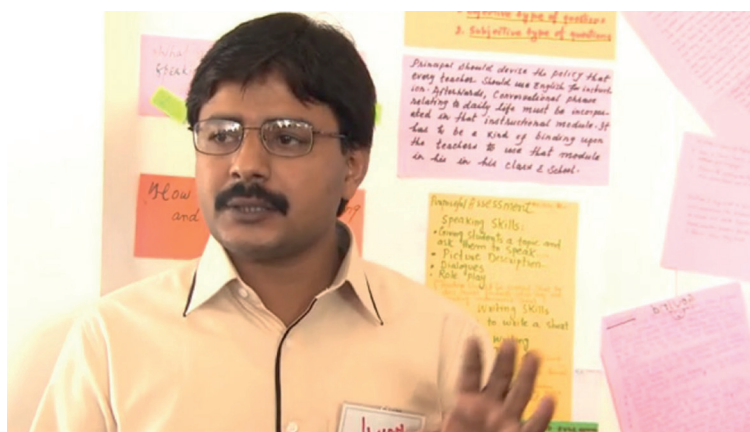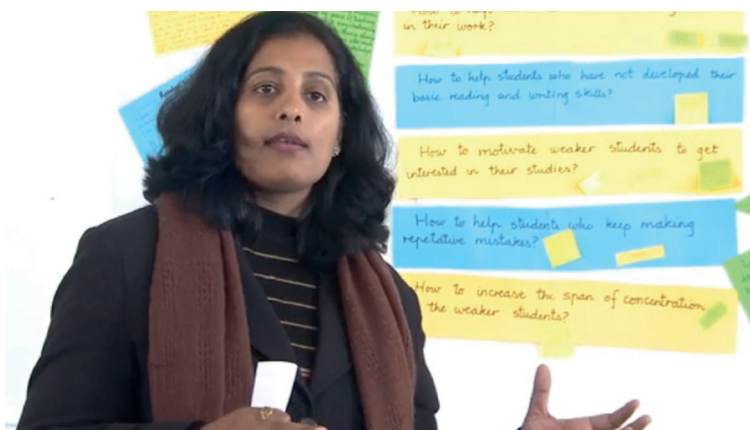# Teaching in low-resource classrooms: voices of experience

Edited by Richard Smith, Amol Padwad and Deborah Bullock

Contents

Introduction

Richard Smith and Amol Padwad

This book and its purpose

Throughout the world English is often taught in 'low-resource' classrooms, but there are few training materials which are derived from and which reflect this reality. The materials presented here are intended to help fill this gap.

The book is an edited collection of work produced by a group of 34 teachers and teacher educators from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan who participated in a five-day Hornby Regional School on this topic in Kathmandu (http://bit.ly/hornby-school). The workshop itself was directed by Richard Smith and co-facilitated with Amol Padwad, with the additional assistance of Jovan Ilic, British Council Nepal. Deborah Bullock has helped us to edit the writing engaged in by participants at and after the school in order to make this publication.

From the outset, participants were made aware that, rather than ideas being brought in from outside, their own experiences would be shared, reflected upon and further built upon at the school and in follow-up work, and that, potentially, the knowledge generated in this manner would form the basis for materials which could be more widely disseminated. This book, with associated video, is the practical outcome.

The book contains written material generated from two sequences of activity which were central to the school, and it also contains hyperlinks to related video-recordings of presentations by school participants which have been uploaded to the British Council's Teaching English website (http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/low-resource-classrooms).

A major reason for publishing these materials, apart from the one given above (i.e. to offer training materials in an important but neglected area) is to provide evidence that there is particular value in teachers in difficult circumstances collaboratively sharing examples of successful teaching as a starting point for their own further development. The materials also show that a useful approach to developing appropriate methodology for such circumstances is teacher-research (termed here 'teacher-inquiry') on a basis of initial and ongoing collaborative work.

The book and associated video materials can be used informally as a stimulus for your own reflections and inquiries (if you are a teacher), or for discussion in teacher associations, English teacher clubs or other forms of self-help group (if you are a member of such a group), or as part of an in-service training workshop (if you are a teacher educator). Each individual story is followed by questions for reflection and discussion to help with these uses. The stories can also be used by teacher educators in initial teacher training programmes for student-teachers who are likely to be teaching in relatively difficult circumstances.

The rest of this Introduction provides further rationale for and explanation of the overall approach adopted in the school and in the book, along with some practical ideas about how to use the book and the associated video-recordings.

The overall 'enhancement approach'

There have been very few books specifically devoted to the problems of 'teaching English in difficult circumstances' since Michael West's book of the same name was published by Longmans, Green in 1960. Based on his long experience of teacher training in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) in the early part of the twentieth century, West drew attention to the importance of considering classes which consist of 'over 30 pupils (more usually 40 or even 50), congested on benches [...], accommodated in an unsuitably-shaped room, ill-graded, [...], working in a hot climate'. (p. 1).

Another aspect of such situations, which – it is important to recognise – constitute *normal* conditions in the majority of English teaching settings around the world, can be a lack of material resources including, in some cases, textbooks as well as electronic equipment, hence the designation 'low-resource classroom' adopted for the Kathmandu Hornby School and for this book.

In the five-day workshop itself and for the production of this book, we adopted an 'enhancement approach', setting out to look for positives to build on from within the experiences and from the perspectives of those who know low-resource settings the best – that is, teachers in such

settings. This is diametrically opposed to the prevalent 'deficit model' of training which is based on preconceptions relating to relatively privileged kinds of classroom; which assumes that practices in small, well-resourced classrooms represent a kind of 'norm' that needs to be followed; and which can result in additional, inappropriate pressures and burdens on teachers. Just one example we have recently come across involved teachers in a West African country being taught how to do a communicative 'mingling' activity in a training session, but their own classes were so crowded and cramped that nobody could move in them at all.

Indeed, we should be wary of describing such circumstances as 'difficult'. Precisely because they are so common around the world we could refer to them instead as 'normal' circumstances, even though they have been neglected by ELT methodologists. If they are 'difficult', this is because they are so for the teachers concerned, for their own reasons, not because – from an outsider perspective – they prevent ideas from being implemented which have been developed in relatively privileged, and rare, conditions. The defining feature of an enhancement approach, then, is to see what works in teachers' own experience, from their own perspectives, and to build from there, on that basis.

What are the 'normal' conditions facing you – or teachers you are working with – in English classrooms?

Have you come across any cases where ideas you received in training were not really appropriate for the conditions in your classroom?

What is 'difficult' in your teaching situation, from your own perspective?

Are there ideas or practices which have worked for you which you think it could be valuable to share with others?

Stories of success

The first half of the book is devoted to stories of success in low-resource classroom settings which teachers shared with one another, from their own experience. These stories were initially told in the course of an activity we facilitated on the first afternoon and following morning of the Hornby School. Sharing success stories ensured that the training event began positively, not with 'problems' but nevertheless with teachers' own experience and contexts. This activity also built up rapport and participants' confidence to share and present. To provide further background, and in case you wish to try out this activity, here are the steps we went through:

First, participants were invited to remember a recent successful teaching experience and to share their experience informally in a small group:

Next, teachers shared in a different group of three, this time 'presenting' the story:

Then, with a different partner, they retold the story to refine the presentation:

For homework at the end of the first day, we then asked participants to write down their success story just as they had presented it. We collected these the following day – and these pieces of writing became the basis for the stories you see in Part One of the book.

That (second) day, we also asked for volunteers to present their stories to the whole group, and these presentations were video-recorded. This is why some, though not all, of the stories in Part One are accompanied by an individual hyperlink to a video-recording of the story in question. Here, additionally, are overall links to all the video-recorded stories, gathered together according to type of school:

Primary success stories: http://bit.ly/primary-success

Secondary success stories: http://bit.ly/secondary-success

At the end of the five-day workshop, we invited participants to comment on the overall success story activity.

Some major benefits of the activity which participants mentioned were:

- increased confidence in their ability to manage challenges
- enhanced sense of dignity, pride and achievement
- development of confidence in their own ideas, due to staged nature of build-up to presentation
- encouragement due to the fact that other teachers shared similar conditions and problems
- being impressed by other teachers' successes
- gaining a number of practical ideas to try out for themselves

Most importantly, a culture of sharing was developed via this activity within the group – based on enhanced appreciation of one's own as well as others' experience. As one participant wrote:

Nobody asked me to write my success story before; I felt like someone was interested in and willing to listen to what I did; I felt valued; I will also take interest in others' success stories in my own school.

And another:

I found value in sharing, and now I believe that sharing can lead to finding solutions to problems.

Many of the participants later reported having incorporated the activity into their work with colleagues or in teacher training, noting that it promoted a new culture of sharing in the workplace and formed a good basis for further inquiry. One participant (Sagun Shrestha) even arranged a whole session based on what he termed the 'sharing success approach' in an innovative 'ELT Clinic' at an international conference of the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association (NELTA).

Your own story of success

As you read the success stories included in this book, think of a recent success story of your own. Where could you share it?

How can you initiate events to share your success stories and learn from colleagues' experience?

Stories of teacher-inquiry

The second half of this book contains reports by participants about small-scale research projects which they embarked upon in groups at the workshop itself and carried on when they returned to their classrooms. As with the stories of success in the first part, these reports show how useful it can be for teachers to engage in collective sharing of experiences and ideas, this time in relation to specific difficulties they are facing, and as a point of departure for teacher-research.

