

EFFECTIVE BILINGUAL TEACHING AND LEARNING OF SPOKEN ENGLISH THROUGH RADIO

(Excerpt from the chapter by Zakiya Kurrien in the book entitled 'Teaching Learning Resources for School Education', Sage Publications, 2016

INTRODUCTION

The 1990's marked a critical turning point in the area of language education in state-run elementary schools in India. It was around that time that the erstwhile 'English Hatao' movement in large parts of the country was firmly replaced by the pan-Indian demand for 'English Sikhao'. Till then, our work with regional medium school teachers and teacher educators at the Centre For Learning Resources (CLR) had minimally engaged with the teaching of English. We had concentrated mainly on early childhood education, literacy learning in the first language, mathematics and environmental education. But as the demand for English, and a clamour for English medium education continued to grow from the ambitious poor and marginalised sections of our society, we realised that regional medium schools were under grave threat. It was therefore incumbent upon organisations like ours who, for both cognitive and cultural reasons, believed in early education to be imparted in the first language, to urgently respond to the situation by taking up the challenge of strengthening the teaching of English as a Second Language in state-run regional medium schools. Only then could we hope to prevent them, as one observer put it, from "slowly buckling under the relentless onslaught of the English juggernaut". *

It was no mean challenge. We were struggling to provide in-service training to government school teachers, most of whom lacked a sufficient knowledge of English. Students from disadvantaged rural and urban communities did not hear English in their day-to-day lives. Neither did they need to use it in their present lives. And existing teaching-learning resources were grossly inadequate. We knew we had to begin with oracy in the language, as basic proficiency in Spoken English would positively influence the acquisition of literacy, and we found that students were highly motivated to speak in English. How long would it take to deliver this basic proficiency to the lakhs of students who needed it? Was there a viable alternative to the usual cascade training model for reaching teachers? What type of resources did we need to create? It was in answer to these questions that we decided to explore the use

*Kurrien, J. "The English Juggernaut: Regional Medium Schools in Crisis", in The Times of India, April 30, 2004."

of distance technologies for large scale delivery of English lessons directly to classrooms in regional medium government schools.

USING RADIO

In the year 2000, CLR chose to revive a traditional technology of distance education, radio, to deliver effective teaching and learning to children in some of the most disadvantaged and often the most remote communities in the country. We developed a highly interactive, bilingual approach for teaching Spoken English to students in regional medium government schools, using the globally researched pedagogy called Interactive Radio Instruction (IRI). IRI content is delivered through a distant teacher, and contains activities that are conducted by the classroom teacher with the student listeners. Hence, although the distant teacher directs the activities that are carried out while the radio pauses from time to time, the classroom teacher has a definite role to play in the teaching-learning process. At the press of a button at the AIR broadcast time, the radio lessons directly give the opportunity for thousands of students to listen to correct spoken English and respond in English.

For Marathi medium schools, we developed a bilingual English-Marathi radio programme entitled “We Learn English/ Aamhi Ingrezi Shikto”, comprising a total of 240 lessons covering a 3-year curriculum. This programme was subsequently adapted for Hindi medium students, entitled “We Learn English /Aao Angrezi Sikhen”. Broadcast initially as part of our action research project in Pune District, “We Learn English” has been a popular programme for several years in Pune District and has been broadcast at different points in time in selected districts of Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and also in Delhi.

USING A BILINGUAL APPROACH

An empirical understanding based on our own classroom experiences over many years, and on focus group discussions with rural and urban teachers whose own English was weak, convinced us that a bilingual approach, i.e. Marathi-English initially, woven into an eclectic ESL pedagogy needed to be used in materials for the teaching of English. Without a **systematic bilingual approach**, it would be impossible to create active learning situations and authentic interactive lessons involving the classroom teacher.

