

The Mobile English Classroom

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ABSTRACT

An aspirational India wants to learn English primarily for achieving literacy in English, for acquiring basic proficiency in English, and for improving the language skills that will help them move up the ladder of social success. English is not the language of transaction in rural areas and teachers labour hard to master the language which they do not use regularly outside their classes. The English language skills of the teachers in rural India are woefully inadequate and when such teachers teach English, the students' learning of the language suffers. How can we upgrade the language skills of these teachers so that ultimately the students would be able to gain proficiency in English? Can technology be effectively leveraged to help rural school teachers attain a reasonable degree of proficiency in English? Can we tap the huge potential of educated Indians who are willing to help in the mission to upgrade the language skills of rural teachers? This article tries to explore these issues.

Keywords: Mobile learning; English proficiency of rural teachers; Technology for language learning.

Introduction

English has come to represent a symbol of people's aspirations across India and proficiency in the language helps them to participate in various spheres of activity. In a country that is rich in diversity like India, English is seen as a binding force. Students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, especially from the rural and semi-urban areas of India, struggle to learn the language due to a variety of reasons. Though they are very good in other subjects academically, their lack of skills in English leaves them behind, especially when they migrate to

cities for purposes of higher education or to seek employment. Competitive exams call for English as a medium of examination. This is a major area where rural students lag behind and here is where the divide becomes more prominent.

The Harsh Reality

English is not the language of transaction in rural areas and the teachers labour hard to master the language which they do not use regularly outside their classes. Teachers use it out of compulsion and students learn it only to pass the examination. Teachers' capabilities must be continuously built and

they must be encouraged to master the language if they have to teach the students effectively. In-service trainings are hardly conducted in these schools and even if they are, these trainings do not target all the teachers, as resources and infrastructure are limited. Spoken English classes are held in cities and big towns by trainers and the prohibitive cost of these courses makes them out of reach of these rural teachers.

How then do we bridge this gulf? How can we upgrade the language skills of these teachers so that ultimately their students benefit? Can technology be effectively used to help rural school teachers attain a reasonable degree of proficiency in English? Can we tap the huge potential of educated Indians who are willing to help in the mission to upgrade the English language skills of rural teachers?

Non-availability of Opportunities for Training

Writing in her blog, Zazulak (2015) estimates that close to 22 million students benefit from learning online and that it is only set to grow as more and more programmes are offered as Massive Open Online Courses (or MOOCs). Attending a virtual classroom is beneficial as it is not only convenient but also offers a better flexibility in terms of time, distance and content delivery. But is this an option for the rural teachers in our country?

Many institutions of repute have been conducting English language courses targeting teachers but these have not reached the majority of rural schools. Online Journal of English Language Teaching LXI/4, 2019

courses are conducted regularly but these have eluded the rural pockets of India. Erratic net connectivity and reluctance to use, or non-availability of, computers dissuade them from joining online courses.

An Experiment

This is where 'The Mobile English Classroom' plays a great role in ensuring that teachers attain minimum proficiency in the English language. It works on the principle of '*Each One Teach One*', and is motivated by the moral and social responsibility that each educated person in this country can shoulder. In a vast country like India, it is very difficult to achieve success in any programme by relying only on government initiatives. In reality, many such programmes initiated by policymakers remain only on paper. Rather than blaming government initiatives and institutions, it is far more effective if volunteer-driven efforts are organized at micro levels. Innovative programmes using volunteers who are willing to go the extra mile by committing their time and energy can be very effective in achieving the English language proficiency goals of such teachers. We can create socially-aware groups who are sufficiently motivated to help those disadvantaged in the area of English language proficiency. The word 'Mobile' here refers to both the mobility of the classroom and the mobile phone.

How does the Mobile English Classroom function?

1. Select a school in the rural/semi-urban area that evinces interest.

2. Enroll teachers who are interested in improving their English language proficiency.
3. Enlist volunteers who will mentor the teachers.
4. Prepare well-designed lessons focusing on all the skills: LSRW.
5. Roll out the programme in the school.

The Classroom Content

The programme is conducted at three levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Teachers can start at the basic level and move up the ladder by completing the lessons at their own comfortable pace as the aim is to build their foundation in English and not mere completion of the course. Each level has thirty lessons and it is hoped that by the end of the advanced course they would have completed ninety lessons. During this period, teachers have the opportunity not only to learn the skills on a one-on-one basis with the designated trainer/mentor but also immerse themselves in an English-speaking environment, which is not available otherwise to these teachers. Each lesson focuses adequately on each of the skills, namely LSRW, with teachers learning at their own pace.

Who can conduct the Mobile English Classroom programme?

- Service-minded organizations with a proven record of carrying out service initiatives in the field of education;
- Corporates as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives;

- Elite schools which can extend a helping hand and serve as a 'buddy school' to a less fortunate school and its teachers; and
- Residential Community clusters.

Who can volunteer to become trainers by being a part of this initiative?

College students with good English language skills, retired teachers from schools and colleges, retired professionals, working professionals, and home makers who are educated and are on a sabbatical or have quit their jobs and hence have some free time at their disposal.

How are the trainers chosen?

The trainers chosen for this programme should have a passion to serve the community, the patience and a capacity to motivate adult learners, and be willing to engage with teachers from rural areas. They should be willing to commit 20 minutes of their time three times a week for this programme. Moreover, they should have a reasonably good proficiency in the English language as well as in the local language.

Why should they volunteer?

The volunteers, it is believed, are interested in giving back to society what they can. Fuelled by the spirit of altruism, they would find this a good opportunity to use their knowledge and skills while serving the less privileged. They also come to realize that it is a self-rewarding service and that there is real happiness in this.

