

CONNECTING DOTS: A PRAGMATIC RESPONSE TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY GAPS

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Abstract

Language teaching in general and English language teaching in particular, is a complex and a constant process of upgrading. Teaching and learning of English as second language in a context-laden setup such as India demonstrates the same. Hence, various government and non-government initiatives seem to have been working towards this up-gradation. The present paper is the outcome of one such initiative. 'Let's Learn English' was a UNICEF funded project undertaken by the researchers in collaboration with QUEST, a Mumbai-based NGO working in the field of primary education. The aim of this project was two-fold: to address the gap between expected language proficiency of the learners in question and their actual proficiency level; and to equip teachers to train learners in achieving the required proficiency. A needs analysis based approach through a baseline test, interaction with teachers and on-field observations was employed to locate proficiency-specific gaps in learners of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas in Jalna district of Maharashtra. However, the analysis indicated that unless the teachers' language proficiency is addressed, the whole exercise of equipping them to teach English is ineffective. Hence, a modular programme was designed and implemented to minimize the said proficiency gap in teachers as well as learners.

Keywords: Continuous professional development, English as second language, Language proficiency, Needs analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Language teaching in general and English language teaching, in particular, is complex and in a constant process of up gradation. Teaching and learning of English as a second language in a context-laden setup such as India demonstrates the same. Hence, various government initiatives and agencies such as Hello English (a program initiated by the Government of Kerala launched under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyanand), The Regional Institute of English (RIE), The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, The "E-Teacher" Scholarship program under Regional English Language Office, New Delhi etc. and various non-government initiatives such as *Teach for India*, SEAL by Sujaya Foundation, Pratham English Programme, The British Council and numerous others, seem to have been working towards this up gradation.

QUEST

Quality Education Support Trust (QUEST) launched in 2007 is one such NGO- a research-action organisation that concentrates on enhancing the quality of education and developing inspired educators for widening the reach of progressive, child-centred education. It aims to develop replicable models of quality education for children attending pre-school and elementary school from rural, tribal and urban areas through direct and indirect intervention.

It is an oft-repeated finding that, in India, several children in higher grades are unable to read and write because the basics of literacy have not been mastered even after primary schooling. The predicament of English is not any better and 'Lets Learn English' is QUEST's solution to this problem- a remedial English programme for students of higher grades, providing need-based inputs to children in an accelerated manner so that their basic English language competencies are enhanced and they are able to cope better with their studies independently. It involves an active collaboration with the regular teachers by conducting workshops for them on English pedagogy which is different from the traditional or conventional ones. Under the aegis of QUEST's 'Lets Learn English' programme, the teacher-training workshops were organised by the researchers

for teachers of English of 7th and 8th standard of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) in the Jalna district of Maharashtra. The KGBV scheme was introduced by the Government of India in August 2004, and then integrated in the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan program, to provide educational facilities for girls belonging to minority communities and families below the poverty line in Educationally Backward Blocks. Funded by UNICEF, this program was undertaken in Jalna as a pilot project.

As the *Let's Learn English* project undertook to train teachers in effectively implementing a remedial teaching of English to Grade 7 and 8 students, two aspects needed to be considered. First, devising of a module taking into account the basic language skills required so as to bridge the gap between learners' present proficiency level and the expected one. Secondly, as the project heavily depended upon the participating teachers for the implementation of the programme, their proficiencies, both linguistic and pedagogic needed to be upscaled.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

In English language pedagogy, one of the most tried and tested approaches to finding proficiency gaps is through Needs Analysis AKA Needs Assessment. Needs analysis plays a crucial role in the process of designing and implementing any language course, whether it is English for Specific Purposes or English for General Purposes. According to Iwai et al. as quoted in Munthe and Pardede, the term needs analysis generally refers to "the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students" (92).

In 1980s, Needs Analysis evolved with deficiency analysis or identifying gaps in learner knowledge. Brindley presents that needs are conventionally defined as the "gap" between "what is" and "what should be" (65). According to Lawson, the agentship to decide the "gap" lies with the educator who identifies such "deficiencies" (37). According to Johns as cited in Haseli, "needs analysis is the first step in course design and it provides validity and relevancy for all subsequent course design activities" (03). Hence, the researchers used Needs Analysis in order to design modules under *Let's Learn English* Project. This approach was informed by Munby's model of Communicative Needs Analysis of which the following aspects were taken into consideration:

1. Information about the Participants (age, sex, present command of target language)
2. Communication Needs Processor (CNP): The particular communication needs according to socio-cultural variables.
3. Profile of Needs: Based on CNP.
4. The Language Skills Selector: specific language skills needed for the realisation of events or activities identified in the CNP.
5. The Linguistic Encoder: takes into consideration the aspect of contextual appropriacy.