The topics considered important by participants include issues such as 'Correcting written work in large classes', 'Managing multiple classes in one room without partitions', and 'How to deal with students from diverse backgrounds'. The fact that relatively under-researched areas such as these emerged as focal points for discussion showed the value of basing training on participants' own expressed needs rather than on pre-determined ideas or techniques. Once they had formed, the groups in question engaged in their own small-scale surveys of other participants' ideas and then actually engaged in using and researching the effectiveness of some of these ideas following return to their own classrooms. These areas and ideas may be under-researched but they are important for many teachers around the world, and so these reports are likely to be quite widely useful. At the same time, the process by which participants were guided to develop contextually appropriate approaches is also worth recording:

1. Firstly, participants wrote down the major issues they were facing in their teaching, on individual pieces of paper;

2. During a break, the facilitators divided these papers into groups, thus regrouping participants according to areas of apparent common concern;

3. Participants clarified the nature of their common concern in groups, and were encouraged to rephrase the problems they were facing as questions (e.g. 'I'm finding it difficult to mark all the homework in my class of 100 students' was converted to 'How can I mark homework in a class of 100 students?');

4. For homework, participants wrote about their problem and further clarified their questions;

5. Groups made posters from their writing, highlighting the questions they wanted to find answers to;

6. Posters were displayed in different parts of the room; workshop participants moved around looking at one another's posters, writing their names on post-it notes against questions on other groups' posters which they felt they might have useful responses to from their own experience;

7. Different members of the group then arranged to interview people who had indicated they might be able to give insights;

8. The group reassembled, informed each other about the ideas gathered, discussed these, and added sheets of paper to their poster to represent their interview findings and conclusions. These posters were later disassembled and transcribed to form the draft of the first part of research reports included in this book;
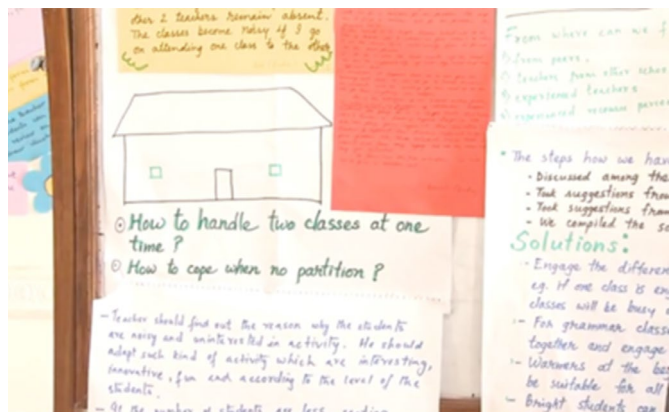
9. Standing in front of their poster, each group reported on their findings. You can view video-recordings of the insights shared in this way, at the end of most of the 'Stories of teacher-inquiry' chapters. We have also gathered together here links to all the separate video-recorded presentations, under three themes:

   Resources for diversity: *http://bit.ly/lrc-diversity*

   Resources for managing: *http://bit.ly/lrc-managing*

   Resources for materials and methodology: *http://bit.ly/lrc-materials*

10. Group members decided on (individually differentiated) new strategies to try out in their classrooms, and agreed a deadline for reporting back;

11. Written reports of practice formed the basis for the second part of each research report included in this book (participants kept in touch after the workshop via a dedicated Facebook group as well as email).

As the above account makes clear, by turning particular issues / problems into questions (often taking the form 'How can I …?'), a constructive inquiry-oriented process can ensue, with teachers starting to find answers for themselves, via collaborative consultation of other teachers' experience. In this manner they can gain potentially appropriate new ideas and develop the confidence to try them out in their own classrooms. This can be sufficient as a bottom-up teacher development activity in itself but it can also be a stepping-stone to further teacher-research. Thus, if workshop participants can then be further encouraged to evaluate the results of implementing new ideas (as with the teachers whose reports are in this book), the process described here can be seen to be a confidence-building stepping-stone to relatively individualistic classroom-based inquiry.

As the stories show, solutions can come from the major resource of other teachers' suggestions, and then from the experience of trying them out and reflecting on / evaluating the success or otherwise of doing so. This, then, turns into a kind of 'action research' process.

Analysis of feedback on dissemination activity by participants following the workshop showed that they had certainly found value in the process of finding their own solutions in collaboration with others and were now keen

to recreate the same kind of sharing environment with other teachers. For example:

> *One major thing I learnt from the Hornby School was that 'sharing' teaches you more than any book or teacher. This is what I wanted to convey to my fellow teachers.* (Merium)

> *After one month, I conducted a workshop with 50 teachers of my school. I did not teach them new ways. Instead I created an environment for them to find solutions to their classroom challenges in the same way as [the] Hornby School did with its teachers.* (Zainab)

> *I asked all of them to write similar problems on one chart paper and paste them on the wall. Then everybody rotated around and tick marked the questions to which they knew answers along with their names. Then I asked [participants] to question the people who had answers to their queries and then present their own analysis/ conclusion.* (Nida)

Your own areas of inquiry

Think of a particular difficulty or other issue you are facing and try turning it into a question or questions for exploration.

Who could you ask (e.g. colleagues via interview or students via brief reflective writing) to get possible answers to your questions?

When will you go ahead and ask them for their possible answers?

Conclusion

This book is based on the premise that teachers themselves are the best 'experts' of their own classrooms, especially in a situation where ideas that are usually given to them via the relatively little pre-service or in-service training they receive are so often derived from relatively privileged settings. Key attitudes that we saw develop in the teachers who attended the school were being positive towards taking control of one's own development and being aware that collaboration – with other teachers, and with students – is something particularly valuable to be pursued when other resources or appropriate ideas are lacking.

Indeed, we suggest that the teaching contexts we are considering in this book are neither entirely 'difficult' nor lacking in resources when *human* resources – the teachers' and students' funds of knowledge, creativity and resilience – are considered. As stories in this collection indicate, it is remarkable how resourceful teachers can be in such settings. We have found that the approaches they adopt can have resonance for others in similar situations, and we hope that, in reading the book and watching the accompanying video-recordings, you will discover the same.

Acknowledgements

Meet the authors

Rupinderjit Dhaliwal

My name is Rupinderjit. I teach girls aged 10—16 years old in a Government Girls Senior Secondary School in Punjab, India.

Bishnu Kumar Khadka

Hi, I am Bishnu. I am a lecturer in English Education in Nepal.

Gulnaz Mondegarian

Hello, I am Gulnaz. I teach at St. Joseph's Convent High School in Karachi, Pakistan. I am presently teaching grade 5.

Fehmina Qaiser

My name is Fehmina and I have been an English teacher in a primary school but I also set up a 'garage school' in my home.

Bornali Gogoi

My name is Bornali. I am a teacher and teacher trainer from India. I like gardening, cooking and travelling. I have 104 students in one class.

Sagun Shrestha

My name is Sagun. I teach Grades 11 and 12 at St. Lawrence College, Kathmandu, Nepal. I have 45 students in my class.

Zainab Rao

I am Zainab. I teach 9—10 years olds in an Army Public School in Karachi, Pakistan. Most of my classes have about 35 students.

Babita Hepila

I am Babita. I teach in a Government Lower Primary School in Assam, India. It is situated in a small interior rural village called Miyurgpur.

Merium Aftab

My name is Merium. I am currently teaching in a private elementary school. Each class has about 45 students from diverse backgrounds.

Saima Iqbal

My name is Saima. I am from Karachi, Pakistan. I teach at KMA Girls Secondary School. The school caters to the needs of children who come from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Mohammad Rejaul Karim

My name is Mohammad Rejaul Karim. I am from Dhaka, Bangladesh. I teach at BRAC Institute of Languages (BIL), BRAC University.

Nida Akif

My name is Nida. I teach students aged 13—16 years of age in a small, private institution in Pakistan.

Fatima Farheen Nisha Chowdhury

My name is Fatima. I teach children aged 9—12 years old in Dhaka, Bangladesh. There are about 25 students in each of my classes.

Parmeshwor Baral

I am Parmeshwor. I teach in a Higher Secondary School in Pokhara, Nepal. On average, I have 40 students in my classes.

Kiran Gogoi

My name is Kiran. I am from North Lakhimpur, Sialbari, Charaimoria in Assam, India.

Krishna Deuba

My name is Krishna. I work as a teacher trainer for Global Action Nepal in Lamjung district.
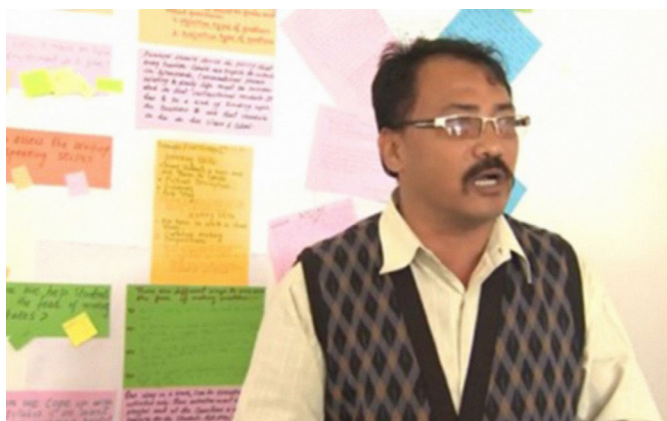
Rajan Kumar Chharahang

I am Rajan. I have over 17 years teaching experience. I teach secondary level students in Boratnager, Nepal. I have about 20 students in each class.

