

SUPPORTING ELT DURING THE PANDEMIC:

EXPERIENCES WITH TEACHER
EDUCATION

ANAND DESAI
RAKESH B

IT FOR CHANGE
THEMATIC AREA:
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Supporting ELT During the Pandemic

IT for Change Experiences with Teacher Education

Anand Desai

E: anand.desai@itforchange.net

Rakesh B

E: rakesh@itforchange.net

IT for Change

393, 17th Main Road, 35th Cross,
Jayanagar 4th 'T' Block,
Bengaluru, Karnataka - 560041.
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Abstract

Constructivism suggests that knowledge and meaning is constructed through one's personal experiences. When it comes to languages, as Krashen¹ says, "acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding". Listening is a very important, even foundational skill, in language learning. Unfortunately, most of the resources with the teacher are print resources even though audio materials would be best for supporting listening and speaking skills. With digital tools, it is now possible for teachers to create their own audio resources and use it for teaching.

IT for Change has been conducting sessions on Krashen Hypothesis on second language acquisition and "Audio Resource Creation for Language Teaching" as a part of the Certificate and Diploma programs of the **RIESI for English Language Teachers**. The objective of our courses is to understand the principles of language acquisition and to explore new digital methods for language teaching including creating their own audio resources. Since the teacher has the best understanding of his/her classroom context, audio materials created by s/he will be more contextual and hence likely to appeal to the students.

During the past one year, these courses were conducted for multiple batches online. In these courses, the participants listened to audio stories from "Karadi tales", ideated on the musical values, created their own audio resources for prose, poetry, speeches and enhanced the recordings done using Audacity functions. The participants also published these resources in public repositories for the benefit of other teachers. This paper deals with the experiences of IT for Change in conducting these courses.

Keywords: constructivism, language acquisition, meaning making and digital methods, Krashen.

¹ Stephen Krashen – linguist known for his second language acquisition theories

Introduction

Among the theories of learning, Constructivism suggests that knowledge and meaning is constructed through one's personal experiences. It is true even in case of language learning. As per the American linguist Krashen, language acquisition and language learning are two very distinct, separate things. Language acquisition is an unconscious process where language is naturally acquired when language is used meaningfully. It develops through meaningful interactions with native speakers. The focus is more on fluency and meaning making than on accuracy. In the context of language learning, listening is a very important, even foundational skill. However, most of the resources available to the English Teacher are print resources which aid reading and writing skills. For supporting listening and speaking skills, audio materials are best suited, but there are not enough of them. Even those that are available are not really contextual and hence not fully relevant. Fortunately, with digital tools, it is now possible for teachers to create their own audio resources and use it for teaching. However, there has not been much focus given to build teachers' capacity towards that.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its rapid spread has led to the closure of schools and colleges in India and also across the world. This has had a great impact on the education system by disrupting structured classroom learning and causing learning gaps in student learning. Online Education has come to the forefront as Teachers have been forced to try different innovative methods to bridge this learning gap. However, Online Education has its challenges. It is a new experience – both for the teachers and for the students. Availability of internet connectivity & devices and access to technology is a challenge which has a direct impact on the reach of online education. This is particularly significant in a country like India where the digital divide is quite huge. Even when one has the access to the digital infrastructure and device, there is the issue of availability of adequate and appropriate digital resources. Since the teachers today are mainly the consumers of technology and digital resources, their ability to create digital resources is limited because the teachers' capacity building is not given much importance. Hence, teachers are forced to make use of what is available. There is a need for teachers to be creators of relevant digital resources, specifically the contextual resources.

IT for Change (ITfC), an NGO based in Bengaluru, has been conducting courses for the teachers to conduct online classes and prepare free and open educational resources. Specifically, for the language teachers, ITfC designed and conducted an online course on '**Audio Open Educational Resource (OER) Creation for Language Teaching**'.

The main objective of the course was to explore new digital methods for language teaching. The course is based on the NCERT National ICT curriculum, 2013 themes—Creating and Learning and Connecting and Learning. This paper deals with the experiences of IT for Change in conducting these courses.

Objectives

The main objective of the course was to support teachers in becoming active users of digital technology by exploring digital methods for language teaching-learning which enabled contextual material making for enhancing the pedagogy of language teaching. These digital methods included both the relevant resources and tools. The objective was also to help the teachers learn to use Audacity FOSS (Free and Open-Source Software) application to create audio OER (Open Educational Resource) and to publish the created resources on a public repository so that they are available for other teachers to use. This resource creation and publishing was intended to help teachers visualize themselves as the Resource Creators and Collaborators rather than being just the consumers. The other objectives included understanding the philosophy of OER (community ownership with the ability to re-use, revise and redistribute resources) which is very important particularly in education and enhancing the knowledge of English Language Teaching (ELT) by accessing and reading articles about ELT on the web and presenting them in the webinars for peer feedback and learning.

