

# Teaching English to tribals: A case study of Spiti, Himachal Pradesh

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper is based on the case study conducted to understand the educational backwardness of tribal learners in the tribal district of Spiti, Himachal Pradesh with special reference to English language. It describes the language learning problems of tribal learners and analyzes the causes of their backwardness in respect of English. A micro approach was used to study and analyze the quality in the education of Tribal learners of Munselling School in Rangrik, Kaza, in the setting chosen for the study. The study was a qualitative study as the hypothesis was formulated after the data was collected through interviews, observations, case study and focus group discussion. It reports the findings on the impact of teaching English to these tribal learners by volunteer teachers.*

**Keywords:** *Teaching English to tribals; difficulties in learning English;*

## **Introduction**

The current paper reports an empirical study of the impact of voluntary teaching of English on the tribal learners in the tribal area of Kaza, District of Spiti, Himachal Pradesh. The study had the following objectives:

- To study the challenges faced by the tribal students of Spiti by adopting Munselling School for poor children of Spiti for a case study.
- To study the role played by the trained teachers of English, individual volunteers, volunteers from premiere organizations/institutions from India and abroad, in the teaching of English to tribals at the Munselling School at Kaza, Spiti.
- To study the role played by the local community by their participation in inviting volunteers for educating the tribal children.
- To study the reasons for the educational backwardness of tribal learners with special reference to English language.
- To identify answers, solutions and methods to work on the drawbacks and problems of the teaching and learning of English in the tribal areas.

## **Methodology**

The paper is based on the researcher's long association with the theme of this study, viz., *the impact and role of voluntary teaching of English to the tribals*. Therefore, the issue being close to the heart was pursued with a clear hypothesis. An empirical approach was made to study and analyze the status and quality of the teaching and learning of tribal learners of a school called Munselling in Rangrik, Kaza, in the Tribal District of Spiti in Himachal Pradesh. The data for the case study was collected and compiled from the experiences of the workshops conducted by volunteer teachers from St. Bedes College, Shimla, Spiti Valley project of St. Stephens College, Delhi and a one-month programme of teaching of English by Miss Fanni from Canada during the session 2017-2018.

## **Need for and significance of the study**

The low literacy rate of Scheduled Tribes is a serious threat to Indian education. It is significant even in Himachal Pradesh, the state with the highest literacy rate in India. The intensity of the problem is reflected in the SSLC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate) examination results that show very low pass percentage in tribal areas of the state. The lack of proficiency in English language is identified as a major obstacle to the education of Schedule Tribe learners. The inappropriate syllabus and teaching method of English develops a negative attitude in learners towards learning. The fear of learning a foreign language is one of the factors to stop their education because English language is a compulsory subject rather than an optional one at higher

education level. It is clear that tribal learners are not motivated well. They have adjustment problems with school curriculum and teaching of English language. At the same time, the community-run schools with the help of NGOs, voluntary organizations and individual voluntary institutions and teachers show a far better performance compared to the State Board schools. Though the Government can provide grants and scholarships for the betterment of learners, the responsibility of their educational development is ultimately in the hands of the teachers teaching them or the teachers who empathize with the need to spread education in a holistic manner throughout the society as one world, one entity.

## **Tribals in Himachal Pradesh: An Overview**

In Himachal Pradesh, the 3.92 lakh people belonging to scheduled tribes counted in 2011 include the Gaddis and Gujjars; there are smaller tribes that are limited to specific regions of the State. There are Kanauras or Kinnaras of Kinnaur district; Bhots or Bodhs, who are akin to the Bots or Botos of Ladakh and inhabit Lahul and Spiti and Kullu districts; Pangwalas of the Pangi valley in Chamba; Swanglas of the Pattan valley in Lahul and Spiti; and Lahaulas of the Lahaul valley. Of these, Bhots are largely Buddhist, Pangwala and Swangla are largely Hindu, and Kanauras and Lahaulas are partly Hindu and partly Buddhist. During 2001-11, Kanauras, who are the largest of these tribes, declined by about 17 percent and Lahaulas, who are the smallest, grew by about 66 percent. Bhots, Pangwalas and Swanglas have all grown by about 7 to 8 percent.

