

SUPPORTING ELT DURING THE PANDEMIC:

EXPERIENCES WITH
GOVERNMENT AND AIDED
SCHOOLS

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IT FOR CHANGE
THEMATIC AREA:
TEACHER TRAINING |
EDUCATION



Supporting ELT during the pandemic - IT for Change experiences with Government and Aided schools

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered nationwide lockdown lead to the prolonged closure of schools, disrupting academic processes, causing serious gaps in student learning. To address these gaps, IT for Change (ITfC), a Bengaluru based NGO, conducted “Back to School” camps (when schools opened after the first wave), and on-line classes (during school closure periods) for class 8 and 9 students from government and aided schools in Bengaluru South-3 Block. Both included English language teaching components.

Our experiences confirmed that many students, mostly from socio-economically marginalized sections, had highly limited speaking, reading and writing skills in the English language. The paper discusses our program strategies - library activities, e-story books read-aloud, story re-telling and language games that were taken up to support students, provide continuity in learning and build these skills. Our model leveraged digital technologies and aimed to create a collaborative and stress-free environment and provide positive experiences in language learning.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, on-line education, collaborative learning, meaning-making, digital technology integration and multi-sensory learning.

Introduction

The English language serves as the “Window to the World”, and most forms of knowledge are easily accessible in this language. It functions as a link language and language of development in all fields of work like the economy, science, trade etc. Thus every individual aspires and will benefit from learning this language in their school to access the realms of higher education and meaningful opportunities in life.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its rapid spread had led to the closure of schools in India and also across the world. This had a great impact on our education system by disrupting structured classroom learning and causing learning gaps in student learning. It deeply affected many students from socio-economically marginalized sections studying in government and aided schools, as they did not have much access to digital means or other modes of learning. These students faced difficulty in coping up with academic gaps in their learning period and also had limited communication skills in the English language. IT for Change (ITfC), an NGO based in Bengaluru, supported students in overcoming these gaps and continue their learning through the “Back to School” camp and online classes. We conducted many meaningful activities both off-line (when schools opened after lockdown) and online mode (when schools closed again due to pandemic) to support and develop English language communication skills among students.

Objectives

The objectives of our English Language Teaching program were as follows -

1. to provide continuity in learning and building language skills in students;
2. to provide positive experiences of language interactions and thereby developing communication skills;
3. to boost confidence among students in communicating with their peers;
4. to impart more focus on meaning-making than formal language structure.

Challenges of English Language Teaching

There were several challenges that make English language teaching difficult for teachers. Many of the students hail from socio-economically marginalized sections of the society, lacking support and resources from their family in learning the English language. They may have developed disinterest towards learning the English language which could either be due to lack of adequate opportunities or reluctance to learn a 'foreign' language. Most of the students previously studied in primary schools whose medium of instruction were in their native languages, this created a diffidence in them and came in the way of moving out of their comfort zones to speak or even attempt to speak in English. Many of these students also have a low self-esteem and fear making mistakes while attempting to learn or speak the English language. Some of the challenges in the English Language teaching were lack of instructional materials and innovative teaching methods, lack of parental and community support, economic marginalization, inequality, gender inequity etc. Hence as teachers, we need to understand the several obstacles in the English language teaching and help and support these students to overcome these challenges and acquire basic English language fluency.

Design and Process – English Language Teaching

Students enjoy learning under a stress-free learning atmosphere. Most of the language activities were planned and organized to yield fruitful positive learning experiences in students, with greater emphasis on meaning-making rather than understanding the formal structure or grammar of the English language. This also involved integrating digital technology while planning and conducting various activities for the smooth transaction and also providing multisensory inputs in the teaching-learning process.

English Language Teaching through 'Back to School' Camp

IT for Change (ITfC) organized the 'Back to School' camp for students of grade 8 from government and aided schools in Bengaluru South-3 block. The main goal of the camp was to help the students in their smooth transition in the academic period and to bridge the gap in their learning caused due to the pandemic. The camp supported and encouraged English Language Teaching through various activities that helped students to strengthen basic communication skills in the English language.