Bhogendra Lamichchane

My name is Bhogendra. I am a teacher trainer from Nepal.

Joya Senchowa

Hello, I'm Joya. I am a Primary Teacher in Majuli, Assam (India) and also a teacher trainer.
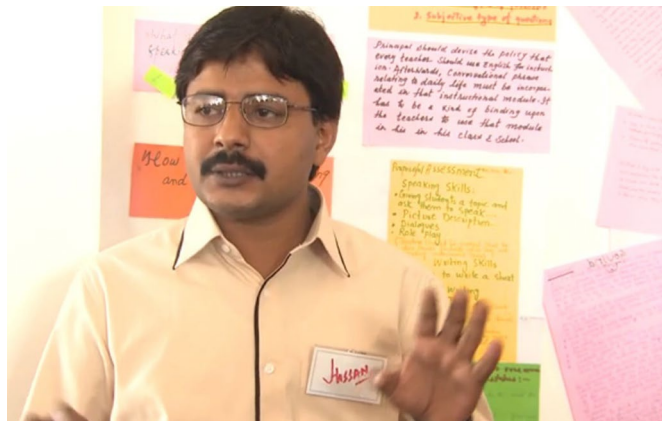
Hassan Mehmood

My name is Hassan. I teach secondary school students in Punjab, Pakistan. There are between 30 and 35 students in my classes.

Pankaj Dwivedi

My name is Pankaj. I work as a PhD scholar-cum-English-teaching assistant at the Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, Punjab, India.

Amarnath

I am Amarnath from Bihar, India. I teach 13—18 years old and have about 60 students in my classroom.

Mandeep Choudhary

My name is Mandeep and I teach in a government school in India.

Indumati Mehta

My name is Indumati. I teach English in a rural high school in India.

Govind Sharma Bashyal

My name is Govind and I teach English at secondary and higher secondary level in Butwal, Lumbini, Nepal.
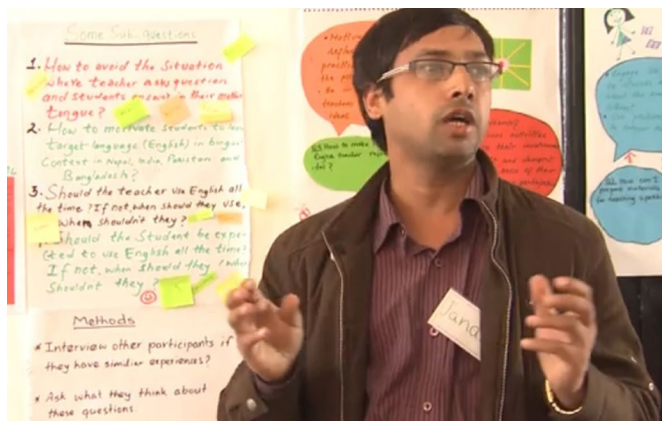
Janak Raj Pant

My name is Janak. I work as a trainer and training co-ordinator for the Nepal English Language Teachers' Association.

Samaraj Dulal

I am Samaraj. I teach students in a Higher Secondary School in Banepa, Nepal.

Stories of success

Introducing creativity

Gulnaz Mondegarian
Karachi, Pakistan

My name is Gulnaz Mondegarian. I teach at St. Joseph's Convent High School and am presently teaching grade 5.

Teaching is a very challenging profession. If you want your students to become successful then it is important to introduce new techniques to help them based on their needs. One of my teaching subjects is English Literature. I used to teach my 9–10-year-old students by reading the text, explaining the difficult words and then asking them questions but I realised that my children were not coming up with the type of answers that I expected from them. They were just using the exact words from the text and making innumerable grammatical mistakes. To bring about a change I introduced role-play into my lessons. My students act out the texts in the form of a play, taking on characters and making up dialogues. Introducing this creative element has helped my learners understand the texts and improve their speaking and grammar to some extent.

With composition writing, too, I felt the limited range of topics was restricting the students' creative flow of ideas, so I introduced free writing. At the start of each lesson I try to get my students to write for a few minutes on anything which comes to mind. It may be about an interesting weekend or something which they did or experienced during the week. This activity has proved beneficial in improving their creative writing. Many girls started reading their work aloud and sharing their experiences with others. Listening to those girls has helped others to gain the confidence to share their writings too.

See Gulnaz telling her story on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/using-role-play-free-writing-introduce-creativity

Reflection questions

1. How does creating dialogues from texts give learners a deeper understanding of the content or the characters?

2. How did free writing benefit Gulnaz's students? How could it benefit yours? Would you like to try it?

Back to basics

Rupinderjit Dhaliwal
Punjab, India

My name is Rupinderjit Dhaliwal and I teach English at the Government Girls Senior Secondary School, Dera Baba Nanak, Punjab, India. The school offers education from grade 6 to 12 and most of the girls are from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Soon after I joined, I realised that though my learners had studied English from grade 1, they could not read nor utter a single sentence in English. But I could sense a kind of curiosity from the look in their eyes. My story is about my grade 7 learners (11–13 year olds). The challenge I faced was how to get them to read. By reflecting on the strategies employed to help young beginners learn a language in school, I saw a ray of hope. At school, beginners recite rhymes before they learn the letters of the alphabet. This rhythmic and musical exposure to the language provides them with different learning experiences – sounds, actions and pictures – and learning a language is fun.

I took a poem, 'The Ice-Cream Man', from their textbook. I told them to keep their books closed and I drilled the poem with the whole class. Then I divided the class into groups of six to practise the recitation. I regrouped them three times. Throughout, I monitored and offered support. After ten days I was amazed that every learner could recite the poem well, even the least able. Without reading a word, they had succeeded in memorising and reciting a full, page-long poem. They were really pleased with themselves and when I asked them to read the poem from their textbooks, they found it easy. Reciting before reading had given them confidence.

I am glad that now the majority of my learners engage themselves in English language learning with great interest and I feel proud when my learners compete and win inter-school Spell-Bees, Poem Recitations and Quiz Competitions.

See Rupinderjit telling her story on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/using-rhymes-help-students-learn-english

Reflection questions

1. Do you face similar challenges in the context where you teach? What approaches have you tried to help your learners read and speak?

2. We often associate using rhymes and songs with primary children. What do you think about using them with secondary students? What are the benefits to 'hearing and saying' before attempting to read and write?

Operation mobilisation!

Bishnu Kumar Khadka
Nepal

My name is Bishnu Kumar Khadka and I am a lecturer of English Language Education at Mid-Western University, Surkhet, Nepal.

When I started, it was a newly established university with only 18 undergraduate students in English Education. They had a good English proficiency level and were probably aged between 23 and 40 years. The physical facilities, however, were not good enough; in the classroom there were only a few desks, benches and a white board. The curriculum required the use of internet facilities but we did not have them at that time. The university had also decided to adopt the semester system and internal assessment, so teachers and students would need to take more responsibility for their teaching and learning, and as my story tells, become much more resourceful.

With no orientation or materials I was given a completely new course to teach – 'Nepalese English and Nepalese ELT' – focused on English discourses (original and translated) by Nepalese writers. I felt like a soldier sent to the battlefield with no weapons or training. Anyway, there was no option but to face the students but my concern was about the resources rather than the pedagogy. I went through the syllabus in detail and then tried to collect the prescribed texts but I could find none of them at the local bookstalls. I consulted the course designers and they promised to send them to me, but I needed them urgently so I decided to mobilise the students.

I made a long list of the poetry, short stories, novels, essays etc. prescribed in the syllabus and handed it over to the students – their first assignment would be to collect as many of the texts as possible. Their second task was to read whatever they could find and analyse the language in terms of phonology, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, stylistics and other features, thereby identifying the 'Nepaleseness' of Nepali varieties of English. I then decided that this would be evaluated as part of their internal assessment.

The students took it upon themselves to call a meeting and get organised. They searched on different websites of publication houses. They consulted their seniors too and collected some of the materials. They then collected money and appointed one student to go to Kathmandu and collect the remaining texts. Once they had them, they informed me and began to prepare their assignments.

While they were busy preparing their presentations, I organised for the Academic Director and other faculty members to be present to evaluate their presentations. We would be the first to implement the spirit of the semester system and the activity-based learning process.

On the day of the presentations, the students did really well and even the Dean was there to hear them. I was giddy with pleasure watching their presentations and everyone praised my students and me. We created a positive impression. Whereas others had not even started to run their classes, we had completed one assignment due to the mobilisation and participation of the students. I had not imagined that sort of success possible; it was a truly remarkable moment in my career.

Reflection questions

1. Bishnu mobilised his students to gather texts. What resources or materials could you get your students to gather? How could you then use these resources in the classroom?

2. Do you use activity-based learning with your students? What kind of projects do you think they would find interesting and motivating?

Getting the whole group on task

Bornali Gogoi
Assam, India

See Barnali telling her story on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/involving-whole-group-lesson

My name is Bornali Gogoi. I teach at Gandhi Vidya Mandir M.E School, a government school situated in a small town of Assam. There are 410 students and ten teachers. Class sizes are large and there is limited space. Class VIII, which has 104 students, is held in a hall. I teach class VIII English.

The English proficiency of my students is quite low and some of my students can neither read nor understand what they read. I often have to explain the text line by line. Some don't get involved in group tasks because they just find everything too difficult and above their level. Added to that, because of the large number of students, the classroom layout and lack of space, I can't move around the room easily nor give individual attention. I reflected on these problems and on my previous classes and I came up with a plan which worked. Here is my lesson success story.