**Table 1: District-wise Tribal Population of Himachal Pradesh**

<b>Name of District</b>	<b>No. of Census Villages (Inhabited)</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Population of Scheduled Tribes</b>
Bilaspur	953	381956	10693
Chamba	1110	519080	135500
Hamirpur	1671	454768	3044
Kangra	3617	1510075	84564
Kinnaur	241	84121	48746
Kullu	314	437903	16822
Lahaul-Spiti	280	31564	25707
Mandi	2850	999777	12787
Shimla	2705	814010	8755
Sirmour	968	529855	11262
Solan	2383	580320	25645
Una	790	521173	8601
<b>Total</b>	<b>17882</b>	<b>6864602</b>	<b>392126</b>

The tribal areas in Himachal Pradesh are very remote and inaccessible having tough mountainous terrain and inhospitable climatic conditions. With such tough living conditions, the cost of developing any infrastructure is extremely high, especially that of providing education at par with the education in urban and even rural areas of the state. Out of the 55673 square kilometers of geographical area of Himachal Pradesh, 23655 square kilometers fall in scheduled area. The scheduled tribe population density in these areas is 7 per square kilometer.

#### **Background to the Case Study**

Until 1992, the entry of even Indian outsiders into Spiti was restricted due to the proximity of a sensitive border. Due to long winter and excess snow, Spiti remains isolated from the rest of the world for  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the year. It is because of this isolation Spiti has remained undisturbed and remained

economically backward and educationally deprived.

Spiti, originally pronounced "Piti", means "The Middle Land", is an area situated between Tibet and India on the northern border of Himachal Pradesh state. Located among one of the most beautiful and breathtaking sceneries, the people of Spiti seem to live an idyllic life. But due to the political situation (the Spiti Valley is in a sensitive, hostile border area), life is rather difficult. Spiti Valley is approximately a hundred miles long but the population does not exceed more than fifteen thousand and suffers from a high infant mortality rate as well.

During the summer months, peoples' main occupation is farming, but the winters are long and cultivable soil is scarce. Snow often covers the fields for more than half a year. Dried yak dung is used as the main source of fuel for cooking and heating. Heating mud

houses costs a lot of dung as temperatures can drop down to -35°C.

Due to a complete lack of access to the outer world, not many Spitian had qualified to study one of the major professions, such as medicine, till the 1990s in spite of the enthusiastic backing of parents. Not only that, the teaching of our own language, Tibetan (Bhoti), was minimal, ceasing after primary level, and children who left school were hardly able to read even the titles of the Buddhist scriptures.

### **Rinchen Zangpo Society**

The Rinchen Zangpo Society for Spiti Development provides a combination of modern and traditional education to young people from Spiti and other underdeveloped tribal areas in the Indian Himalayan region. The Rinchen Zangpo Society Education Program has been operating since 1993 with the generosity shown by various western charities, regular contribution by individuals and financial assistance from the Department of Tribal Affairs, Government of India at both state and central levels. It now has more than 1000 young people of all age groups from kindergarten to college goers either receiving direct supervision from the society or receiving financial assistance to pursue their education outside Spiti Valley.

The various schools opened by the society are listed below:

#### **1. Munselling School, Rangrik**

In the year 1996 the Society established Spiti Children Home School “Munselling” in

Rangrik. It is the second biggest village centrally located in the Valley. His Holiness the Dalai Lama inaugurated the new school.

#### **2. Kaza Public School, Kaza**

Kaza Public Buddhist Model School is a very successful part of the Rinchen Zangpo’s Education Programme. Due to the success of our educational program enrolment has increased dramatically and the number of students at Munselling was consistently increasing every year. Hence there was the need for a new school.