BASELINE TEST FOR STUDENTS

A baseline test was designed for students keeping the proficiency level expected at grade 7. It was ensured that the linguistic inputs used in designing the test were taken from grade 4, 5 and 6 *Balbharti* English textbooks. The questions ranged between easy to difficult/ simple to complex. This included types of questions such as matching, gap- filling, error correction, multiple choice and open questions. The test was designed keeping LSRW skills in the backdrop. The focus in analysing the learners' performance was as following:

Questions	Ability Tested
A-E	Association of words with objects, Understanding of meta-language, Reading comprehension.
F-G	Spelling and Diction
H-K	Basic Sentence formation
L	Conversational skill
M-N	Listening Skill

Figure 01: Abilities tested

The above table indicates that spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, sentence structure, tense in writing. Since the number of students selected for the project was above 300, for practical reasons no oral test was conducted. This was compensated through question L (on conversational skills), M and N (on listening skills) in the Baseline Test. The BLT analysis showed that the learners committed the following types of errors:

Question No.	Types of Error
A	Word-Picture Association
B	Identification of Major Parts of speech
C	Sentence Speech situation association
D	Contextual comprehension
E	Reading Comprehension
F	Diction and spelling
G	Number spelling
H	Sentence order
I	Sentence in Present Progressive
J	Sentence in Present simple
K	Sentence in Past simple
L	Response in conversation
M	Listening (Word level)
N	Listening (Sentence level)

Figure 02: Types of errors

According to the overall analysis, except the performance in question A (word- picture association), the learners' performance in the rest of the questions was erroneous (more than 50 percent). These inputs were used in designing the modules for teacher- training workshops.

BASELINE TEST FOR TEACHERS:

While the BLT for learners was direct and conventional, the BLT for teachers was indirect and non-conventional. This was mainly to avoid apprehensions, reservations or rejections by the participating teachers. The test was given in the form of activities such as introducing oneself, analysing learners' errors in the BLT for learners and written feedback. The focus in analysing teachers' performance in these activities was on spelling, tense, structure and punctuation in writing and accuracy, appropriacy, pronunciation and fluency in spoken performance. According to the overall performance analysis the English language proficiency of these teachers ranged between 3.5 and 5.5 on the scale of 0 to 10. These inputs were used to device various instructional activities during the workshop so as to address teachers' proficiency gaps, which are as follows:

Activity	Details	Objective	Parameter	Time
Introduction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> The teacher introduces herself/himself. Shares his/ her observations on language problems of 7th and 8th grade students of the respective school. Shares expectations from the training programme. 	To the test the ability to communicate effectively with others orally.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Pronunciation Accuracy (Grammar) Fluency Appropriacy (vocabulary/ expressions) 	½ hour
Preparing Report	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> At the end of the day, each participant writes a two-paragraph report. 	To the test the ability to communicate effectively in writing.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Accuracy (Grammar) Appropriacy (Vocabulary/ Expressions) 	½ hour
Test/Text Analysis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Participants read a passage and classify the words/ phrases/ sentences under various heads such as suffix/prefix, idiom, types of sentence, conjunctions, tenses. Each participant is given one BLT (for 	To test the knowledge about language/ understanding of key terms and concepts used to describe language.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Identification and appropriate use of key terms 	½ hour

	students) and is asked to analyze the errors under various categories.			
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Besides these tests, preliminary field visits were undertaken. The discussions with teachers and principals of respective schools reiterated that the gulf between expected English language proficiency level at grade 7 and 8 and the students' actual one is vast. Moreover, both, students and teachers are not fully equipped to bridge this gulf. However, a series of workshops may help in initiating the process of connecting dots through remediation.