My aim was reading with understanding and I used two paragraphs from 'This is Today's Fawn' from the textbook. Here are the steps I followed:

1. I elicited the names of animals: doe, fawn, snake etc. using pictures because I knew that some students know the names in Assamese but not in English and with the help of the others they could learn the words without my support.

2. To motivate the students and gain their attention, I asked them to tell a very short story in groups and I asked one or two groups to tell the whole class.

3. Then I slowly read the two paragraphs and asked the students to follow as well as they could.

4. I read the paragraphs again pausing to elicit words from my students and keep them focused.

5. I read the paragraphs again and asked the students to focus on the meaning of the sentences. I asked them to locate the difficult words and then with the help of pictures or gestures I helped them understand the meaning.

6. I asked them to read individually and then in their groups (if individuals didn't understand, they asked members of their groups).

7. To find out whether they had understood the text I gave them an activity.

Activity

8. I divided the class into groups by asking alternate rows to turn around and face those behind them.

9. I gave them some pieces of paper on which there was either a question or an answer.

10. I asked them to match the questions and answers.

11. I said that for each wrong answer they would get a negative mark but they could refer to their textbooks.

12. I also said that the winning team with all the right answers would get a prize.

I found that all the members of the groups were involved in the task and completed it within a very short time. When I did whole class feedback, all the groups had the right answers. How was this possible? I think there are three main reasons:

■ While trying to find the right answers, they were reading the text and trying to grasp the meaning by themselves in order to avoid negative marks (which was my plan).

■ As it was a group task, the advanced learners were helping the less able learners for fear of negative marks.

■ They were all enjoying the activity and everybody was involved in the task as the activity was at their level and they were allowed to refer to the textbook when they were unsure.

That day I was very happy because the lesson went well. Everything went according to plan, I got the whole group (104 students) involved and working together, they all achieved and enjoyed what they did. For me, that is a success.

Reflection questions

1. What constraints do you face with your classroom space and resources? How can you manage your space to carry out and monitor pair and group work?

2. What problems do you face with mixed-level groups? How could you use the mix of levels and abilities in your classes in a positive way?

Making learning meaningful!

Fatima Farheen Nisha Chowdhury
Dhaka, Bangladesh

My name is Fatima Farheen Nisha Chowdhury and I teach grades 1–5 in a private primary school. I teach English and sometimes Science in English since English is the medium of instruction.

In a teacher's life any successful lesson becomes a success story so each and every day of my teaching I have encountered some tiny successes. But the one that stands out and which made me realise that students learn with interest and attention only when they are engaged at a meaningful level, is a grade 2 Science lesson.

The unit was on the life cycle of plants and I spent one whole 45-minute lesson describing this with the help of pictures. Three or four students listened and paid attention but all the others were playing around at the back of the room. After this I knew I had to think of some other, non-traditional way to get their attention and rouse their interest. I decided to get them engaged in a fun activity.

The next day I got each student a paper cup, coloured them and put them on the table. When they entered the class after break they saw the coloured cups and thought they might be getting a drink as a treat! But I told them to each take a cup and write their name on it. They immediately did what I said, and then I took all of them to the playground where we have a garden. I told them to half-fill the cups with dry soil from the garden. Then I gave them some seeds and instructed them to make a hole in the middle of the soil, put the seeds in and cover with soil again. I told them to water the dry soil just a little. Then we all put the cups outside the classroom on a balcony where they would get some sunshine.

As I was doing these activities with the students, I was amazed at how many questions they asked me: why were we putting the soil in, why were we making a hole and putting seeds in, what would happen next, why were we adding water, why were we putting them on the balcony and not in the playground? All I had to do was answer their questions. I didn't have to teach them anything; they were so curious to know about the life cycle of a plant.

They waited eagerly to see their plants come out of the soil. They checked every day and finally after a week a small plant with two leaves came out. I can't describe in words how happy and cheerful those students were that day, it was as if they had discovered something new. Indeed they had, they had discovered a new life, and learnt about the life cycle of plants.

I also discovered something new – that to teach only with the textbook is not going to work. We, as teachers, must bring the textbook to life and keep our lessons lively and effective. Teaching might be easy, but successful learning is another matter. And from this small success I discovered a new teacher in me, and a new set of students eager to learn as a result of that small change in my approach.

Reflection questions

1. What can you do to bring your textbook to life and make learning meaningful to your students?

2. There is an old saying: "Tell me and I will forget; show me and I might remember; involve me and I will understand". What projects could you do with your learners to arouse their interest and help them understand?

Creating a 'garage school'

Fehmina Qaiser
Karachi, Pakistan

My name is Fehmina and fifteen years ago I was a teacher in a primary school in Rawalpindi, but this story is not about that school, it is about a garage school I created at my home.

One day as I was putting groceries in my car, three street boys came up to me asking for money. I looked at those innocent faces and asked "Why don't you go to school or study?" They looked at me and one of them asked, "Will you send us to school? Will you teach us?" That moment touched my heart so I told them to meet me at the same place the next afternoon. I didn't expect them to be there.

The next day to my surprise there were five boys waiting for me. I took them home and that was the start of my garage school. We started off with a story and they had a lot of stories of their own to share from their day-to-day experiences. They all went off happily and promised to be back the next day.

I wanted them to be comfortable, so I set about arranging some matting, stools and a small board and chalk. I collected paper, pencils, colours and lots of old books from my friends and relatives. The boys were fascinated as they had never been to a 'proper' school. However, their parents were not too happy because they generally earned at least 20 rupees a day. I told them to work more in the mornings so they could study in the afternoons and offered to make up their earnings if they fell short. They were so happy because they were so keen to learn.

I taught English, Urdu and Maths but I needed more resources so I started making them myself from bottle caps, ice cream sticks, old beads and buttons. I made materials from old shoe boxes, used books, newspapers etc. I was very fortunate to receive donations of stationery items and cash from friends and family. By the grace of God I was able to make ends meet. Sometimes it just seemed like too much work but when I saw the enthusiasm on the faces of those kids I got the strength to carry on. Slowly the garage became too small as the number of kids grew but I had an empty plot just beside my house with a big shady tree so I moved some children there. Now I faced another problem as the kids coming in were of different ages and I was the only teacher.

My maid's daughter was high-school certified, and she also needed an income so when I told her I would pay her to teach she jumped at the chance. Now I could divide the children into two groups and we started using different books and resources.
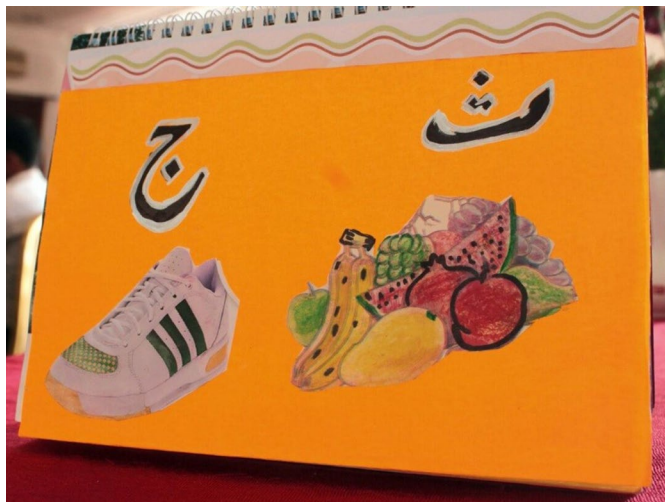
Then when one of my cousins saw just how willing the kids were to learn he volunteered to give a computer class every day. The kids were out of this world – it was like a dream come true for them!

With so many kids though, it put a strain on resources. Once we were really short of water and I thought I would have to send the kids away, but all of a sudden a big water tanker arrived and the driver told me he'd been ordered to fill our water tank. I was taken aback and asked a number of times who had sent it but he said he'd just got a payment and been told to supply water to this address. To this day I don't know who sent it. I was also paying a lot of kids 20 rupees a day because I knew they couldn't attend school if they didn't get it. Without the support of my friends and family it just wouldn't have been possible to carry on and I'm really grateful for their help.

As time went on the students wanted uniforms like other school children. I contacted the big uniform outlets and they were kind enough to provide us with shirts and trousers of different colours and sizes. So our students got to wear uniforms which were not quite uniform but it made them happy. They were also fed as friends often brought in food for everyone. Gradually we got more teachers – on low salaries as we could not afford much, but they were dedicated and we carried on with our mission with an ever-growing bunch of students. They were so enthusiastic to learn and were really grasping the language and mathematics; some of them were quite brilliant and could do any task they were given. I started to wonder about their future.

I approached the government schools and schools with very low fees. Could they take the students if they qualified for standard five? We worked hard with those who were ready and finally managed to get seven of our students into mainstream education – a great achievement for us all.

Unfortunately, after three years I had to leave that school and go abroad. I left it in the hands of some volunteers and although it continued for about a year, slowly the students dropped off. But what I noticed during my time with those street kids was how education left an impression. In the early days when they got food, they would gobble it all up in one go. They were rude and badly-behaved, but slowly they began to show good manners, they wanted to please us and they started to behave. It was as if they were becoming aware of what education could do for them. Some parents even visited me to express their gratitude. They wanted their sons to carry on because they believed that learning was making them better people.