#### **3. Reva Buddhist School for Girls**

Last year the Society opened a new school with the chief purpose of giving more opportunities to girls. 119 Girl children have been enrolled in the school so far.

#### **4. Spiti Children Hostel School, Sidhbari**

For higher secondary education beyond Class 10, the Society runs a hostel for Spiti children at Sidhbari, Dharamshala. The hostel has separate blocks for boys and girls. Residential tutors from renowned schools in and around Dharamshala are provided to students for coaching them.

#### **5. Spiti Feeder Schools**

To address this issue of the inability of children between 3 and 5 years to avail the education opportunities in boarding, last year the society opened feeder schools at remote areas of Spiti where education accessibility was almost nil. The present strength of the enrolment of students is represented in **Table 2**.

**Table 2: The Present Strength of Students**

<b>Location</b>	<b>No. of Students</b>
Munselling School	560
Rewa Buddhist Model School	119
Kaza Public School, Spiti	250
Feeder Schools in Spiti	102
Hostel in Dharamshala	46
Delhi, Chandigarh and other places	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>1112</b>

With a total of 1112 students being imparted education here, for more than two decades now, the society is planning to establish an institution for the higher studies of these tribal children. Out of all the above mentioned schools, Munselling is the school with maximum number of residential students and the subject of our case study.

#### **Voluntary teaching in Munselling residential school**

Although the society established a school of teaching for poor Spiti children in 1992, the involvement of voluntary teachers and organizations in Munselling School run by them at a village called Rangrik, Kaza, the District headquarters of Spiti, is a recent development in the past one decade. Numerous workshops for academics, personality development, career counseling, health and hygiene are

conducted by teacher volunteers from different parts of India, England, Canada, New Zealand and America, an annual feature of the school curriculum. The University of British Columbia is associated with the school with missionary spirit. This has happened because over the recent years Spiti has become more accessible and open to the outside world. The researcher of the present study has seen in the past six years a rapid progress of the school in terms of quality in the overall performance and achievements of the school as well as its students. **Figure 3** shows the board exam results of the past ten years and reveals improvement in the quality of education. At a closer observation it was found that the major cause of such rapid improvement was the progressive initiative of the management to invite voluntary teachers from privileged institutions in India and abroad for all subjects especially English.

**Table 3: Year-wise Results Data**

Year	Number of Students							Pass Percentage
	Appeared	Passed	Failed	1 <sup>st</sup> Divn.	2 <sup>nd</sup> Divn.	3 <sup>rd</sup> Divn.	Distinction (≥ 75%)	
2006	22	22	-	18	2	3	7	100
2007	38	38	-	24	11	3	5	100
2008	17	17	-	15	2	-	9	100
2009	16	16	-	15	1	-	7	100
2010	24	24	-	24	-	-	10	100
2011	35	31	4	23	2	6	10	88
2012	20	20	-	20	-	-	13	100
2013	27	25	2	14	8	5	12	92
2014	28	28	-	24	4	-	8	100
2015	27	27	-	22	3	2	16	100
2016	26	23	3	22	1	-	16	88
2017	32	32	-	30	-	-	22	100
Total	312	302	9	251	34	18	135	

**Data based on empirical study of workshops and projects of the voluntary teaching of English by:**

1. Professors Anuja, Anupama and Nandini from St. Bedes College, Shimla.
2. Volunteers from staff and students from St. Stephens College, Delhi.
3. Miss Fanni De Maio, Research Fellow from Amsterdam University, Holland.

Based on the feedback from all the voluntary agencies and teachers and on the six-year-long association and experience of the researcher herself, the following conclusions have been drawn from the case study.

**Conclusions**

On the basis of the study the feedback from the host school and the volunteers for teaching English, the following conclusions are derived:-

- Qualified teachers are not willing to work on a regular basis because of lack of basic facilities like water, electricity, internet connectivity, roads, and means of transport. They come and serve until they get better options. Voluntary teaching is the most effective method of providing the latest resources of education - books, materials and methodology especially in the absence of long term regular teachers.
- More trained teachers/volunteers are needed to enhance the competence of the students.
- While frequent interactions with the volunteer teachers from different parts of India and the world have inculcated confidence amongst the students in using English as a medium of conversation, they also seem to have picked up various accents of English.