The most important linguistic elements that needed to be emphasized to initiate this process included exposing learners to sound and graphic codes, decoding, meaning making (single words, phrases and sentences), developing active vocabulary through nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, using articles, prepositions of time and place, sentence construction, simple sentences in present and past tense, guided and free composition. Teachers needed to be trained in teaching the above elements involving students in listening, observing, acting out, reading, speaking and writing. As the analysis of BLT for Teachers indicated, it was necessary to train these teachers in devising activities and customizing teaching and learning material besides upgrading their own English language proficiency.

Based on the inputs from BLT, discussions and observations a series of workshops of approximately 56 hours designed and implemented in order to address the said gaps. The following is the day-wise outline of the series of workshops:

Workshop Outline

Workshop	Day 1	Day 2
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • Baseline Test for Teachers (through activities & games) • Orientation: Baseline test for students (Formal and informal) • Exposure to Codes: (Spoken) Introduction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to Codes: (Practical) • Skills involved: Listening, observing, acting out/ following instructions, speaking. • Follow up Project (to be carried out by teachers in their respective schools/classes before the next workshop)
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback/ Follow up of the last workshop and the given project • Decoding (Spoken and Written) • Skills involved: Listening, observing, acting out/ following instructions, speaking out (word & utterance level)/ reading aloud (word level) • Spelling Games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing Comprehension • Imperative (Mono-code, di-code, tri-code/poly-code) • Interrogative • Assertive • Negative • Skills involved: Listening/Reading/ Following instructions • Devising activities for comprehension skills • Follow up Project (to be carried out by teachers in their respective schools/classes before the next workshop)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback/Follow up of the last workshop and the given project • Identifying and describing objects • Skills involved: Observing, Listening, following instructions, reading, speaking, writing • Grammar Focus: Nouns, Adjectives, articles and demonstratives, Present tense (simple) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and describing actions • Skills involved: Observing, Listening, following instructions, reading, speaking, writing • Grammar Focus: Verbs and Adverbs, present tense (simple and progressive) • Devising activities for Identifying and describing actions • Follow up Project (to be carried out by

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Devising activities for Identifying and describing objects 	<p>teachers in their respective schools/classes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> before the next workshop)
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Feedback/Follow up of the last workshop and the given project Locating objects in time and place Skills involved: Observing, Listening, following instructions, reading, speaking, writing Grammar Focus: prepositions of time and place, Present & past tense (simple/progressive) Devising activities for locating objects in time and place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Narrating, expressing and describing Skills involved: Observing, Listening, following instructions, reading, speaking Grammar Focus: Sentence Construction Devising activities for narrating, expressing and describing Follow up Project (to be carried out by teachers in their respective schools/classes before the next workshop)
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Composition Writing (Guided) Skills involved: Observing, Listening, following instructions, reading, writing Grammar Focus: Paragraph construction Devising activities for composition writing Composition Writing (Free) Skills involved: Observing, Listening, following instructions, reading, writing Grammar Focus: Paragraph construction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Devising activities for composition writing Follow up Project (to be carried out by teachers in their respective schools/classes before the next workshop) End-line test for Students to be conducted and assessed by teachers. Revision and Presentations by Teachers (End-line test for teachers) Feedback by teachers and Closing

Figure 03: Workshop outline

The above outline clearly indicates the thrust areas of inputs through the series of workshops. All the four language skills, that is, LSRW, were focused upon as it was the demand of communicative approach.

In language teaching and learning, strategies play a vital role. Usually, it is the choice of strategy that contributes either to the failure or success of a learning objective. Clancy and Hruska in their essay, "Developing objectives for English language learners in physical education lessons" suggest characteristics of effective strategies which include physical involvement with language, use of multiple mediums to present information, opportunities to demonstrate language comprehension through physical expression, a low-stress environment for language performance, ample scope for interactions with other learners.

The researchers found Clancy and Hruska's parameters of effective strategies comprehensive and hence used it as a foundation to devise strategies to be used by teacher trainers in their remedial classes. Following are some of the major strategies the teacher-trainers were given exposure to:

Games: Games contribute in reducing the stress and anxiety levels in learning a language. Therefore, they were employed considerably.

Communicative Tasks: Communicative tasks make language learning relevant and shifts focus from conscious learning of language to using language as a tool to navigate through a social situation.

Songs and Rhymes: Like games, songs reduce stress level and make learning a pleasant experience. Songs are effective especially to develop vocabulary and improve pronunciation.