Over 120 students passed through that garage school but when I think about it, it was a drop in the ocean. Nevertheless, even if I managed to put a drop in the ocean, I have achieved some success in my life.

See Fehmina telling her story on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/creating-a-garage-school

Attitude is everything

Kiran Gogoi
Assam, India

My name is Kiran Gogoi and I am an English teacher at an Assamese Medium Middle-classes (Class VI to VIII) school. The Name of the school is Chilarai Middle English School located in a remote village area of Narayanpur, Assam, India.

When I joined this school in the first week of October – almost at the end of the school year as annual final examinations are held here at the very beginning of December – I was asked to teach English to class VII. The previous teacher was clearly not impressed with this class. "The students are not in the habit of reading at home, they are unable to write, speak or recite anything in English. In fact, most of them are dull. Whatever you teach them is a waste of time. They just sit there and say nothing except to create a disturbance!"

Being a new member of staff I just agreed with him, knowing that if I questioned him it would be considered insulting. But deep down I know that 'actions speak louder than words' so I just said, "Yes, Sir, you are right. But where should I start?" "'Mystery of the Talking Fan' – a poem". "Ok, Sir. Will you please introduce me to the students?"

And that was day one, but to my immense pleasure at the end of day four when I asked, "How many of you can recite the poem?" half of my new students promptly stood up. By the end of the week when I asked the question again, all of them stood up! A week or two later I was absent for two days and on my return the previous teacher came to me with a look of a highly surprised exclamation mark on his face. "What have you done to the students? In just a week, they can all recite the poem! Some are even ready to write it. How is this possible?"

Now, did I do anything extraordinary? The answer is a big 'No'. I just followed these twelve steps:

1. **Drawing attention:** I just pointed to some classroom objects.
    "What's this?" "Table."
    "What's this?" "Chair"
    "What's that?" "Blackboard" etc.
    I finished with the ceiling fan.

2. **Let them imagine:** I asked them to close their eyes and hear and feel the sounds of the fan.

3. **Let them guess:** I asked "Can you guess which poem I'm going to teach you?" Quite a few quickly found the page of the textbook and the poem, and the others quickly followed them.

4. **A few facts about the poem:** I asked some questions.
    "How many lines are there?"
    "Good. Name the poet."
    "Do you know any of the words?"

5. **Developing listening skills:** I asked them to close their eyes and books. I gave three model recitations and they all listened.

6. **Find out what's hard to pronounce:** I asked them to repeat after me. They followed and in the process I found out which words they found hard to pronounce.

7. **Drill:** I wrote those words on the blackboard and drilled them until everyone could pronounce the words correctly. Later I pointed to specific words on the board and elicited their pronunciation.

8. **Model recitation and practice:** The students followed my recitation.

9. **Group work and motivation:** A few volunteers led the recitation while others followed. Sometimes the volunteers also needed help but I always praised them. To motivate the others I explained that all would be leaders as soon as they could recite the poem. It worked like magic because everyone wanted to be a leader.

10. Pair work, monitoring, counselling: The students were paired in such a way that advanced and slower learners worked together – a kind of peer learning – and I monitored. Later I grouped all the slower learners together and gave them extra support.

11. Consolidation, final practice: I gave another model recitation and they listened and followed. Then we did a choral recitation. Finally, each bench recited one line – boys, then girls and so on.

12. Home assignment: I asked the students to practise at home and memorise the poem.

I know I didn't use any innovative techniques nor was there any magic. Rather, I probably wasted seven long days to teach a poem. But it's a great achievement for me, not because I taught them a poem, but because my belief that children learn better if they are taught with love and affection was strengthened anew. I tried to encourage all the students by appreciating their every effort and ignoring their every mistake. We need to think of our students as a resource rather than a nuisance. Instead of treating them as empty-headed we need to exploit their experiences. The teacher who can think and see the world through their eyes will love them and this love can help us become better teachers. Always encourage them all to do the best they can.

I think our actions are the product of our own thoughts and attitude. A negative attitude is like a punctured tyre - we can go nowhere unless we change it.

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Reflection questions

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1. Do you teach poetry to your students? How do you do it? What do you think of the twelve steps Kiran followed?

2. 'We need to think of our students as a resource … and exploit their experiences'. How do you exploit your students' experiences in your teaching?

Five rules, drama and questions

Rajan Kumar Chharahang
Biratnagar, Nepal

My name is Rajan and I teach at Bal Batika English Boarding School (BBEBS) in Biratnagar, in the east of Nepal. Students from low and middle class families attend this school because they can't pay the fees of the costly schools in and around Biratnagar.

Though students are well-behaved, we face a lot of problems in teaching them. The school provides them with a daily diary to remind them of their home tasks and other work to be completed but this is never checked or completed by their guardians and very few students review their schoolwork or read at home. I teach English, which is a second language and not spoken in the home, and there is no opportunity outside school to practise or improve English. Added to that, even at school most prefer to communicate in their first language only. Another issue is exams. Teachers are obliged to complete the textbook within a given time and lessons are exam-oriented, leaving little time for communicative practice.

Despite these constraints, I have had some successes in my teaching and I would like to tell you about three activities which have worked well and why.

Five rules

My students used to make a lot of errors with verb forms when writing but as a result of an activity I introduced, they are now more conscious of these and can even correct their own mistakes when I remind them.

What I did was to give them five rules:

1. Be verb (am/is/are; was/were; be, being, been) + ingv (continuous form) or v3 (past participle)
2. Have verb (has/have; had) + v3
3. Do verb + v1 (present simple; root form of the verb)
4. Modals (will/would, shall/should, can/could, may/might, must, need, dare, used to) + v1
5. To + v1

I then told them to write a paragraph about any topic they wanted to. Most wrote about a festival, a favourite book or their family. I checked their writing, circled their mistakes, told them to look carefully at the five rules and correct their mistakes. Now most of the students avoid making these mistakes by applying the five rules.

Drama

With drama, my students found it difficult to understand the characters, their actions and the plot. But since I got them to act out the dialogues they find it much easier to explain the characters and their actions.

Questions

My students used to have a lot of problems with reading comprehension. What I did was to teach them to convert the question into a statement and give answers according to the information it seeks. So, 'How?' seeks the manner or way of doing something, 'Why?' looks for a reason, 'Who?' asks for a subject or doer of an action. I also taught them how to begin the answer e.g. the 'Why?' answer begins with 'because/because of', etc. Now, most of the students do better in reading comprehension.

There are still other problems to deal with but I am happy when my students avoid errors like 'don't ate' and 'is stole', when they understand the characters of the play and when they answer the questions correctly.

Reflection questions

1. Rajan gets his students to correct their own mistakes. Could you try this with your students? What do you think are the benefits of this approach to correction?
2. Have you tried using drama with your students? What are the benefits of play-acting? What reading activities in your text book could you adapt to introduce an element of drama into your classes?

Using technology to motivate learners

Sagun Shrestha, Nepal

My name is Sagun Shrestha and I am a grade 11–12 English teacher at St. Lawrence College, Kathmandu, Nepal. I have 45 students and the classroom is not equipped with anything other than furniture, ceiling fans and a whiteboard. There's a podium at the front where the teacher can stand and lecture. I teach compulsory English, which comprises English language and literature. Basically, we study grammar and language functions along with other language skills, whereas in English literature, we teach different literary texts from around the globe. There is a workbook for the students to practise language but surprisingly this also has to be completed during class time so there's a lot to complete in the course of ten months and time is an issue. Noise and motivation are also issues I had to deal with. I reflected on my teaching and explored possible reasons. I concluded that because of the class size and the mixed levels of the learners, the teacher-centred, lecture-style approach could not meet the needs of the students.

In fact, I tried using group work, pair work, role play and miming but that didn't work too well either so I thought of using interactive PowerPoint in my classroom. We didn't have a projector in our college, so I suggested the college administration provide one which we could use with our classes. They accepted my proposal and bought it. At first, to motivate everyone, I showed some short English video clips and asked them to discuss these. They had some good discussions, and then wrote about them. They would then present some of the writings in the class the next day. Once a month I also let them choose an English movie to watch. Showing the videos solved the problem of motivation and slowly the students became more positive about the lessons.

Then, I started to think about using PowerPoint to present literary texts. I divided the literary texts into two categories: those the students could read and present themselves, and those that would require the teacher's help. For the first few days, I dealt with the latter, preparing them with PowerPoint as a model. I used pictures, some video clips and text in my slides. Usually I used bullet points to make it interactive. It worked well. They listened, and everyone was engrossed in the slides and the explanation. They took some notes too.

I asked questions throughout and got their active participation. My happiness knew no bounds as I was changing them, and moreover my own way of teaching. As I felt they could do the simple texts on their own, I taught them how to make effective PowerPoint slides.

The next day, I asked one group of students to present. To my surprise, they did it very well and generated discussion. I got other students to present in the same way and even the less able students got involved, learning from their peers. They came to me asking questions and I was so happy to guide them. I decided to award merit cards to reward them for their hard work and motivate them more and they were so happy to receive these in front of the class.

I considered how I could use technology more for instruction and I created a class blog in which I posted summaries and their writing. They would read it at home and post comments. I also used www.nicenet.org to create a virtual classroom in which I posted questions once a week and they posted answers and comments on each others' answers. This generated some long discussion threads. My job was just to moderate so they would be encouraged to use their creativity and critical thinking to write the answers to the text-based questions.

This is my success story. I have also shared this approach with my colleagues and some of them are using it too.