- Learners seriously lack proficiency in grammar and spelling, the intensive teaching of which is recommended by the majority of volunteers in the case study.
- Students are enthusiastic but the lack of exposure to the world outside impedes their creativity seriously.
- It was observed that not only the students but the teachers in the school use their native dialects/Hindi. It is recommended that the use of English as the only medium of communication inside the classrooms and even in the hostel should be encouraged.
- It was observed that there is serious lack of parental participation in the education of tribal students. This is due to poverty, ignorance, lack of transportation, difficult geographical terrain and long distances. It is suggested that participation of parents, especially of educated parents, in the education of children should be encouraged wherever feasible.
- Majority of the volunteer teachers of English observed that the learners took a couple of days to adapt to the new classroom teaching and methods. They were extremely responsive and keen to learn more and more, driving home the fact that the teaching sessions of voluntary teachers should not be for less than a week.
- It was observed that there was a lack of overall discipline due to the lack of a rapport between regular teachers and students, with the teachers quitting jobs frequently.
- It was observed that connectivity between the learners and the voluntary teachers should be maintained through follow-up workshops on an annual basis for more effective and long-lasting impact on the learners.

### **Suggestions**

- The case study of Munselling proves that voluntary teaching of English to the tribal learners by professionals from outside is beneficial as English is a compulsory rather than an optional subject at the higher level of education. And exposure to the best and latest teaching in English at their doorstep prepares the learners to compete with others in a world of tough competition outside their comfort zone.
- The tribal learners need to be motivated and encouraged to treat English as a medium of communication and not as a foreign language. The volunteers should explore the needs of tribal learners and prepare their teaching aids and materials in order to cater to the specific needs of learners.
- Tribal learners face the stress of adjustment to the school syllabus at par with that being taught to the learners in cities and performing at the same level in examinations as well. They lack the convenience of technology as well as a conducive environment for studies. In

this context, the students from schools run with the help of volunteers in teaching might perform better than those in state board schools.

- A friendly and practical approach of teaching and learning of English will not only relieve the learners from a yardstick of perfection but encourage them to outgrow their fear and hesitation of using the language and be free of any inhibition.
- Given the fact that development in tribal areas requires higher financial investments and efforts, it becomes imperative for stronger educational institutions to associate themselves with community teaching to tribal learners. The idea of establishing community schools and voluntary teaching is cost effective for the schools that invite and host the volunteer teachers.
- Government of India, under its community development programme, following the special rights given to tribals under Article 46 of the Constitution should encourage privileged educational institutions to contribute to the upliftment of the disadvantaged communities by sharing knowledge and education. Government and its agencies of social welfare must encourage the NGOs, institutions, organizations and individuals engaged in voluntary teaching by awards or promotional benefits based on authentic contribution.
- Professional courses to train resource

persons for voluntary teaching of English and other subjects should be introduced at graduate and postgraduate levels to enhance the quality of volunteers teaching the marginalized and disadvantaged segments of society.

The following data from the workshops on teaching of English by the volunteers during the sessions in 2017 and 2018 has been compiled in the form of their lesson plans, execution of their workshops, their feedback and suggestions.

### **01. Voluntary Teaching by teachers from St, Bedes College, Shimla – A Report**

Dear Suneela

Thanks to your suggestion and effort I along with Ma'am Nandini Pathania and Anupama Tandon, were able to see and experience such beautiful people and their abode, Spiti. Here's my report:

#### ***May 13th to 16th, 2018.***

It was nearly evening when we arrived at Munselling School, Kaza. Totally mesmerized by the landscape, the serenity and the awesomeness of God's creation, we met Cherring sir, manager, teacher at Munselling. He had made very comfortable arrangements for our board and lodging.

