention was designed to provide. This finding points to the importance of identifying struggling readers early and providing additional foundational support alongside the main programme.

Parent Feedback

Parent feedback, collected approximately three months after the programme began, reinforced the classroom observations.

Although awareness of the programme before its launch was higher among parents at Ambalathara than at Perumathura, children quickly became an important link between the classroom and the home.

Across both sites:



Parents also reported that children were increasingly interested in reading beyond scheduled class time and were enthusiastic about sharing stories with family members.

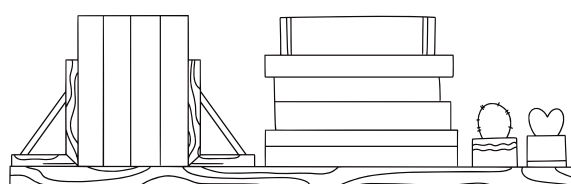
These findings represent a substantial change from the situation before the programme, when only 20–30% of students reported reading anything regularly apart from their school textbooks. Together, the facilitator observations and parent feedback suggest that the programme not only improved classroom participation but also helped foster positive reading habits at home, extending children's engagement with reading beyond the classroom.

Reading Outcomes

Student learning was assessed using three reading assessments:

- Baseline Assessment, conducted before the programme began to establish students' starting levels.
- Progress Assessment, conducted after approximately three months to measure learning during the programme.
- Benchmark Assessment, conducted at the end of the programme using more demanding reading passages aligned approximately to CEFR low B1 level. Unlike the earlier assessments, the Benchmark Assessment was designed to examine how well students could read and understand texts beyond the level used during instruction rather than measure progress over time.

The Baseline and Progress Assessments measured reading comprehension in both Malayalam and English using narrative and expository texts. All three assessments were developed specifically for the programme by the project team.



Overall Progress

Comparison of the Baseline and Progress Assessments showed improvements across all four reading assessments.

Average scores increased in:

English Narrative

English Expository

Malayalam Narrative

Malayalam Expository

The largest improvement was recorded in Malayalam Narrative, while positive gains were also observed in all English reading assessments.

These findings indicate that students strengthened their reading comprehension in both languages during the programme.

Differences Between the Two Sites

Students at Ambalathara entered the programme with stronger reading skills. However, students at Perumathura recorded larger improvements during the intervention.

The most notable gains at Perumathura included:



English Narrative:

+6.5

percentage points

Malayalam Narrative:

+5.8

percentage points

Positive gains were also recorded in both English and Malayalam Expository reading.

These findings are particularly noteworthy because students at Perumathura came from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, attended



fewer sessions on average and received less academic support at home. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated some of the strongest improvements observed during the pilot.

The findings suggest that structured reading instruction can improve reading outcomes even in challenging educational environments.

Variation in Student Progress

Not all students progressed at the same pace.

Many students demonstrated steady improvement throughout the programme, while others continued to require additional support, particularly in English reading and, in a few cases, with basic decoding skills.

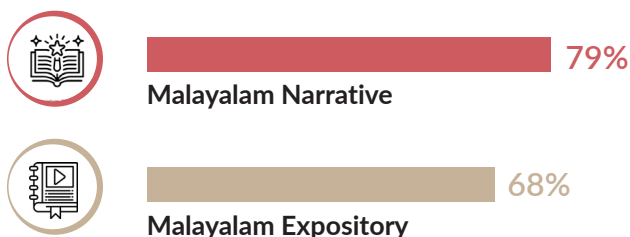
This variation highlights the importance of using levelled reading materials that allow students to begin at different starting points and progress according to their own learning needs rather than expecting all children to advance at the same rate.

Benchmark Assessment

The Benchmark Assessment provided an additional perspective on student learning by examining how well students could comprehend texts that were substantially more demanding than those used during instruction.

Students performed particularly strongly in Malayalam.

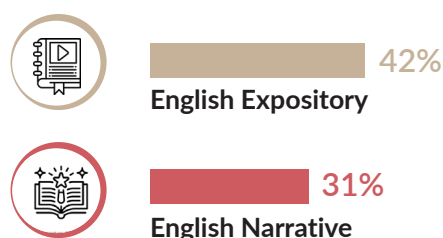
Average scores were:



These results demonstrate that students were able to comprehend texts well above the level used during the programme. Performance was consistently strong at both Ambalathara and Perumathura, indicating that gains in Malayalam reading comprehension were evident across different educational settings.