Reflection questions

1. Do you have access to a multimedia projector? If yes, how do you use it? If no, how do you think you could use it if you could get one?

2. Do your students have access to mobile phones, computers, the internet? How could you exploit this technology to help them learn outside the classroom?

Switching to activity-based learning

Zainab Rao
Karachi, Pakistan

My name is Zainab Rao and I teach 9—10 year olds at the Army Public School in Karachi.

I interact with young primary grade students who have a very short attention span. They are quite restless but always eager to learn new things. However, they tend to forget things easily and can't recap what they have learnt. Added to that, there is a mix of levels; some learners work quickly and others are quite slow. What often happens is those who finish quickly disturb the others. So I introduced some specific activities to keep them all focused and to help them retain knowledge and key concepts.

I switched to activity-based learning instead of the conventional teacher-centred approach of explaining things on the board. I included games and more innovation in my lessons. For example, to learn adjectives, I asked them to bring a toy to class and the next day I asked them to describe their toys. Then, later when I asked them if they could remember the toys they brought to class, they themselves were eager to recap the adjectives we had learnt.

Similarly, with verb tenses, I asked them to prepare role plays of their daily routines, what they want to do in the future or different inspirational events in their grandparents' lives. This personalisation makes activities more interesting, it enhances their concentration and they look forward to doing new activities. They also come prepared as they love giving small presentations. Even shy students are now able to speak up and share their experiences.

I've made reading more interactive too so they don't get restless. I read stories to them and while they are listening inquisitively I ask them to pick out different parts of speech. I tell them they won't find out what happens next unless they find, for example, five prepositions, conjunctions or adverbs. So I exploit their curiosity and they are more interested in following my instructions as they want to hear the full story.

In order to keep all the learners busy and on-task I make them sit together, help each other and do peer-checking, and before they do this I write success criteria for marking notebooks on the board. I tell my students that their notebooks will not be marked if they do not responsibly check their partner's work. In this way, the more capable students help the others and they get to learn from their peers; they are kept busy and involved in doing something constructive.

These are some of the activities that I introduced and which work really well in my classroom.

Reflection questions

1. Have you experienced any of the problems Zainab describes? Which of the activities she uses could you try with your learners?

2. Zainab personalises learning by getting the children to bring in objects and create role plays based on their families' lives. How could you make learning more meaningful for your students?

Peer learning

Parmeshwor Baral
Pokhara, Nepal

My name is Parmeshwor Baral and I am a lecturer on the Foundation Language and Linguistics programme. My students are first-year undergraduates in a public college in my home town, Pokhara.

There are 42 students in the class and they have a mature attitude to studying. However, they find it hard to retain what they have learnt. Whenever I taught new content I always asked whether they understood and they always told me everything was clear but they couldn't answer in exams. I became quite worried since a teacher is evaluated on the basis of his students' performance in the final examination and I was pretty sure that most of them wouldn't pass. I consulted senior faculty members and fellow faculty members but still didn't know what I could do.

Eventually I came up with an idea and to implement it I created a pre-test. After checking the answers, I selected those with the highest scores and made them bench captains. In fact, I re-arranged the seating in the room too. I told those bench captains that after my presentation they would have ten minutes to clarify what I had said to their bench members. In the beginning there was a bit of a superiority/inferiority problem but the captains did such a fantastic job patiently answering the others' questions. When I saw this technique working I decided to change the bench captains every two weeks and surprisingly the less able students also started discussing the content and taking responsibility in classroom activities.

When the examination results came out, I was startled to see my students' results. For the first time in the history of that college, 100% students passed that paper. I have continued this practice with other students as well and when my friends ask me about my success, I tell them this story.

Reflection questions

1. Parmeshwor changed the layout of his classroom to facilitate group work and peer learning. Could you re-arrange the furniture in your classroom? If not, what else could you do to get your learners working in groups?

2. Have you ever set up study groups so that learners can review together when preparing for exams? How do you think this could benefit your students?

Strategies that work for me

Merium Aftab
Karachi, Pakistan

My name is Merium Aftab. I used to be a secondary school teacher but now I teach elementary students, aged 8–9 years, in a private school. I really feel that teaching secondary is far easier than teaching elementary learners because there is a great responsibility to build a strong foundation. I have 54 students from different social, religious and educational backgrounds and every day brings new challenges in terms of the syllabus content, the learners' prior knowledge, the time available, skills development and behaviour. This is my story of some strategies which have worked for me.

In my country children do not have well developed speaking and writing skills. To develop speaking skills I use an activity called 'Oracy'. Students are divided into groups and each group is given an object. They are asked to discuss the future versions of those objects. Students have 15 minutes to discuss their objects and decide how they are going to present this to the class. Each member has to say at least two lines and the group has 5–7 minutes to present their ideas. This helps students to develop their communicative skills and even though some students are not very confident at the beginning, after the discussion with their friends they do quite well.

On the first day of a new school year I organise my students into pairs and give them some questions to ask their partner. They note down the answers and later introduce their partners to the whole class. This works well as an ice-breaker and helps me to get to know about my students in a short space of time.

To develop writing skills I tried a simple activity – autobio-poem. I gave my students a model, writing it on the board and provided them with colourful cut-outs to write the autobio-poems on. They helped each other to describe themselves using interesting adjectives. This activity made them think about who they really are. With composition writing, I use reading passages in the textbook as models. I ask them to read the text twice and then tell me what they have learned from it. Then we look at what to write and how. This makes it much easier for them to write as they have the information and model structure in front of them. I get them to write a first draft and then peer check, correct their mistakes and write a final draft.

See Merium telling her story on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/how-encourage-manage-active-involvement-group-work

Correcting notebooks is also a big issue for teachers with large classes. I manage this by doing mass correction in the classroom. I ask my students to complete their exercises within a time limit so that I am left with 5–10 minutes to call out the correct answers while students correct their mistakes.

These are some of the strategies that I use successfully with my elementary learners.

Reflection questions

1. Do you face some of the same problems as Merium? Do you think some of these strategies could work for you? Which ones would you like to try?

2. Merium describes how she scaffolds the writing process by giving learners a model, drafting, peer checking, self-correcting and re-drafting. What do you think are the benefits of this approach? Could you use it with your learners?

Creating readers

Nida Akif
Karachi, Pakistan

My name is Nida Akif and I teach students aged from 13 to 16 at a private school. Being an 'O' level English language teacher my course content consists of composition writing and reading comprehension. My students are required to be creative, have a good range of vocabulary, good command of sentence structure, and have good general knowledge. This is my story of some action plans that I made for my students which were well executed.

My students come from diverse educational and social backgrounds and there is a vast difference in their command of the language. I feel that in order for them to understand and write, it is vital that they read so I was very disappointed to know that only five or six of my 50 students were readers. I realised I needed to get them into the habit.

I started off by asking them to bring in newspaper articles, magazine clippings, brochures and whatever else they could lay their hands on. I assigned soft board duties: students were appointed to manage the soft board by changing the clippings every week. All the students were asked to read the cuttings and I would randomly question them about these. Over time this aroused an interest in reading and students started borrowing books from the library. Gradually I saw how this interest in reading was influencing the students' writing – sentence formation improved and creativity grew.

After the summer vacation it was a moment of triumph when the number of readers in my class reached more than 50%, and students who didn't even read articles before, started sharing with me the novels they had enjoyed reading! So my story is that I created readers, and this is one of my proudest achievements.

Reflection questions

1. Do your learners enjoy reading? Do they read for pleasure? Do you have a library in your school or town? How could you motivate them to use it?

2. In this digital age, many learners prefer to read online. How could you encourage your learners to develop their reading skills in this way?

Building literacy skills

Babita Hepila
Assam, India

My name is Babita Hepila and I teach in a government lower primary school. It is situated in a small interior rural village called Miyurgpur in the Sangbar Educational Block in Dima Hasao district. The village where my school is situated is the village of my own community, the Dimasa tribe.

When I first joined the school in 2012, there was only one other teacher. There were six classes from nursery to class V with 9–15 students in each class. I taught classes III, IV and V and none of my students could read even the simplest words 'the', 'are', 'as', 'what' etc. How could I teach the children in these three classes to read when I had to take them all together at the same time, especially since I also had to teach subjects like mathematics, environmental studies, Hindi, mother tongue etc? It was a huge challenge but I had some success and this is my story.

Every day with my class V students I gave a model reading of a text and told the students to point to the words with their fingers and follow me. After two or three paragraphs I asked them to read aloud in unison. They did it making the same pronunciation mistakes again and again but I corrected them and encouraged them to continue reading. After this, I got them to take it in turns to read aloud and I translated the meaning of some words too. They kept asking 'What is this word?' and I could tell them ten times but they still had to ask me again. I never discouraged them from doing so. I wrote the difficult words on the board, broke them down into syllables, made them say them and explained the meanings again. Every day they were told to read a text for homework, and the next day we read it again. As time passed I gradually got them into the habit of reading.

I also used an activity I had learnt from British Council for reading poetry which worked very well with all my classes. After helping the students to understand the tough words, I wrote the poem on the board. Then I divided the class into two groups. I got these two groups to read alternate lines. I had to help them pronounce the words but after a few times they could read them well. Then, I started rubbing out two words at a time and got them to continue reading. I continued this way until all the words had been rubbed out. The students read and memorised the poem in no time at all.