Day -1 began with a meeting with the Principal, Sh. Subhash Katoch who is doing an admirable job in this remote part of HP. Soon we were guided to all classrooms as we had to judge the most clean and creative classroom. We found most of the teachers



had taken interest in doing up their classrooms. In the junior section it was class 1, the middle section, class 7 and the senior section class 9 which won the prizes. After lunch we were sent to the classes we had to work with. Anuja went to class 11, and did the first chapter of their English textbook. The response of the students was beyond expectations. They were not shy, were asking questions etc. in English!!!!

Nandini did her Pidilite fabric art with the senior girls in the Art room. Anupama took class 10 for Data collection related to economics. In the evening we played Tambola with the middle section and thus distributed gifts to the winners. It was thoroughly enjoyable for us and the children.

The evening was spent preparing for the next day and with the yum food of Mr. Karmu.

Day-2: Nandini took up a personality development and leadership skills workshop with senior students and through games and interaction held a successful workshop. Anupama did math with class 9 and also had a quiz on the logistics of eco and math. It was enjoyed by the students.

Anuja went to class 10 and did a Communication skills session with the students. The class was divided into six groups and each group was given a topic to speak on. Simple topics like, my dream, a beautiful summer morning, what I love most, my Aha moment etc. Once again the response was very encouraging. I guess interactions with various volunteers have made the students less shy and self-

conscious.

The evening saw all three of us keenly involved with the staff of the school. We did a SWOT analysis with them and I must respect their eagerness and genuine suggestions for the improvement of the school. The results of the SWOT were handed to Mr. Cherring. On the last day we were asked to give a report on our observations and suggestions to the management and staff and students.

### **Observations**

1. Tremendous effort of Lamaji, who envisioned and started this selfless service to society.
2. The teachers we found were committed
3. Students very keen to learn. (The children knew a lot about the good Hollywood films like Stuart Little, Taming of the Dragon, Jungle book!!!! It was a pleasant surprise!! We too had taken a few wild animals documentaries, videos of Panchatantra stories and Jungle book video for the students.) An air pump for basketball and volleyball and pawns for Carom, books and five volumes of How to teach English Grammar were also presented to the school.

