

## Let's Learn English!

Having pursued a Masters in English Literature, I have always wondered about how to put this education to some constructive use. An opportunity presented itself



when my professor from Mumbai University approached me, asking if I would be interested in the Teacher-Training Workshops organised under QUEST's 'Lets Learn English' programme for Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBV) in the Jalna district of Maharashtra. The KGBV scheme was introduced by the Government of India in August 2004, 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.

It is an oft-repeated finding that, in India, several children in higher grades are unable to read and write because the basics of liter-

acy 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 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 peda-

gogy which is different from the traditional or conventional ones. The workshops are organised for the teachers of English of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> standard. Funded by UNICEF, this program is being undertaken in Jalna as a pilot project. If it shows promising results, it would be employed in rest of the KGBV schools throughout Maharashtra.

On conducting the baseline survey for the students of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> standard of the KGBV schools in Jalna, we found that more than 86% students struggled with basic level grammar like word-object association, articles, tenses, sentence structure etc. (which are introduced in primary school). Based on this survey, we chalked out the target areas, as follows:

## **Vocabulary**

Word association with objects

Pronunciation

Spellings

## **Grammar (understand and produce)**

Tenses- simple present, simple past, present progressive

Sentence structure- assertive, negative, interrogative, imperative

Singular and plural

Prepositions of place and time

Articles- a, an, the

**Comprehension-** reading, listening

## **Development of basic conversation skills**

Initially I thought, “It's just grammar. How difficult can it be to deliver?” As it turned out, a lot. The aim of this program was not to teach grammar the traditional way i.e. by learning grammatical formulas and rote examples out of context but, to make grammar lively and interesting by employing full-body-response techniques. So, we dabbled with designing simple games and activities which would make grammar seem fun and not something to be afraid of. This was an extremely educating experience for me. I never knew designing an activity entails so much work- First, we would brainstorm and come up with an activity. Then after piloting it and making the required amendments, we'd design instruction sheets for the teachers and introduce the activity to them. The teachers would then conduct the activity in

their respective classes and note down the problems faced/modifications made by them. Based on these inputs we'd make required

changes and design the instruction manual for further use.

The first workshop was conducted in December 2015. We were all geared up and ready with numerous ideas and activities up our sleeves. However, the first hour of this workshop was a complete eye-opener. We realized that majority of the teachers themselves struggled with basic level grammar. How does one expect the students to comprehend grammar if their teacher doesn't? To top it, the teachers were appallingly over-loaded with 'clerical' work and meagrely paid. As a result, conducting these extra, out-of-syllabus language activities in class dropped to the bottom of their to-do list. I had been warned to expect this by my professor but, we never thought it would be so bad. So, discarding many of the activities designed earlier, we now focused on designing activities which could be implemented in 10-15 minutes and the role of teacher would be only of a facilitator with minimum efforts on his/her part.

There have been quite a few such eye-opening encounters, but there have been some



good experiences too. The most heartening one for me has been to find out how effective a role music can play in language acquisition. Once, during a field visit to the KBGV School in Tirthapuri, I sang the nursery rhyme ‘*Old MacDonald Had a Farm*’ with the girls as an ice-breaker activity. (We needed a song in English and it was the only one I could think of!) A month later, some of the girls from the school wrote to me (letter-writing and making pen-pals is also one of the activities we are employing) that they have taught the song to girls from other grades, have been singing it almost every day and would love to learn some more. I was ecstatic... We are now trying to design some musical activities for developing their listening comprehension, vocabulary and pronunciations.

Three workshops have been conducted so far and I have learnt a lot from them. This was my first encounter with Linguistics as well as the ground realities of English-Teaching in

the rural scenario and, as mentioned earlier, it has been a complete eye-opener. Among other things, it has also helped me understand better and tackle more efficiently the difficulties faced by many of my BA and B.Com students at college who study English Communication Skills as a compulsory subject.

To sum up, the ‘*Lets Learn English*’ programme has been very educating for me so far but, it is still an embryo and has a long, long way to go as we have a few more workshops lined up, and if this pilot project succeeds, so much more to look forward to!



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