The camp comprised of many activities like story reading, storytelling, scattergories, drawing, games and other fun activities. The most interesting activity valued by the students in the camp was the library activity, in which students got an opportunity to read any book from the “camp library” (Figure 1). Some students who insisted to read alone were given the space to enjoy reading books themselves and others read in pairs or groups. Some students who found difficulty in reading the English language were assisted by their peers or teacher. This in turn helped them in improving their language skills like listening, speaking and reading skills.

The reading of storybooks was also encouraged through several activities in the camp. Reading or listening to stories help in building familiarity with the English language[1]. Students acquired basic language skills and understood them better by providing an adequate amount of exposure to the English language through many such stories. In another reading activity, students had to read a given story and retell them to their peers by giving a new twist at the ending of the story. This invoked their thinking skills, creativity and communication skills. The students developed and improved their knowledge of vocabulary through the game of scattergories. Here, students were divided into a number of groups and each group was assigned a category. Some of the categories provided for each group were- birds, animals, fruits and vegetables, etc. All student members in the respective groups had to find a number of words along with a simple description for each word and scores were given for each new related word. This helped them in identifying new words and be more familiar with the words in the English language.

Different stories were narrated to different student groups in the form of audio stories. This encouraged students to listen stories and visualize them. Each student had to convert the audio story into picture format by drawing different scenes (Figure 2). The students were also given a platform to present their work and share the story with peers and teachers using by displaying their pictorial representation of the story on a large screen. This activity promoted their cognitive abilities and language abilities by attentively listening to the narration of stories and representing them through drawing. This also helped in invoking their hidden talents, maintaining concentration level, understanding the story, overcoming stage fright, building confidence, listening and presentation skills etc.



Figure 1: Reading books – “Camp Library”

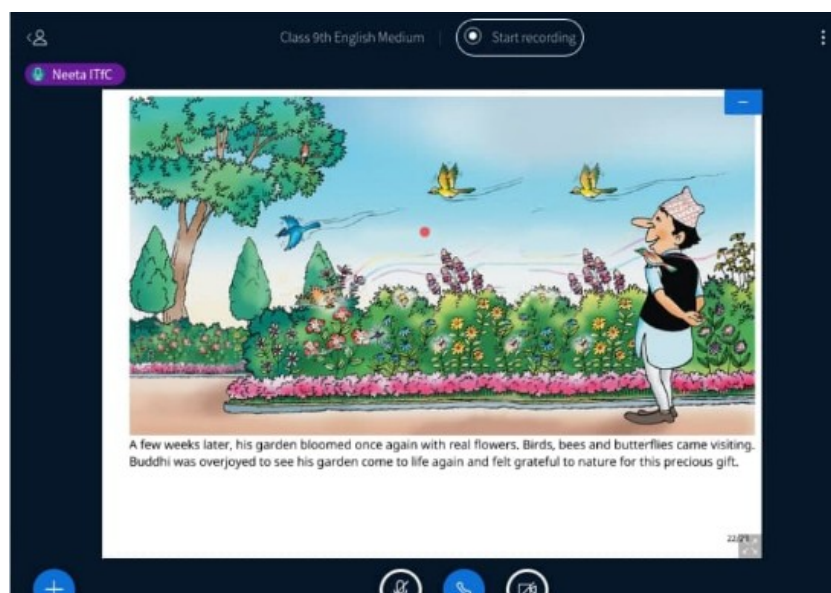


Figure 2: Pictorial representation of a story

Most of the student activities in the camp were conducted in a collaborative manner (by creating student groups and each group took up an activity) which helped in developing cooperation and team spirit in students. The collaborative way of performing tasks provided a healthy and positive learning environment for the students to help and communicate with their peers and thereby developed the confidence to speak the English language. Students who needed individual support in reading or performing activities were given special attention and assistance by the facilitators. This boosted the confidence level among students who attempted to speak and understand the English language.