Performance in English was naturally lower because the assessment was pitched at a considerably higher level than the texts used during the programme. Nevertheless, the results remain encouraging.

Average scores were:



Nearly half of the students achieved at least half the available marks in English Expository reading, while more than one-quarter scored at least two-thirds of the total marks.

Taken together, these findings suggest that many students were able to engage meaningfully with English texts that were substantially more challenging than those encountered during the programme. Rather than serving as a measure of improvement, the Benchmark Assessment demonstrated the level of reading comprehension students were able to achieve after participating in the intervention.



Evidence on Bilingual Teaching



One of the central objectives of the pilot was to examine whether strengthening reading skills in Malayalam could support the development of reading skills in English.

The evidence collected throughout the programme suggests a positive relationship between reading performance in the two languages.

Analysis of the reading assessments showed that students who performed well in Malayalam generally also performed well in English. This relationship was strongest and most consistent for Expository reading, where statistically significant positive correlations were observed across the assessments. These findings are consistent with the view that literacy skills developed in a first language can support reading development in a second language.

While the pilot did not include a control group and therefore cannot establish that the bilingual

approach alone caused the observed improvements, the quantitative findings, facilitator observations and classroom experiences all point in the same direction.

Facilitators consistently reported that many students first became more confident reading, discussing and explaining stories in Malayalam before demonstrating greater confidence during English sessions. They observed that using Malayalam strategically to explain ideas, discuss meaning and support comprehension—without relying on direct translation—helped students understand English texts more effectively, participate more actively in discussions and gradually attempt independent reading.

Importantly, facilitators found no evidence that the use of Malayalam reduced students' motivation to learn English. On the contrary, it appeared to reduce students' hesitation, lower anxiety about making mistakes and encourage greater participation in English reading activities.

Taken together, the assessment results, facilitator observations and classroom evidence suggest that the bilingual approach supported reading development in both languages and helped students build confidence as readers. Although further research using comparison groups would strengthen the evidence, the findings provide encouraging support for the continued use of a structured bilingual approach in similar educational settings.



Attendance and Learning

Attendance was recorded for every lesson throughout the programme to examine how participation influenced learning outcomes.

Across both sites, students attended an average of 68.3% of all sessions. Attendance was higher at Ambalathara (73.4%) than at Perumathura (63.3%), reflecting differences in family circumstances and the additional challenges associated with an after-school learning programme.

Despite these differences, students at both sites benefited from the intervention.

To better understand the relationship between participation and learning, students were grouped into those who attended 75% or more of the sessions and those whose attendance was below 75%.

Across all four reading assessments, students with higher attendance generally achieved higher scores than those who attended fewer sessions. The clearest difference was observed in English Expository Reading, where students with higher attendance performed significantly better than those with lower attendance. Smaller, though consistently positive, differences were also observed across the remaining reading assessments.

These findings suggest that regular participation strengthened the benefits of the programme, particularly in English reading, where sustained exposure to structured reading activities appeared to have the greatest impact.

Facilitator observations supported these findings. Students who attended more regularly were frequently described as becoming more confident readers, participating more actively in discussions and demonstrating stronger reading comprehension over time. Several facilitators also noted that regular attendance was associated with greater willingness to read independently and respond to comprehension questions.

Although attendance alone cannot explain learning outcomes, the evidence suggests that sustained participation plays an important role in maximising the benefits of structured reading interventions.

The findings also highlight the importance of improving attendance in future implementations, particularly in community-based settings where external factors can make regular participation more difficult.



At the end of the programme, students completed a Benchmark Assessment that was intentionally more demanding than the Baseline and Progress Assessments.

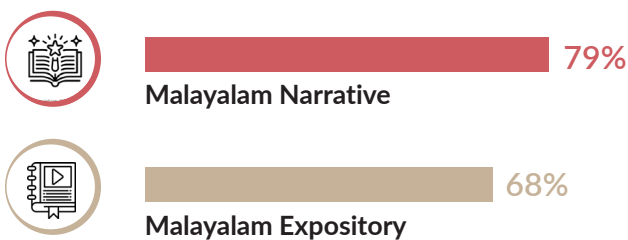
Unlike the earlier assessments, which measured improvement over time, the Benchmark Assessment examined how well students could read and understand more advanced texts after completing the programme. The assessment was aligned approximately to CEFR low B1 level, considerably above the level used during classroom instruction and higher than the reading level typically expected of Grade 5 learners in most Indian school contexts.