Rationale for a Bilingual Approach

CLR drew upon the vast body of global literature on the efficacy of bilingual approaches in second language teaching. Foremost amongst the concepts that endorsed our decision to use bilingual methods were the following:

- *Principle of Common Underlying Proficiency between L1 and L2*: According to Cummins (1979, 1984), both languages, i.e. the first (L1) and the second (L2) operate through the same central processing system, though they are visibly different on the surface. The thinking behind understanding a language comes from the same cognitive functioning ability. Speaking, listening, reading and writing in L1 helps students transfer the same skills while learning L2. Hence teachers can consciously tap into students' prior vocabulary and grammatical knowledge in L1, and facilitate learning of English vocabulary and syntax by being able to make comparisons between certain elements of the two languages.
- *Principle of Comprehensible Input*: Krashen (1985) posits that we acquire skills in a second language in one way only: when we are exposed to input (written or spoken) that is comprehensible to us. Comprehensible Input is the necessary condition for language acquisition to take place. Given the fact that young learners from poor communities in India do not hear English in their day-to-day lives, and their teachers are unable to speak in English during classroom transactions, clearly the most important component of 'comprehensible input' was the use of the regional medium of instruction/first language in the transaction of English lessons, in order to aid students' understanding.
- *Affective Filter Hypothesis*: Krashen also states that Comprehensible Input will not result in language acquisition if that input is filtered out because of anxiety, lack of confidence or low motivation. Our understanding was that for both children and their teachers, audio support entirely in English would be too alienating and confidence-breaking. The use of Marathi and Hindi would provide a necessary comfort zone, apart from enabling Comprehensible Input.
- *Multi-competence*: Our own empirical understanding at the outset was that the use of the first language can be a resource in learning a new language, rather than an interference. The concept of multi-competence has been explicated by Cook (2001).

USING AN ECLECTIC ESL PEDAGOGY

Regarding the selection of an overall pedagogy for Spoken English, we studied the most prevalent global methods and came to the decision, based again on our empirical

understanding, that no single given instructional method could successfully deliver the goods in our rural and municipal schools. It would have to be an eclectic ESL pedagogy, combining the more contemporary Communicative Method with Presentation-Practice-Production techniques and supported by some translation where required.

DEVELOPING INTERACTIVE RADIO LESSONS

CLR developed a well-designed 3-year curriculum for spoken English that could be implemented on a large scale through lively IRI lessons. The development of the IRI lessons involved several processes, namely:

- Designing the curriculum
- Designing the lesson structure
- Selecting formats and scripting the radio lessons
- Directing the production of lessons for broadcast

BILINGUAL SCRIPTING OF RADIO LESSONS

Scripting of the actual radio lessons was the most creative, as well as the most challenging aspect of the content development process. Fortunately, our CLR script writers, having been in and out of rural and municipal schools, had an intimate feel for the audience and were all teachers and teacher educators themselves. Moreover, some were content specialists, and some possessed a flair for creative writing in both languages.

Section 1: Serial Episodes

With competent script writers, we were fully able to exploit radio's advantage of being the 'medium of the imagination', to create lively, **bilingual dramatic episodes** for the first section of each lesson that would allow our student-listeners to imagine themselves in these situations and stories, and be motivated to listen attentively. The spoken English skills to be taught were deftly woven into these episodes. The format of serial episodes – usually over 3-5 lessons per theme – lent itself to developing action-packed situations. Cliff-hangers between lessons could be included, helping students to eagerly await the following lesson. At the end of one dramatic episode, for example, the child characters witness a police hunt for a gang of smugglers, but radio listeners have to wait for the next lesson to discover the outcome. Humour and fun could also be built into the situations.

The earlier lessons involved more Marathi/Hindi. Gradually the balance shifted to more English.

Themes and setting

The theme or plot of each serial running over 3-5 lessons was selected according to the English speaking skills to be taught through the particular episodes. The plots consequently revolve around themes such as talking about oneself, family, friends, school, daily routines, food, recreation, games and sports, celebrations, exciting happenings, funny situations. Here is an example of an episode in Section 1 towards the start of the programme: (Note: Parts spoken in Marathi/Hindi are in italics).



Level 1 - Episode17: A Dog in the Classroom

(Fx: Barking; Coming closer.)

Children: (exclaiming) *Here comes Moti! Mangala's dog!*

Teacher: (laughing indulgently) **What's going on, whose dog is this?**

Ranjana: *It's Moti, Teacher. Mangala's dog.*

Teacher: **Nice dog!** *But take him outside now.*

Santosh: *Please, Teacher, let him be here. He doesn't do anything.*

Teacher: *No, that won't do. Mangala, take him outside.* **And shut the door.**

(The script continues, introducing 2-3 simple and interrogative sentence structures. Then the dog bursts in again. Script continues.....)