One year later I can say that my students can read at least some simple words and they even try to read the long words by themselves. They often come to ask for story books to read and I feel very happy to see my students, who could not read such simple words as 'the', 'as' etc., reading story books which are not even on the syllabus.

Reflection questions

1. How do you teach literacy in your context? How do you get children into the habit of reading at home?

2. What do you think of the 'disappearing poem' activity? Could you use it with your learners? How could you use this activity with other text types such as dialogues or stories?

Learner-centred teaching and 21st century skills

Saima Iqbal
Karachi, Pakistan

My name is Saima Iqbal. I am from Karachi, Pakistan and I teach at KMA Girls Secondary school. I teach a class of 47 mixed ability students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Initially I found it very difficult to involve my students in a purposeful learning process and it became a hard nut to crack to measure the learning outcomes and figure out what was happening in the classroom. I went along with the syllabus and eventually managed to complete it within the specified time frame but I was unsure about whether the learners had developed any understanding of the content or not. I was afraid of introducing communicative activities in case I lost control of the class. Another big challenge which I faced was correcting work and assessment. It seemed to be a difficult task to assess my students' individual progress. In a nutshell, my lessons were teacher-centred where students were passive, discontented and unresponsive. Furthermore, I also realised we were only producing 'school minds' with few 21st century skills as learners just sat at their desks all day without any peer or group interaction. Even in Grade 10 they were unable to communicate in English language despite learning it from childhood. I tried to find solutions to my problems by learning from experienced colleagues and researching new methods. This really helped me to take the first step towards a learner-centred classroom.

I learnt that individual learning may not nurture confidence and collaboration skills so I divided my students into three groups: highest achievers, average students and below-average learners. I asked the groups to choose their leaders and I re-arranged the seating. I found grouping very useful as the students got a chance to interact with others, share their ideas and communicate. They began to feel responsible, they learnt to co-operate and help those students who were a little behind.

As I mentioned earlier, assessment of a large class is an ordeal. To deal with this issue I adopted assessment strategies such as self-correction, peer correction, group assessment, board tests and open book tests. With self-correction and peer correction students were learning from their own mistakes and finding the right answers with the help of their textbooks and group members. Open book tests proved very useful as during the process of checking answers they were revising grammar rules.

See Saima telling her story on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/developing-21st-century-skills

I also wondered how I could involve my students and engage them in effective learning. I decided to integrate the use of technology. It took me a whole month to prepare a PowerPoint presentation on tenses which included information about the topic, colourful images, and a short activity or test to help them grasp the concepts. I gave them this session in the library and was really surprised and glad to see the students' involvement and interest. They not only enjoyed learning but also participated actively and created small sentences on their own. They were thoroughly involved and engaged in learning. I prepared another multimedia presentation on active and passive voice. After the session, I again circulated a multiple choice question worksheet to assess the students' grasp of the grammar. They performed well and this encouraged me to teach all other grammar topics this way.

I also realised that to meet the needs of 21st century learners, it is vital that teachers equip themselves with novel and creative approaches to teaching so in 2009 and 2011 I undertook training on integrating IT, project-based learning, 21st century skills and assessment. This training had a great impact on my teaching and my learners. They developed skills in collaboration, communication, critical thinking, team working, social responsibility, self-direction, media literacy and self-accountability.

From 2009 to 2013 I did four projects on different themes, based on extensive learning from the course book. I involved students in discussions, debates, role play and creative writing, for example designing brochures, writing invitations for seminars, and poems. I designed listening and speaking activities and the students shared their learning through social media blogs and wiki.

I believe that change is the essence of a good teaching-learning process and I think it is my achievement that slowly and gradually I not only changed my approach to teaching but also inspired my colleagues to try new methods. I involved my students in projects and integrated IT so as to make them global citizens. I helped them to develop their higher order thinking skills and encouraged learner independence. I agree with Confucius that 'Everything true has four corners – as a teacher I give you one corner, and it is for you to find the other three'.

Reflection questions

1. What do you think of Saima's view of teaching? Do you feel that it is your responsibility to equip your students with skills for life in the 21st century? How could you promote collaboration, critical thinking, social responsibility and learner independence in your context? What would be the benefits for your students?

2. Do you have access to technology in your context? If not, how could you use project-based learning in a low-tech or low-resource context? What kind of projects would motivate and engage your learners?

Building teacher confidence

Krishna Deuba
Lamjung district, Nepal

My name is Krishna Deuba and I am working with Global Action Nepal (INGO) as a trainer in Lamjung. We are currently implementing a course designed by British Council Nepal: ETTE+ (English for Teaching, Teaching for English). The main objective of ETTE+ is to develop the proficiency levels of English language teachers.

Before our implementation of ETTE+, BC Nepal tested the teachers' language proficiency and the results ranged from A0 (pre-beginner) to B1 (intermediate). Since the language proficiency of the A0 teachers was so low, my colleague Mr Dipak Paudyal and I trained them separately.

Initially it was very difficult to communicate with the teachers. They were not even able to form basic sentences and they frequently used their mother tongue. As you can imagine, the fact that they were English teachers and could not speak English made them feel very uneasy. We dedicated the first day to introducing the course and organising everyone. We decided to make a training agreement and all agreed that during training sessions, everyone would do their best to speak in English. We also delegated responsibilities e.g., time-keeper, materials manager, reporter, reflector, etc. by making and using a job chart.

The training began and they were following most of the activities. They tried to speak in English, though it was not easy so we also introduced an extra daily English activity. Each day we asked the teachers to reflect on the activities and share funny, emotional or unforgettable moments with us all using English only. Participation was good and with each day I felt that they were improving. By the time the training finished nine days later, not all but a few teachers appeared to have improved and confidence levels were high.

Reflection questions

1. Do you have experience of training teachers with low English language proficiency? How do you encourage them to use English? Do you think there are times when use of the mother tongue is preferable/more effective?

2. Building confidence is an important aspect of teacher training. Krishna and his co-trainer delegated responsibilities and introduced a small daily activity to help with this. How do you build confidence if you train teachers? Can you think of other ways to make teachers feel good about themselves and what they do?

Changing teachers' attitudes

Bhogendra Lamichchane
Kathmandu, Nepal

My name is Bhogendra Lamichchane and I am a primary teacher trainer in Nepal. Last October I and Deepak Poudel, teacher trainer of Global Action Nepal, went to Lamjung district to train teachers on interactive methodologies for nine days. Immediately we started the training, the teachers resisted. They were passive, unwilling to participate and would not do certain activities. We were frustrated and disappointed, and needed to find out why.

That evening we asked them. Many of them explained that they were elderly and nearing retirement so the training had no meaning for them. They had been forced to attend and that was the only reason for them being there.

We hardly slept all night thinking and making plans to motivate them towards the training. We prepared some motivational stories, video clips and success stories. Similarly, we prepared some slide shows of old people, disabled people, people from marginalised communities etc. and their success stories and achievements. The next day we presented these and they worked!

The teachers started to participate actively in each and every activity. In fact, after the training one of the teachers told us he always used to say 'No' when his headmaster asked him to teach English, but now he was going to request English! Other teachers told us that this had been the best training of their lives.

Reflection questions

1. Have you ever experienced a situation like this? Did you manage to bring about a change in attitude? How do you think you could use motivational and/or success stories in your context?

2. As a teacher how do you keep up-to-date with the latest developments in English language teaching? Do you tend to resist change or do you welcome opportunities for learning about new ideas and ways of doing?

Getting to know you activity

Mohammad Rejaul Karim
Dhaka, Bangladesh

My name is Mohammad Rejaul Karim. I teach English Language courses at BRAC Institute of Languages (BIL), BRAC University but the story I am going to tell here is from a training session conducted at the British Council Teaching Centre, Dhanmondi, Dhaka.

It was the first day of training and I facilitated a 'Getting to know you' type of activity. I got the original idea from Dr. Jane Cullen, a professor at Open University, UK while attending a session with her in Dhaka back in 2010 but adapted it to this context. There were 32 school teachers participating, all from English medium schools in Dhaka.

To run the activity, I wrote four questions on a small piece of paper – six sets of questions can fit onto an A4 piece of paper. Regarding the questions, questions 1, 3 and 4 were usual questions designed to elicit the participants' personal details, their course expectation and what they could contribute to the workshop. Question 2 was open-ended and thought-provoking and it was designed to make the participants imagine something interesting to share with others. Whereas questions 1, 3 and 4 were the same for each participant, each question 2 was different. An example of a question 2 would be 'What would you do if you were invisible for a day?'

At the start of the activity, I gave clear instructions that it would be a walk and talk activity and for that reason all the participants would need to stand up. I also told them they were going to get to know more about each other and for that reason they should try and talk to six to eight participants. I also told them to remember the answers as there would be a sharing session at the end.