Art and Craft: Art and Craft ensure full body response as well as creative involvement of learners. Like communicative tasks, they help in shifting focus from form to content

Classroom and Surrounding as Material: Contextualizing learning accelerates the process of language acquisition as learners are able to establish associations between linguistic forms and real-life situations.

Problem-solving (In groups/ in pairs/ individually): This is just another strategy like communicative tasks and use of art and craft to shift focus from the form to content. This strategy promotes meaning-making more effectively.

Group Projects: To enable learners to develop interactive as well as reference skills, group project as a strategy can be influential.

IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL:

Mere effective design of a strategy does not ensure effective learning. It is the implementation by the teacher that decides its success or failure. As the BLT performance of teachers as well as the discussions with Principals of schools suggested that the teachers need to be up-skilled not only in language pedagogy but also, language proficiency. Hence, a two-fold strategy was deployed by the researchers. The following is a brief description of the same:

Pedagogical Inputs:

After each session on a strategy, teachers were grouped/ paired and were instructed to devise and perform a set of activities along with clear instructions to engage the learners. Besides, the teachers were given a period of approximately 28 days' time to implement the said activities in their respective schools and prepare brief reports along with supporting material which was then presented by them in the following workshop. This gave them enough time to internalise the learnt strategies, implement them and share their experience. These shared experiences were used as feedback to address the questions raised during the implementation of activities.

Linguistic Inputs:

The teachers participating in this project were exclusively from regional medium educational background. This reflected in their linguistic proficiency. The teachers faced problems in pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence construction and usage. While equipping them with communicative pedagogical strategies, it was necessary as an initial stage that they be made aware of these short-comings. One of the major strategies used to address this was the consciousness raising technique. (Auto-correction through re- examination of their speeches/ notes). Whenever teachers made presentations or conducted micro-teachings sessions, a feedback session was arranged to allow them to introspect as well as welcome comments from others. Secondly, these teachers were made to write notes on each training session. The teachers were asked to comment on their as well as other participants' notes. Through these inputs and through researchers' interventions the participants were made aware of their linguistic proficiency gaps.

These gaps then were addressed by introducing uses of dictionary and comprehensive functional grammar books during the training sessions. These proved useful in increasing confidence level of teachers. Besides, the process of writing instructions for each activity and demonstrating them during training sessions helped these teachers to address the proficiency gaps. During these processes, care was taken that no teachers grew apprehensive and consequently withdraw from the training sessions.

End-line Test:

After conducting a series of workshops for the duration of approximately 56 hours spread across 4 months, an End Test was conducted for students as well as teachers. The outcome of the test for teachers is as follows:

Name of teacher	Baseline Test Av. Score out of 10	End Test Av. Score out of 10
Sunita Gawai	3.50	5.62
Aruna Pawar	3.25	4.75
Dhabhade kavita	3.56	4.62
Rajashree More	4.12	4.37
Archana Patil	3.00	5.12
Jyoti Jadhavi	1.27	3.87
Avinash Madke	3.43	4.87

Figure 04: Comparative chart of Test performance

The above table shows that on the scale of 1 to 10 the performance range of teachers in BLT was between 1.27 and 4.12 while it was between 3.87 and 5.62 ET. This shows a certain though not very remarkable progress among teachers. What must be mentioned here is despite any external motivation and in the absence of stable career as well as situational hurdles these teachers were able to show consistency in their efforts. The series of workshops was successful in initiating the much-needed change in the proficiencies of these teachers as well as their approach and attitude towards teaching of English as Second Language.

As for the students, the progress was measured by observing in-class participation in the process of learning English language. The visits to respective schools and the interactions with students during demo sessions by the participant teachers showed a very positive response of students. The students were able to use vocabulary (especially action verbs, concrete nouns, adjectives and adverbs) in the given context through the group, pair and individual activities. Besides, project-based approach to teaching of English showed a

remarkable impact on the level of participation of students. This included Scrap Book, letters to teachers and the NGO, instruction Sheets, Creative corner (wallpaper).

Though this project falls a little short of a thorough analysis of outcome, it, nonetheless, is felt that the workshop was seminal in initiating the process of connecting the dots by addressing a two-fold gap namely the teachers' linguistic and pedagogical proficiency and learner's proficiency. To conclude, it is suggested that along with the interactive and communicative approach to teaching, teachers' linguistic and pedagogical proficiency need to be worked on through constant up-scaling for effective acquisition of English as Second Language by learners.

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