The assessment was included to provide a stretch benchmark and to determine how far students could extend their reading comprehension beyond the programme's instructional level.

Performance in Malayalam

Students performed particularly strongly in Malayalam.

Average scores reached:



These results indicate that students were able to understand texts substantially more demanding than those used during the programme. Strong performance

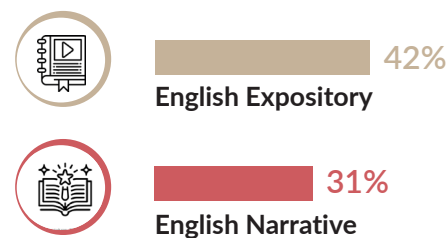
was recorded at both Ambalathara and Perumathura, suggesting that improvements in Malayalam reading comprehension were evident across different educational settings.

A large majority of students also reached meaningful comprehension thresholds on these more demanding texts, providing further evidence that their reading comprehension in Malayalam had become well established.

Performance in English

Performance in English was naturally lower because students were assessed using texts considerably above the level at which they had been taught.

Average scores were:



These findings should be interpreted in the context of the assessment's high level of difficulty rather than as a measure of failure. Nearly half of the students achieved at least 50% of the marks in English Expository reading, while more than one-quarter scored at least two-thirds of the available marks.

Given that these Grade 5 students came largely from disadvantaged communities and were assessed using texts aligned to a much higher level of proficiency, these results are encouraging.

Overall, the Benchmark Assessment demonstrates that many students were able to engage meaningfully with reading material well beyond the level used during the programme. It therefore provides additional evidence that the intervention strengthened reading comprehension and prepared students to tackle increasingly challenging texts.



9

A Scalable Model

The pilot was designed not only to improve reading outcomes but also to examine whether the approach could be implemented successfully on a larger scale.

The findings suggest that the model can be adapted for use in both schools and community learning centres, including resource-constrained settings.

Several features contributed to the success of the programme.

Structured lesson plans ensured consistency in classroom delivery, while carefully selected levelled storybooks enabled students with different reading abilities to progress gradually. Continuous mentoring, classroom observation and regular feedback helped facilitators refine their teaching throughout the intervention.

One of the most important findings was that positive outcomes were achieved despite several practical challenges. The programme was shorter than originally planned, student attendance varied considerably and facilitators had different levels of teaching experience. Nevertheless, structured teaching materials, systematic mentoring and continuous monitoring

enabled facilitators with diverse backgrounds to implement the programme successfully.

This demonstrates that the model does not depend solely on highly experienced teachers. With appropriate training, mentoring and structured instructional materials, it can be implemented effectively in a wide range of educational settings.

The pilot also suggests that even stronger outcomes could be achieved through a longer implementation period, improved student attendance and continued investment in facilitator development.

Overall, the Benchmark Assessment demonstrates that many students were able to engage meaningfully with reading material well beyond the level used during the programme. It therefore provides additional evidence that the intervention strengthened reading comprehension and prepared students to tackle increasingly challenging texts.



The pilot generated valuable insights that can strengthen future implementation of the programme. While the overall findings were encouraging, the experience also identified several areas where the model can be further refined.

- **Supporting Students with Different Reading Levels**

One of the clearest findings was that students entered the programme with widely differing reading abilities.

While most participants were able to engage effectively with the reading activities, a small number had not yet acquired basic decoding skills in Malayalam or English. As a result, these students found it difficult to benefit fully from the programme, which was designed for children who could already read simple words and sentences.

Future implementations should therefore include additional support for these learners through targeted small-group or individual instruction, enabling them to develop foundational reading skills alongside the main programme.

- **Developing Age-Appropriate Reading Materials**

The levelled storybooks proved highly effective in engaging students and supporting gradual improvements in reading comprehension.

However, during the early stages of the programme, facilitators found that some books appropriate for students' reading ability were less suitable for their age and interests.

This highlights the need to expand the availability of reading materials that combine simple language with themes, characters and content that appeal to older children who are still developing basic reading skills.

- **Continuing Facilitator Development**

Regular training, mentoring and classroom observation were central to the successful implementation of the programme.

The pilot also demonstrated that facilitators with different backgrounds and levels of experience benefited from continuous professional support focused on practical classroom challenges rather than one-time training alone.