Ranjana: **Moti knows English.**

Teacher: (laughing) *You're simply saying silly things.*

Ranjana: *Just see.* **What is your name?**

(Bark)

Ranjana: *See ! He said 'Moti'.*

(Fx: Laughter)

Ranjana: **Motia, how old are you ?**

(Fx : Three barks)

Ranjana: *See ! He said* **Three. Motia, how many sisters and brothers do you have?**

(Fx : Many barks, fading... as children heard laughing)



The main setting of the dramatic episodes is a large, fairly well-developed village in Maharashtra, though the plots also take listeners to other places, depending on the English vocabulary to be introduced, e.g. a zoo in the city, a restaurant on the highway, a picnic spot near the beach, etc.

Scripting the bilingual radio lessons also provided opportunities to consciously weave in themes related to human values, social awareness, democracy, gender sensitivity, and so on. We did this not through obvious 'moralising' but indirectly through a variety of ways. For example, we depicted positive roles for women through real people such as Helen Keller and

Kalpana Chawla as well as fictional characters. The following is an example, featuring Habiba Shaikh, a fictional rural entrepreneur: (Parts spoken in Marathi/Hindi are in italics).



Level 2 - Episode 15: An Interview with Habiba

(Fx: Sound of tape recorder being opened, cassette inserted, various buttons being pressed)

Ranjana: *Santosh, is this tape recorder okay? Is there a new battery inserted? Sunita Mavshi, is it okay if we use your tape recorder?*

S. Mavshi: *Yes, it's okay, but why do you want my tape recorder? Where are you taking it?*

Santosh: *What's this Ranjana, you didn't even tell Sunita Mavshi what our teacher wants us to do. The two of us have to interview two people, record the interviews, and let other children listen to them in class.*

S. Mavshi: **Oh, I see. That's very good. But which two people? Who will you interview?**

(The children then mention Habiba Shaikh, and Sanjay Chaudhary, a disabled inventor who is visiting their village)

Ranjana: *Remember Habiba Shaikh? She has started such a big business, employed so many women. So we want to interview her.*

Santosh: *And then we'll interview Sanjay Chaudhary.*

S. Mavshi: *But both of them can't speak in Marathi. Will you interview them in English?*

Ranjana: *Yes. No problem! We've learned so much English for more than a year now. **We can speak in English!***

(Fx: Chord)

(Interview starts)

Habiba: **Good morning, children !**

Ranjana

&Santosh: **Good morning !**

Habiba: **Come in, Come in. And please shut the door. (Pause) Come, sit down. Okay. Do you want to put on your tape recorder?**

Ranjana: **Yes, we do.** (Whispering to Santosh) *Put on the tape recorder.*

Santosh (Whispering) *I've already put it on....., when I came in. (Saying aloud) **Yes, the tape recorder is on.***

Habiba: **So tell me, what can I do for you ? Will you speak in Marathi or English?**

Ranjana: *Teacher has told us to speak in English. **We have come to interview you for our school.***

Habiba : **Oh how nice ! Okay, ask me some questions. What do you want to know?**

Santosh: **Please tell me something about yourself.**

Habiba: **My name is Habiba Shaikh. I am twenty-eight years old. I live in Pune, and I work here in Wadgaon.**

Santosh: (whispering) *Now, ask about her family.*

Ranjana: (whispering) *Shouldn't we talk about her work before that?(Saying aloud) **Tell us about your work, Habiba Tai.***

Habiba: **Five years ago, I started this factory. We make handmade paper. The whole factory is run by women. We send our paper to different places in Maharashtra and India. We also send our paper to Europe, America, all over the world!**

(The episode continues with further questions for Habiba about her family, her likes, dislikes, etc., followed by interview with Sanjay, the disabled inventor.....)



In various episodes of Section 1 of the radio lessons, the behaviour of characters subtly demonstrates respect for diversity, equity, communal harmony, and other social concerns. Thus, besides learning English, student-listeners are involved in making judgements and expressing their own opinions in Marathi/Hindi. We also ensured that the English heard in the serial episodes was featured as naturally as possible in the conversations of the characters, as seen in the following excerpt: (Parts spoken in Marathi/Hindi are in Italics)



Level 3 - Episode 11: The School is Flooded.