Language Teaching through online classes

When schools closed again due to lockdown and the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic, English Language Teaching continued through online classes which were conducted for grade 8 and 9 students from government and aided schools in Bengaluru using the BigBlueButton (BBB) free webinar platform. Our team members supported students initially for entering the classes through the BBB platform and clarified their doubts. Many students attended and actively participated in the online classes. Students could communicate, clarify doubts and send their homework to the teacher through class WhatsApp groups. This gave a feedback for the teacher on their learning levels of the English language.

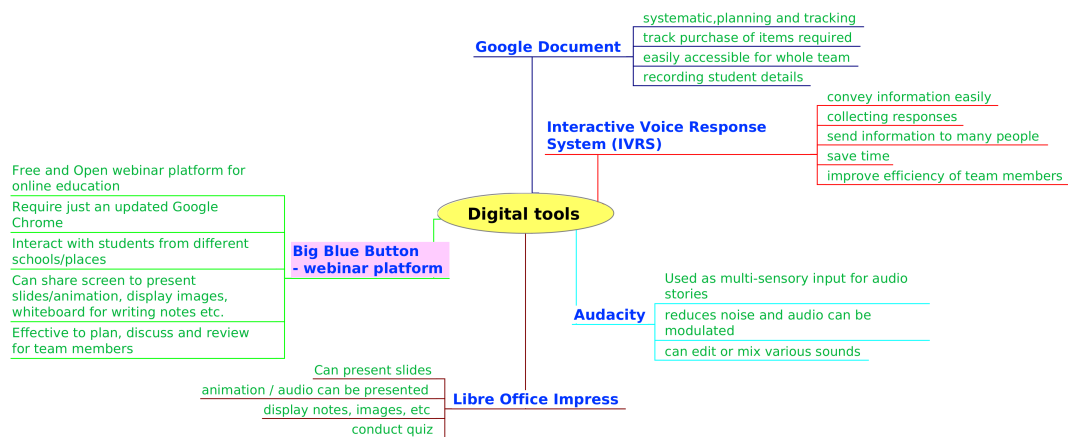


For the online classes, instead of confining to stories from school textbooks, new stories which were unfamiliar for the students, were selected and narrated to them (Figure 3). Students were also asked to

read out the stories and tried to explain what they had read. The teacher framed some simple questions relating to the content read by these students and encouraged them to share their thoughts. For instance, in one of the stories in which the characters played the game of hopscotch, students were asked to list and discuss the games they played in their communities, before and during the Covid-19 times.

These stories had pictures and written texts which were both in English as well as in their native language (Kannada), so as to help them understand the essence of the story. This provided room for acquiring familiarity and skills in the English language. As part of learning language, students had to identify new words from the story along with their meaning in their home languages and were asked to frame simple English sentences on their own. This helped them to expand their horizon on learning new vocabulary, their pronunciation and framing meaningful sentences. To encourage the students, they were given an opportunity to narrate their own stories in the English language and retell them in the next class. This activity of “learning by doing”[3] helps them to construct sentences with more focus on developing their speaking skills rather than structure of the language or grammar.

The facilitators used multi-sensory inputs like text, images, audio and video predominantly in facilitating English Language Teaching during the “Back to School Camp” and online language classes. Multi-sensory[4] approach along with technology tools helped the students to involve many of their senses- visual, auditory, kinesthetic for learning the English language. Unlike the traditional textbook, the use of multi-sensory inputs (audio and video) using digital technology provided a joyful and stress-free learning atmosphere for the students. Hence digital technology was a boon to assist language development in students even during the pandemic.



Integrating Digital Technology

The planning and conducting of camp activities and online classes would have been difficult without the use of digital technology. Digital technology was integrated into many ways for the smooth organizing and execution of activities by the IT for Change (ITfC) team members. Schools were approached and an IVRS (Interactive Voice Response System[4] - it is an automated phone system technology having a pre-recorded message and the call receiver can access the information and use the menu options via keypad selection) was created to contact parents during the lockdown and to keep them informed about the 'Back to School' camp and also about the online classes. IVRS technology helped in informing many parents and students in a short span of time and track students' attendance through the menu options provided which were to be selected using the phone dialpad. This helped in easy communication between the educators and the parents of the students.