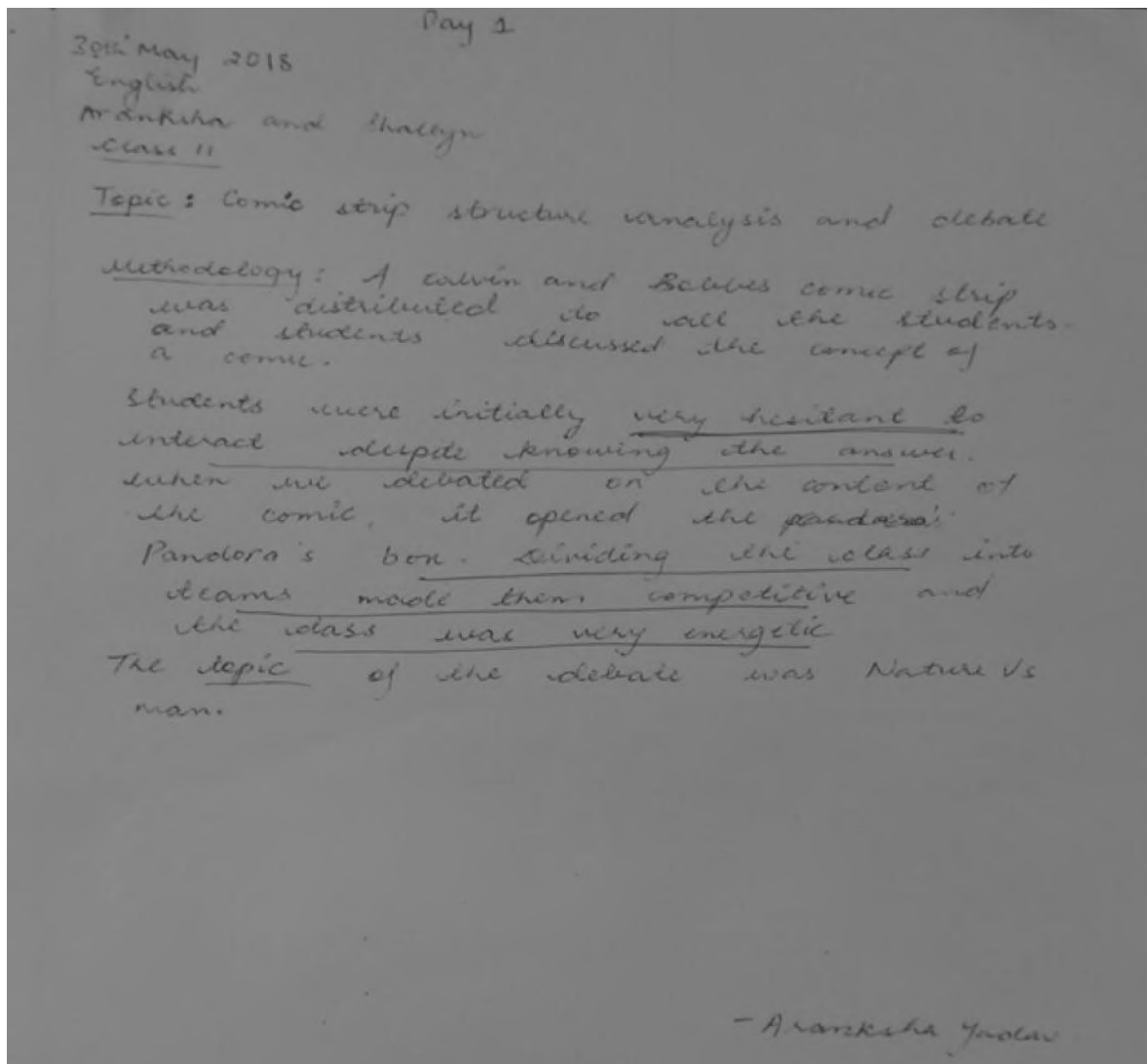
### **Suggestions**

1. Counseling for senior students
2. Building teacher students rapport by assuring them of your love and that their worth is never a question in your eyes

3. Evaluation of teachers by students. We drew up an evaluation form and gave it to the Principal.
4. Evaluation of volunteers who come. A form was designed and given to the authorities.
5. To plan teacher's presence when volunteers interact and thus ensure that precious school time is not idled away.

**02.**

**St .Stephen's College Volunteers**



1st June 2018  
English  
Aranksha and Shallyn

## DAY 3

Class 11

Topic: Play and its dramatic presentation

Methodology:

A copy of the excerpt of the play (The Scar Separated) was distributed and analyzed. The ~~isnt~~ relationship between parents and children with the concept of old age homes was discussed. We taught the structure of the play, and how to write and perform plays.

The class was divided into four groups and asked to write and perform their original plays.

Observation: The students were much more comfortable in articulating in Hindi rather than English.

Lack of confidence in English language hampered their performance.

Generally, boys were more expressive and loud than girls.

Suggestion: Clearing basics of English grammar will help them in writing and speaking.

Group activities increase participation and the interest level of the students in our experience.

- Aranksha Yadav

6/1/2018

30/5/18

ENGLISH ( X<sup>th</sup> )

The topic for the day was advertisements - which first involved discussing the 2 types of ads - normal and classified. The class collectively made an advertisement of a class with the essential features (catch line, USP, contact details, illustration) being explained. This was followed by the class being divided into groups of 6 or 7. They were each given an object to advertise. They had to collectively make a poster and finally present the ad in front of the class - in the form of a single enactment etc.

There was a certain lack of creativity and enthusiasm as compared to other classes. ~~That~~ Some people also did not know basic spellings - eras, seeds, company etc. As a result otherwise the activity was well received.