Course Design and Processes

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 who's 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.

Course Content and Transaction

The synchronous activities included online webinar sessions using the Free and Open-Source Big Blue Button (BBB) platform. There were four 90-minute webinars conducted across multiple days with gaps in between for the participants to work on offline activities. During these sessions, the participants listened to select “Karadi Tales” (<https://www.karaditales.com>) like “Monkeys on a Fast” and “Crickematics” and ideated on musical values. The topics covered in these webinars included explanation of concepts of language learning and demonstrations by the faculty on using the Audacity tool for creating resources, and hands-on sessions for the participants.

The participants learnt to use Audacity (a multi-track audio editor and recorder) to create their own audio resources by recording themselves and adding music and sound elements to create rich audio resources which they could use in their classrooms. The participants learnt to mix multiple tracks and background music to their audio. The participants accessed the audio OER repositories for different music like natural sounds (rain, wind, etc...), sounds of musical instruments (tabla, flute, drums, piano etc...), animal and bird sounds, abstract sounds (vehicle sounds, church bells, applause, whistle etc...) for effect. Each participant selected a topic (prose/poetry) and created an audio resource based on it. The participants were also taught to use advanced features of Audacity, including volume adjustments (fade in/fade out, changing pitch, noise cancellation and reduction), voice changeover, incorporating multiple tracks for various purposes, changing pitch etc. The faculty demonstrated how the use of these advanced features enhances the quality of the audio. The participants were able to appreciate the same and used these features to enrich the audio resources that they created. The participants were encouraged to share their audio resource on a phone group created for the course for peer feedback and reflections. The peer feedback and reflections helped in enriching the audio further. The participants published their audio OER in a public repository (<https://www.soundcloud.com>) so that other teachers can access and use them for their teaching-learning. Most participants created and shared audio resources by the end of the course.

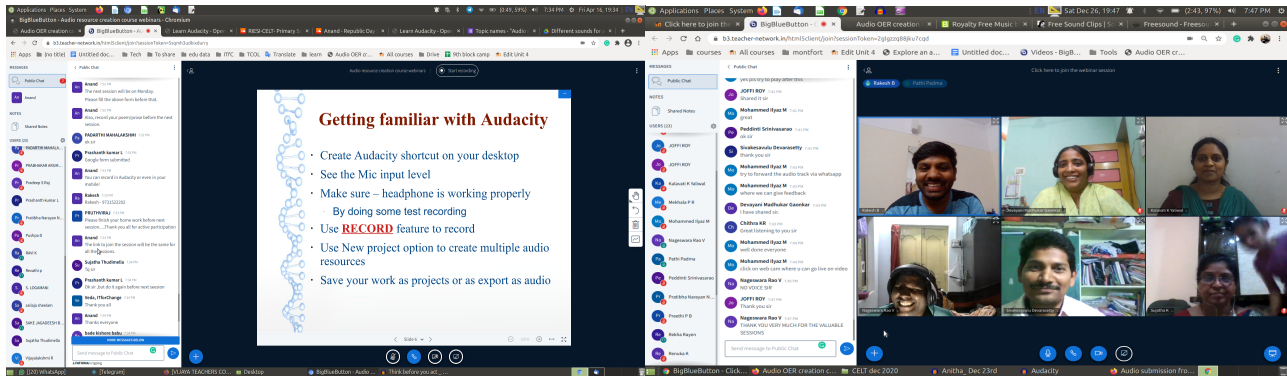


Figure 1&2: Course Transaction over Webinar

The asynchronous learning included installing relevant applications, reading assigned articles, accessing OER audio repositories and working with Audacity to create audio resources. The readings included those related to language teaching that covered Krashen's Hypotheses, Digital storytelling, NCF position papers on English and Indian language teaching, articles from journals, etc. Each participant was assigned an article about English Language Teaching (ELT), which they had to read and present to other participants during the webinars. This peer learning activity helped participants fully engage with the piece of writing and be conversant with the ideas in the other papers presented in the webinars. This also enriched their understanding of the ELT and the relevant practices and gave them an opportunity to present their understanding and thoughts in a formal forum which helped in increasing their confidence.

Participants

The course was designed for the English language teachers and was conducted in multiple batches. There were English language teachers from primary, middle and high schools. Each batch was a heterogeneous cohort comprising English language teachers including experienced and novice teachers from both high school and middle school. Some were new to digital technology and required an additional support to become comfortable with it. The heterogeneous nature of the cohorts made the peer learning and feedback sessions rich and more interactive since there were multiple perspectives shared. The participants got benefited from these interactions which could be seen from the quality of the final audio resource they created as well as the feedback they provided. There were 10 batches each of 35-40 participants and nearly 90% of the participants completed the course. Participants created and shared their audio resources as OER in the public repository. They also presented the article that they had accessed and read.