For conducting and executing various activities and procurement of resources, there was a need for systematic planning and documentation. Thus for smooth internal planning and discussion of the various activities, Google Document was created and regularly updated by team in-charge members. We also had periodic discussions which were arranged either in the form of video conference using the BigBlueButton (BBB) webinar platform or via face-to-face mode to discuss, plan and review the work by the team members. This helped in avoiding confusions and chalk out the work fruitfully and in a more organised manner. The structured and systematic method of working helped us to get detailed, time-to-time feedback about the various activities conducted by our team members and paved the way for further improvisation of activities and responsibilities, wherever required.

Reflection on English Language Teaching

The 'Back to School' camp conducted in the schools and online classes created a positive and fun-filled learning impression in all students. Throughout the camp days, students sustained their inquisitiveness and passionately participated and interacted in all language-related activities. Though these students found difficulty in producing writing skills, other skills like listening, speaking and reading were quite strengthened. Some of these students lacked confidence in learning the English language, hence by encouraging and supporting them, we aroused their keenness to learn and express these skills through the activities. They also showcased enthusiasm to share and support their peers in all learning activities and exhibited good team spirit and collaborative learning experiences. By regular feedback, assessment, use of multimedia and interaction with the teacher through the online classes improved their communication and English language acquisition skills.

Students continued to interact with us in a friendly manner long after the camp as the camp experiences had given them a deep sense of joy and fulfilment which encouraged them to connect to us again and again. Thus we have understood that providing a stress-free learning environment and joyful learning experiences can support meaningful language acquisition and learning in students. This is even more critical in the pandemic context, where many students are undergoing stressful and even traumatic experiences of restrictions on mobility, inability to interact with peers or friends, loss of near and dear ones, economic difficulties etc. Joyful and meaningful learning also acts as a healing process for the students.

Suggestions for practice in English Language Teaching

Language acquisition can take place by creating a learning environment in which less focus is given on formal structure or grammar (accuracy of language) and more focus on meaning-making (fluency - Krashen hypothesis)[5]. Many stories or bilingual stories that are unknown to the students could be read out or narrated to the students, to help them listen and be familiar with the English language. The selected language stories should be simple and at the easy level for a beginner. The stories should have adequate illustrations like images and texts (animation if available) to help students read and understand in a better way.

Students should be given individual attention based on their levels of language learning or cognitive abilities and provided constant support and motivation to build self-confidence. Peer learning or collaborative learning should be encouraged as learning happens faster in peer groups. Peers are likely to support each other and this can develop interests in students for learning the language, but care should be taken by educators in inhibiting antagonistic behaviour by pupils like teasing, bullying or laughing at others mistakes, as it may demotivate certain students in the teaching-learning process.

The library should be made a key part of English language learning. It serves as an unlimited source for language acquisition and also instils good reading habits in students. Many activities like storytelling, story narration, role play, pictorial representations etc., should be organized in building linguistic abilities. Camp like activities can also be planned and organized regularly to support learning jumps, especially when schools reopen after a long gap (post-COVID-19 / lockdown). This can also act as a starter program in the new academic year for students promoted to higher grades. It should include many fun-filled activities with more duration for each activity and supporting collaborative work in students. Facilitators need to support group efforts in the accomplishment of tasks and provide necessary encouragement and guidance for the needed students. Students can also exhibit their works or activities to the entire class and teachers. At the end of each camp day, inexpensive useful gifts or eatables can be provided to stimulate their interests and encourage active participation in learning.

Conclusion

English language learning is a time-consuming process and requires innovative efforts from teachers to help their students attain fluency in speaking the language. Students may be more inclined to speak in their native language and hence need to develop the self-confidence to read and speak English, even though they commit mistakes in grammar or the formation of sentences. Thus, English Language teaching through several meaningful activities and real, life-like and training experiences will make way for systematic development of essential language abilities and skills in students.

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