Besides, trainers can be anywhere in the world, as long as they are proficient in English and the local language of the teachers undergoing the training programme; the trainee-teachers also need not move out of their homes to learn the language.

When can the mobile English classes be conducted?

Some schools allot twenty minutes a day, three days a week during the school hours as the management understands the importance of the English course for the teachers. This depends on the availability of the trainers, too. But in most cases, phone calls take place during evenings at a mutually convenient time for both the trainer and the teacher. Working professionals prefer the late evening hour to place the calls.

How are the lessons made available to the teachers?

The lessons, which cover all the four skills of the language, are sent via WhatsApp and teachers take a copy or the school provides a printed copy of the daily lessons. Teachers have these lessons before them when the trainer places the call and together they cover each section. A small audio clip in good English is sent to the teacher to improve their listening skill. Passages for reading are provided in the lessons. The trainer engages the teacher in conversation and finally gives a few exercises to enable the teacher to develop their writing skills.

Research and Feedback

The Mobile English Classroom is also known

as 'Phone your Friend', as the trainer is a mentor and friend who guides by handholding the teacher virtually to help her/him learn the nuances of the English language.

As an experiment in the field of ELT, this programme is being conducted in a few sample schools. Do the teachers converse in English with their students and attempt to speak in English with their colleagues in the staff room after the intervention? This is a practical yardstick to measure the improvement in the English language skills of the teacher. Teachers and trainers also give their feedback continuously and this helps in keeping the experiment dynamic.

A Case Study

ABC is a huge apartment complex in the heart of a tech park in the city of Bengaluru. The techies and their families decided to help a village school nearby. The management and the teachers requested for help in improving their English language skills, as that would help the school attract more students and also help the teachers to impart quality education almost on par with a few elite schools in the vicinity. Children of domestic helpers, drivers and cleaners who work in the apartment complex study in this village school. The Mobile English Classroom is a boon to the teachers of this school and the programme is being conducted by competent volunteers from the apartment complex.

Advantages to the teachers

Among other benefits, this programme helps

the teachers to shed their inhibitions and gain confidence as they are less conscious of what others think of them because the virtual classroom provides a cloak of invisibility. They learn to speak better in English and get opportunities to correct their mistakes while conversing with the trainers.

As adult learners, teachers are almost always shy and hesitant in a face-to-face language class, which is not the case in the mobile classroom as classes are conducted using mobile phones. Thus, there is a great deal of reduction in learner anxiety.

Can such an initiative benefit the society?

A school which has teachers who speak reasonably good English will certainly see an improvement in student enrolment as word spreads in the local community about the presence of such teachers in a particular school. Improved English language skills help the teachers and students to engage with people from other places as language serves as a window to the world. Students are able to access many avenues and they can become innovators in their chosen fields, which can definitely bring great benefits to the society. Communication channels open up to those whose English language skills are good.

Critique

The idea itself may sound idealistic and bold but deep-rooted problems in society require out-of-the-box, innovative solutions. The New Education Policy has dealt with teacher

training and development at great length and says that if the country has to produce well-educated students of merit, quality teaching should be provided. Rather than expect miracles to happen and wait endlessly to upgrade existing systems, it would be prudent to give a chance to offbeat solutions if they can solve the problems in our education system.

Can volunteers' enthusiasm be sustained? The motivation for the volunteers is intrinsic as they see their trainees doing well and become proficient in English. Organisers can constantly motivate them and paint the larger picture that they are playing an important part in nation building as they are helping countless teachers and, through them, students from the rural areas. If the country has won freedom by galvanizing its citizens in the last century, it can also create a selfless posse of people who would like to pass on the benefits they have received through quality education to their less fortunate counterparts in the remote corners of the country. After all, it is the right of every child to receive education on par with others. Just because a child is born in a rural part of this country, it need not be deprived of English language education.

Is it possible to reach out to the teachers using mobile phones? MOOC is an idea that has come to stay and all universities are hailing it as a wonderful tool to reach out to the entire country. The Mobile English Classroom is an experiment born out of years of my travel across the rural areas of our country as part of a team imparting training to the teachers. I have seen

teachers struggling to read or speak in English though ostensibly they had been teaching English as a subject to the students. This is the reality that cannot be ignored in our country. This experiment has certainly touched the lives of a few teachers though it is too early to measure its success.

Conclusion

The Mobile English Classroom is a bold and innovative experiment which can fulfil the need of empowering rural teachers by developing their English language skills. It is very effective for adult learners who have neither the means nor the avenues for attending regular English courses. The mobile revolution has come as a great boon in this country and this is effectively leveraged to provide large scale training to these disadvantaged sections of the society. As Patel (2013:117) states, “The application of technology has considerably changed

English teaching methods. It provides so many alternatives in making teaching interesting and more productive in terms of advancement.”

The success of such an out-of-the-box experiment has the potential to prove that one good idea has the power to change the world – the world of the less fortunate.

References

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Some useful web tools for speaking skills

English Central (<http://www.englishcentral.com/>)

English Central is a video site bringing voice to learners. It makes use of both speech recognition and text-to-speech facilities for language learning.

Online Voice Recording Tools

Audiopal (<http://www.audiopal.com>)

Vocaroo (<http://vocaroo.com/>)

Both Audiopal and Vocaroo are very simple voice recording tools. You don't need to sign up in these sites. You can record your speech and download it as an mp3 file from these sites. You can preview your recording and can email it to anyone right from these sites. Additionally, Audiopal offers some more facilities. You can record your speech by making phone calls to the numbers given in Audiopal.

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