(Fx: Heavy rain, thunder and lightning. Commotion. Children shouting, 'Teacher Oh Teacher....')

Teacher: *(in calm tone) Arey, what's happened?*

Rahul: *Teacher! Please come to the school soon. Water is coming into the school.*

Anwar: **Teacher... the water is coming into the school!!**

Teacher: *(calmly) Water is coming into the school? Come on, let's hurry. We must save some important things. Rahul, call some older children. And other children can come to the school with me. We must save the school's property.*

Children: *Yes, yes....let's hurry.*

(Fx: Heavy rain, thunder and lightning .Commotion)

Rahul: **Teacher, where is the school key?**

Teacher: **Here it is. Hurry up - open the door. The water is coming into the school.**

(Fx: Lock opening; door opening.)

Teacher: *(calmly) Now, make a chain. Make a chain from the school to Parvati Aji's house. We can take out things one at a time. You have to then pass it along. In this way let's take the things to Parvati Aji's house. Let's start....*

Radha: **Teacher, let's pick up the mats first.**

Teacher: *Yes, pick up the mats first. Girls, pick up the mats, and take them out. Boys, open the cupboards and pick up all the books. Take them out and keep them in Parvati Aji's house. I will go to Aji's house.*

(Fx: Rain continues...)

(Fx: Jeep drives up and stops)

(Episode continues, arrival of TV crew, introductions all around, etc)

Ashok: *(In broken Marathi) I am Ashok, I've come from Mumbai, we want to...over here... Er...News....news....Er...For TV...*

Radha & Sheetal: *(gasp) TV.?!!*

Teacher: **Are you from Doordarshan?**

Ashok: **Yes, we've come from Mumbai Doordarshan.**

Teacher: *What do you want to show on Doordarshan from our village?*

Ashok: **I want to show how the people in this small village are affected by the heavy rains. (In Hindi..) There is a river here that is flooding.)**

Rahul: *(excitedly) Yes, the water is coming up. It came into our school too!*

Ashok: **Really? Into your school? What did you do then?**

Sheetal: **We picked up the mats. We picked up the notebooks.**

Radha: **We clean....Er....Er....We cleaned Parvati Aaji's Er....Er...We cleaned a room in Parvati Aji's house and put all the things from our school over there.**

(Fx: Chord)

(Episode continues, introducing verbs in past tense....)



Section 2: Modelling by the radio teacher

This part of the radio lessons focuses entirely on the English to be learned. The scripts provided the radio teacher with the structures and vocabulary introduced in the serial episodes, which she has to dictate to the classroom teacher. A small dialogue or a question-answer interaction that she has to ‘model’ for listeners also formed part of the scripts.

Section 3: Interactive session for student listeners

For this section, the radio teacher’s part in setting up various interactions for speaking and responding in English had to be scripted. An encouraging rather than an authoritarian, didactic tone was built into the radio teacher’s script, whereby students in the classroom could be motivated to interact freely. Her instructions to the classroom teacher to facilitate the interaction also had to be scripted, as we wanted to ensure that the distant teacher and classroom teacher were partners in the teaching process.

Other formats: Stories, Songs, Games

As both listening comprehension and speaking skills of students were expected to increase through the first year of the CLR radio curriculum, we gradually reduced the amount of Marathi/Hindi used in the scripting of the serial episodes for Section 1 of the lessons. Moreover, by the third year of the programme, instead of only serial episodes, whole stories such as ‘Alibaba’ and ‘Birbal’ were added in simple English, with minimal Marathi /Hindi translation of unfamiliar words.

As the learning of language structures and vocabulary is enhanced through songs and language games, the lessons are interspersed with generous helpings of these formats, making them highly child-friendly.

IMPACT OF CLR RADIO LESSONS ON STUDENTS’ ENGLISH SKILLS

Besides the implementation of the English-Marathi version of the CLR radio programme in Maharashtra, where it continues to be used, the English-Hindi version has been implemented in government schools at varying periods of time in Jharkhand, Delhi, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh. Various NGOs as well as some government agencies have also accessed this audio TLR on CDs.