Outcomes

Through this course, the participants became familiar with the usage of digital resources for language teaching-learning. The webinar sessions were highly interactive, and the participants were enthusiastic about learning new skills. The participants became aware of the available resources that can be used in their teaching. They were introduced to concepts of FOSS and OER and their associated relevance and benefits in the context of teaching-learning. They learnt how to use Audacity to create and enrich audio resources which can be used in their teaching process. By the end of the course, they prepared at least one audio resource on their selected topic and shared it for publishing on a public repository. Thus, the Teachers became not only the 'Resource Creators', but also 'Resource Collaborators' which gave them a sense of empowerment.

The audio OER created by the teachers were published on SoundCloud, an online OER audio repository (<https://www.soundcloud.com>) for other teachers to access and get benefited from. Many of these were extremely powerful, melodic and soulful resources that would help teachers in creating a significant impact in the classroom. [This poem by Lord Alfred Tennyson](#), The Charge of the Light Brigade is one such example. One of the teachers created her own channel on SoundCloud where she has been publishing the audio resources she has created (see <https://soundcloud.com/the-teaching-prodigy>). All such audio resources created and published by the teachers were collated and published (see: <https://soundcloud.com/gurumurthy-kasinathan/sets/demo-resources> and <https://soundcloud.com/it-for-change/albums>) for the benefit of all.

Participants also strengthened their capacities for aesthetic appreciation of audio resources through discussions in the webinars and peer feedback on the audio resources made by them. Participants were exposed to resources related to language teaching available on the web and became aware of the need to access freely available online resources to improve their understanding of language teaching-learning. The use of OER (connecting to available repositories of music) and the making of OER (creating their own audio resources) resulted in more resources being available for use by the teachers. Through the course, the teachers took first steps towards becoming active users of digital technology by creating resources.

Challenges and Learnings

There were multiple challenges faced during the course. Online learning poses the challenge of a new medium – for both the faculty and the students. For the participants who attended these sessions mainly from their homes, it was challenging to get the uninterrupted network connectivity to be able to

participate actively in the online sessions. Some participants were busy with other activities including conducting online classes. For all such participants, the video recordings of the webinar sessions were made available so that they could watch the recordings and learn. Despite all the challenges, it was very heartening to note the active and enthusiastic participation of the majority of the participants – in both online and offline activities. The course faculty had to adapt their content and pedagogy to suit this new medium. Since there was no face-to-face interaction between the faculty and the students, it was difficult to get a sense of the class for the faculty. The faculty used the “quick poll” option in BBB at regular intervals to get a sense of the class and also engaged the participants effectively.

Educational software applications and resources can be quite costly and not everyone can afford them. This is where the FOSS and OER play a significant role. All the applications used in the course were FOSS applications – including the BBB webinar platform and the Audacity application. Since these are available for everyone freely, it addressed the issue of affordability and created an equitable opportunity for everyone. Another advantage of using the FOSS platforms and applications is that there is no danger of loss of privacy or of possibility of commercial exploitation of data. The use of OERs ensured that the resources were community owned and were available for modification, re-use and re-distribution

Conclusion

The course oriented the teachers to the importance of audio resources in developing listening and speaking skills. The course encouraged teachers to think of themselves as creators and collaborators and visualized every teacher as a creator and a collaborator. The course also supported teachers in becoming active users of digital technology by creating resources, rather than just being passive users. The act of material-making can be an emancipatory process of teacher development. When technology is seen as something that is done to teachers, it compromises their agency. However, when technology-based resources are created by the teachers, is owned by them and used for the benefit of teachers, the resources become relevant and aid teacher agency.

Since the teacher has the best understanding of his/her classroom context, audio materials created by s/he will be more contextual and hence appeal to the students. The participants found this course to be very useful and have been using the Audacity tool to create resources (of prose and poetry) for integrating into their teaching process. They have been implementing this in their schools and have enhanced the teaching-learning experience.

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Other publications by IT for Change on ICT and Education include:

Democratizing Translation Using Digital Methods

Arriving At the Right Platform For E-Learning

Integrating Wikis into Open and Distance Learning

Digital Technology in The Education Sector

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Exploring Teacher Agency- Design of IT and Education Programs

Collaborative OER Adoption by A Professional Learning Community, A Model of Teacher Professional Development

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Research On Open Educational Resources for Development (ROER4D)

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They can be accessed from the ITfC website: <https://www.itforchange.net/publications>