1<sup>st</sup> June, 2018

Shrut Sharma

ENGLISH

CLASS X 12:20 — 2:20

The class revolved around discussion on an extract of the play 'Dear Departed'. ~~There~~  
We discussed the structure of the play (Beginning, Climax and End), characters etc. A summary of the rest of the play was provided which was followed by a discussion on old Age homes, treatment of the elderly etc. The students were then required to make and perform a play on a similar theme. Constructive criticism was then provided for each play.

A drastic change was seen today in terms of engagement and participation. When discussing reasons for people to send their elderly to Old Age homes, one student pointed out the primary role of women / wife in the household. This led to a larger discussion on patriarchy and division of labour in the household, in which a lot of people participated. This also meant that the storyline of the plays went beyond the stereotypical role of women to larger issues of property, drunkenness etc. ~~Next kids~~  
It was a fruitful day and most kids also completed the homework given on the previous day.

## **Fanni De Saio**

Hi Suneela

You have asked me to share the experience I had teaching English at Munselling School in Dharamshala. I was there for a month and taught Class 8 A and Class 8 B every morning. There was a definite difference between the classes in terms of level and ability, but not in terms of enthusiasm. Most of the students showed a high interest in learning English. Class A had overall stronger students than Class B, which I believe was a deliberate decision on the school's part. I am not sure whether this selection/segregation of higher and lower performing students was to their benefit or not.

I could tell that a lot of pressure was being put on them in other classes and they were not getting enough rest, which I think ultimately impeded their learning. Therefore, I decided not to bombard them with homework and assessments, but rather make the class an enjoyable experience that would instill in them a love for learning.

In the first class, I asked each class to explain what aspect of ESL they would like to focus on. The choices were listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing composition and conversational skills. Class A voted for conversation practice, while Class B opted for listening comprehension. Needless to say, these skills are all interlinked and we had a chance to practice each one in turn.

I found that both classes were able to understand animated short stories at a beginner to intermediate level. Both classes could answer simple questions about the stories; however it was a challenge to get them to answer in complete sentences. They would often give a one word answer and would need to be redirected to answer in a full sentence. I came to realize that they were often not sure how to properly construct a sentence. On the plus side, they understood the question and could recall the relevant information without fail.

In terms of reading comprehension, I dedicated some class time to helping students make sense of homework and assignments from other classes that were in English, such as Civics. I was surprised to see that the text in their Civics book was quite complicated and well above their English level (upper intermediate to advanced). I am not convinced that they would be able to understand the text or complete the assignments without direct assistance or someone to translate for them. It is clear to me that the Civics book was designed for students in English medium schools who are fluent in English, whereas the grade 8 students have not yet reached the level of fluency required to interpret such a text, which was problematic.

When it came to speaking practice, there were some students who would dominate the conversation, while others would be afraid to speak up. To combat this, I had them work in groups or pairs, or I would sometimes call on students one by one. I

think this was the most fun and enjoyable part of classroom time as we incorporated many games as well. Over time, the confidence of the students grew when it came to speaking English in front of others. I told them not to be afraid of making mistakes because that is how we all learn.

To practise writing skills, I had the class write short (1 page) compositions on various topics. Early on, it was decided that another English teacher would focus on grammar whereas I would focus more on conversation, pronunciation, etc. In hindsight, perhaps we should have spent more time on grammar in my class as well as it is the foundation of every language. Before their board exam, we reviewed some of the grammatical points covered on the exam. It should have been just review for the students but they still struggled, which led me to believe that perhaps they never really synthesized the material.

All in all, I would say that the main focus moving forward should be on grammar and sentence structure. Once these students are confident about the grammar and understand how to form proper sentences, speaking and writing will develop naturally. Since they were so engaged when I brought multimedia into the classroom, it would be nice to incorporate more technology and interactive elements as well. I wish there were more resources available such as a projector and speakers in the classroom as using only my laptop was difficult at times. I hope this helps with your research project, and please let me know if you have

any questions for me!

Best,

Fanni

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