The Student Progress Reports and classroom observations also proved valuable in monitoring student learning, guiding facilitator development and identifying children who required additional support. These tools could be further refined to simplify recording, improve consistency and strengthen ongoing monitoring.

- **Refining Student Assessment**

The pilot found stronger and more consistent relationships between Malayalam and English performance in Expository Reading than in Narrative Reading.

Future assessments could therefore place greater emphasis on expository texts while continuing to use narrative stories as the primary instructional material. This would better reflect the reading demands students encounter across school subjects while also reducing the overall assessment burden.

The experience also suggests that combining multiple sources of evidence—including assessments, facilitator observations, attendance records and parent feedback—provides a more comprehensive understanding of student learning than relying on test scores alone.

Conclusion

The Pilot Bilingual Reading Program was designed to achieve three objectives: to increase children's interest in reading, strengthen reading comprehension in Malayalam and English through a structured bilingual approach, and determine whether such a programme could be implemented successfully as a practical and scalable model.

The findings provide encouraging evidence across all three objectives.

Students became more engaged in reading activities, participated more confidently in classroom discussions and increasingly developed reading habits beyond the classroom. Facilitator observations, parent feedback and student participation all indicate that reading became a more enjoyable and meaningful activity for many children during the programme.

Reading assessments demonstrated measurable improvements in both Malayalam and English. Students recorded gains across all four reading assessments between the Baseline and Progress Assessments, with particularly strong improvements among students at the more disadvantaged Perumathura site. The Benchmark Assessment further demonstrated that many students were able to comprehend texts substantially more demanding than those used during the programme, providing additional evidence of the reading skills they had developed.

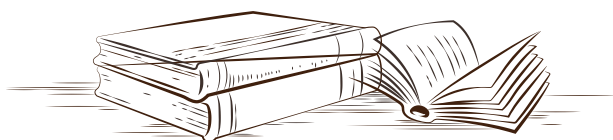
The findings also support the use of a structured bilingual approach. Students who demonstrated stronger reading skills in Malayalam generally also performed better in English, while facilitators

consistently observed that the strategic use of Malayalam during English lessons helped students understand texts, participate more actively and build confidence as English readers. Although the pilot was not designed to establish causal relationships, the assessment results and classroom evidence are consistent with the view that strengthening first-language literacy can support second-language reading development.

Finally, the pilot demonstrated that a structured bilingual reading programme can be implemented successfully in both schools and community learning centres, including resource-constrained settings. Carefully selected learning materials, structured lesson plans, facilitator training, ongoing mentoring and continuous monitoring enabled meaningful improvements despite the shorter implementation period, varying attendance and differences in facilitator experience.

At the same time, the pilot highlighted important priorities for future development. These include providing additional support for students with limited decoding skills, expanding the availability of age-appropriate reading materials, continuing facilitator development, strengthening assessment and monitoring tools, improving student attendance and extending the duration of the intervention.

Overall, the pilot provides strong evidence that a structured bilingual reading programme can improve children's engagement with reading, strengthen reading comprehension in Malayalam and English, and provide a practical, scalable model for supporting literacy development among disadvantaged learners.



The project, conceived by VMFT, was prepared and implemented with the support of many people. Prof. Rama Mathew (former Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Delhi) provided detailed guidance on the preparation of the lesson plans structured around each storybook. She also provided the initial training of facilitators and coordinators. Esther Gloria and Reneesh John prepared the lesson plans in English, while T.S. Nisha prepared the lesson plans in Malayalam. The baseline assessments in English and Malayalam were developed by Prof. Lina Mukhopadyay (Department of Training and Development, School of English Language Education, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad) along with Vrishali Ingle and Devanaryanan S. The learning assessments were administered by Manjima Bhadran and Reneesh John, under the guidance of Jabeena Ansari, retired Headmistress and English language trainer. Data entry was done by Aswathy Sajith (Program Assistant, VMFT). Suaid Ahmad Rather (Research Scholar, CDS and Resource Person, VMFT) developed the student questionnaire and other data collection instruments, which were administered by different members of the project team.

The team thanks the facilitators, coordinators and authorities of the school/learning centre where the pilot project was implemented for their hard work, enthusiasm and commitment to students' learning.

The project was developed and guided by Dr. Sajitha Bashir (Executive Vice-Chairperson, VMFT and former Global adviser/ Africa manager for Education, World Bank). Ms. Jabeena Ansari provided the overall field level supervision and coordination of the project.