Our own systematic evaluations of learning outcomes, as well as later third-party evaluations in Pune and Lucknow districts*, have indicated a substantial impact on large numbers of urban and rural students studying in government schools, helping them to better understand spoken English, and to start speaking and expressing themselves confidently in basic English. And this was possible despite the fact that their teachers themselves could not speak in English. Neither were these students, a large proportion coming from poor families, exposed to any English in their day to day lives. Furthermore, the post-tests results revealed that improved oral ability indirectly influenced improvements in writing skills.

Besides the improvement in the quality of teaching and learning evidenced through the measurable learning outcomes achieved through the bilingual IRI pedagogy, one of the most rewarding experiences of the entire 3-year programme was the extremely positive reactions of students, gleaned from our intensive monitoring. An informal survey of about 500 teachers conducted at the end of our initial action research project, indicated that a large number of teachers also strongly supported the approach, especially as it gave them an integral role in the teaching process. Some comments are quoted below.

“We liked the lesson on Rani Laxmi Bai. We liked the questions Sunita Mavshi asked. Yesterday we felt very sad as it was the last radio lesson of the year. We want this programme to be longer next year.”

Varsha Gade, Student, rural government school, Pune District

“I write down in my notebook what I have learnt from the radio programme. I want Ranjana and Santosh to visit my school.”

Monica Vadki, Student, rural government school, Pune District

* (1) Study of the Effectiveness of the “We Learn English/ Aamhi Ingrezi Shikto” Radio Programme – Report submitted to Zilla Parishad, Pune, conducted by District Institute of Education and Training, Loni-Kalbhere, Pune District, April 2011.

(2) “Aao Angrezi Sikhien” Radio Programme – Evaluation for Primary / Upper Primary Schools in Lucknow (2008-2009), conducted by Nehru Yuva Kendra, Lucknow, for District Institute of Education and Training, Lucknow, April 2009.

“The CLR’s English radio lessons have been created with a deep understanding of children’s minds. Dramas, poems, travel, television programmes, famous people and places, all these feature in this treasure chest that my children and I have been enjoying for three years. Children are given opportunities to listen to and tell stories in English, and to learn many poems that they recite beautifully.”

Prathiba Nandkumar Hadap (Joshi)
Teacher, Pune Municipal School
From a translation of her article in the magazine of the Pune Municipal Schools

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that important pointers embedded in this excerpt can illuminate what we believe to be essential processes in the creation of effective, bilingual teaching-learning resources and assessing their actual impact.

Where the strengthening of English in state-run regional medium schools is concerned, the need remains as relevant now as it did when CLR first began to address it in the late 1990s. Despite several years of English instruction, large numbers of students in these schools are still unable to speak, read and write simple English. Illiterate and semi-literate parents are more and more aware that without proficiency in basic English, access to higher education, employment, technical knowledge, and the world of computers and the internet would be severely limited for their children. Large-scale efforts to provide effective teaching-learning resources for English in state-run schools are urgently needed, instead of misdirected policies of opening the flood gates to English as a universal medium of instruction. Consequently, the CLR radio programme continues to be highly relevant.

Regarding IRI, besides improving the quality of teaching and learning, we believe that the strength of carefully-crafted IRI interventions lies in the following systemic advantages:

- Equity: There is standardization of quality, in urban and even isolated rural areas.
- Access: Programmes can be accessed on a large scale by formal elementary schools, remedial learning centres, academic support centres for school children and youth, general “shadow” audiences.

- Cost-effectiveness: Once the material is developed, IRI is much less expensive than other options, as it can be scaled to reach lakhs of students and teachers.

Computer-based and other forms of digital learning are now spreading rapidly in our country and can be effective when used judiciously in our schools. However, research-based evidence regarding the efficacy of multimedia learning programmes delivered via the internet or through software packages in the Indian context, has yet to be established, especially when such resources are used on a large scale. CLR believes that since our radio lessons have been implemented on a large scale and our bilingual pedagogy has empirically demonstrated significant gains in student learning, IRI for the teaching of Spoken English should not be looked upon as merely a temporary technology, but rather a cost-effective, large-scale pedagogical option with which our teachers are comfortable, and which should be included in a 'smorgasbord' of effective teaching-learning resources.

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