All the pieces of papers were on the front desk and all the participants came forward and picked one. So 16 participants got papers and 16 didn't. I told those with questions to go and ask those without papers all four questions. When they finished they should hand the piece of paper over to those they had just questioned. Then they would walk and talk to someone else without a paper and ask them the questions. This process was repeated six times. Some of the participants were very enthusiastic and talked to more than six people.
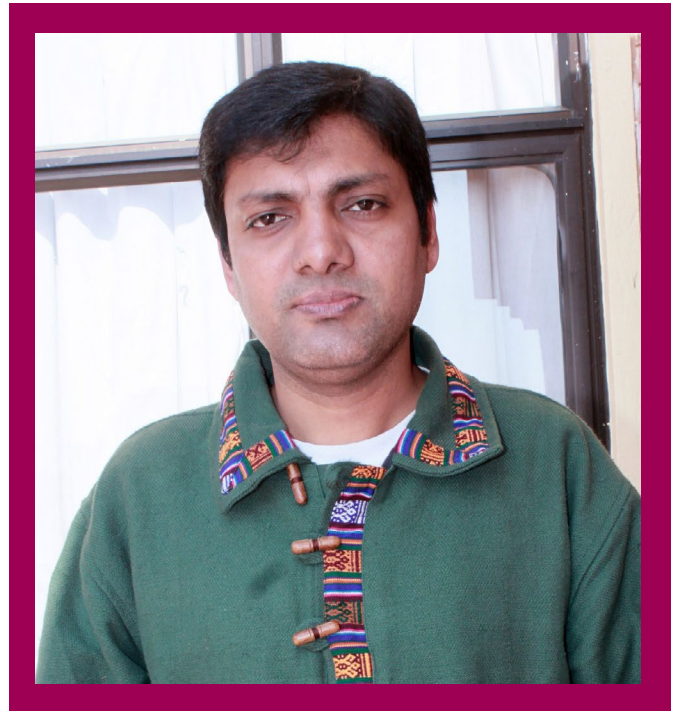
After twelve minutes I asked them to go back to their respective seats. Then I elicited some of the interesting findings. They really liked some of the findings which came from question 2.

The activity was very lively and everyone participated fully as they had to either ask or answer the whole time. Later I received feedback from some of the participating teachers telling me that they liked the activity and would use it in their own classrooms. It was a success.

Reflection questions

1. When are 'Getting to know you activities' like the one Rejaul described useful? What are the aims of such activities?

2. Could you use this activity with your trainees/learners? If not, how could you adapt it (as Rejaul did) to your context?

Stories of teacher-inquiry
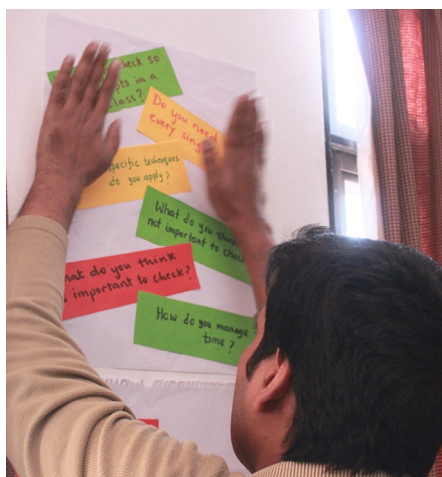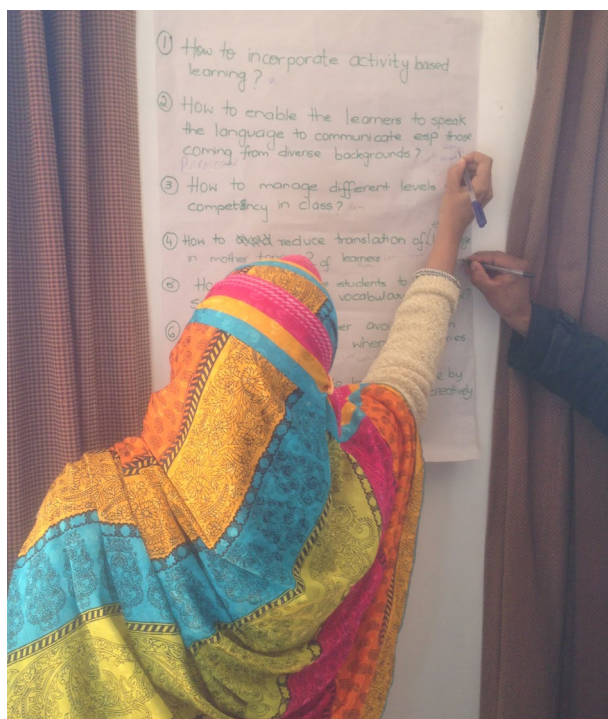
Correcting written work in large classes

Fehmina Qaiser – Pakistan
Mohammad Rejaul Karim – Bangladesh

The problem we face

Our situations are quite different in terms of the ages of our students but we face the same issue – correcting so many students' written work.

Every week we need to mark and give feedback on hundreds of written copies which requires a considerable effort on the part of the teacher. Sometimes it is not possible to return the copies on time because there is so much checking to do when students lack vocabulary and ideas and make so many mistakes. However, it is very important for the students to receive timely feedback as marks greatly influence their grades. For me, Rejaul, another major issue is that I must do all my marking at the university as we are not allowed to take student work home.

What we did

We formulated questions

Together we shared and discussed our problems and agreed that we should seek advice from colleagues who teach large classes and find answers to the following questions:

- How do you check so many scripts?
- Do you need to check every single copy?
- What specific techniques do you apply?
- What do you think is not important to check?
- What do you think is important to check?
- How do you manage time?
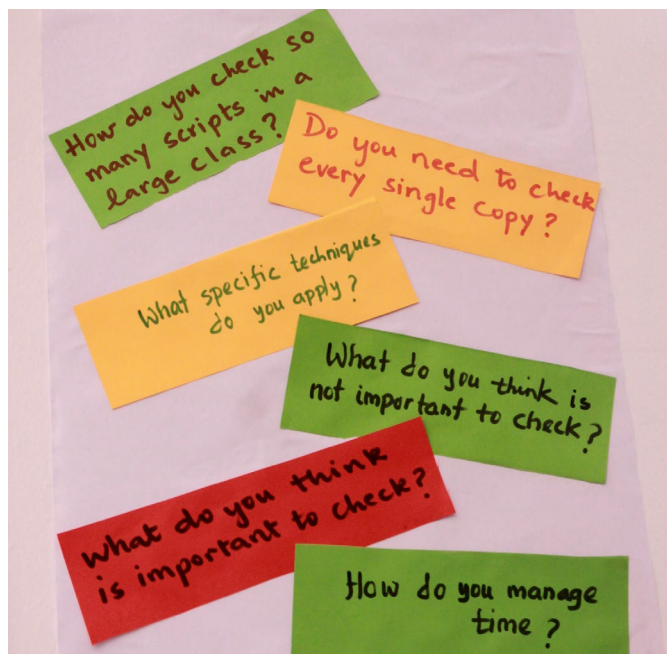
My name is Fehmina Qaiser and I teach English language and literature, and history, to primary and secondary students in a school in Pakistan.
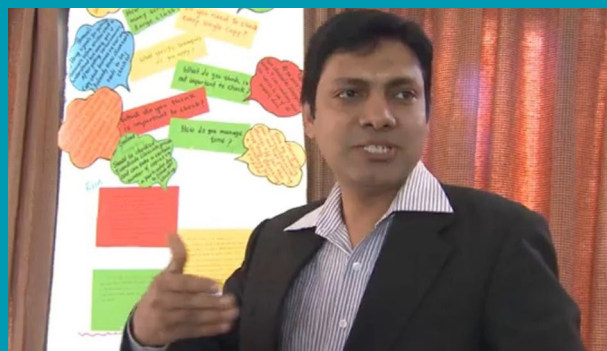
My name is Mohammad Rejaul Karim. I teach English language courses to undergraduate students and trainee teachers at a university in Bangladesh. The total number of students is 55 to 65 and they attend two writing classes per week.

We discussed our problems and consulted colleagues

We shared our experiences with colleagues and we interviewed several teachers who deal with large classes. We asked them questions around the area we were trying to explore and they gave us some useful suggestions which we could try in our classrooms.

What we learned

Most of our colleagues agreed that most work needs to be checked and preferably every day. However, they offered us some suggestions for reducing and managing the daily workload.

Check while the students are working

As teachers we can monitor the students and give advice or make corrections while the students are working. To avoid interrupting the writing flow, this can be done towards the end of a paragraph or towards the end of the writing task.

Use peer checking

If we divide the students into groups of mixed levels and ensure there is a high level learner in the group we can give some responsibility to that student for checking and correcting work.

Do a verbal check first

One way of reducing the checking of written scripts is by doing a verbal check first. We can ask questions to get an overview of the students' understanding of the task. This will give us an indication of whose work may need looking at more closely.

Random check

If we use peer correction in groups, then instead of checking every copy we can randomly select copies from each group to be sure that the work has been done as it should have been.

Check one group at a time

Instead of taking in all the students' written work, we can organise the learners into groups and take different groups' work in on different days to correct.

Check different features depending on text type

When we are checking answers to grammar and content questions, then we need to check all. However, with open-ended questions, essays etc. we can focus on technical aspects. For example, with essays we can check there is an introduction, body and conclusion. We can also focus on other features such as attention grabbers, topic sentences etc.

### Create a work plan to manage class work and homework

It is also very useful to manage marking by making a comprehensive calendar/plan for each class's coursework and homework. If we stick to this plan we can manage the workload more easily.

Fehmina

When I returned home to my teaching context, I also consulted the teachers I work with to seek their ideas about the issues surrounding the correction of students' written work.

According to them, feedback and correction is a necessary part of the learning experience. However, students also need to be encouraged to use the language so there is a risk that correcting students while they are trying to do their best could discourage them.

They also felt that it is important not to correct every error we see when marking students' written work. Instead, we should think about each student's level and consider – What mistakes might they be able to correct themselves? What should they be looking to correct at this level? It's also important to look for words and expressions the students could have used.
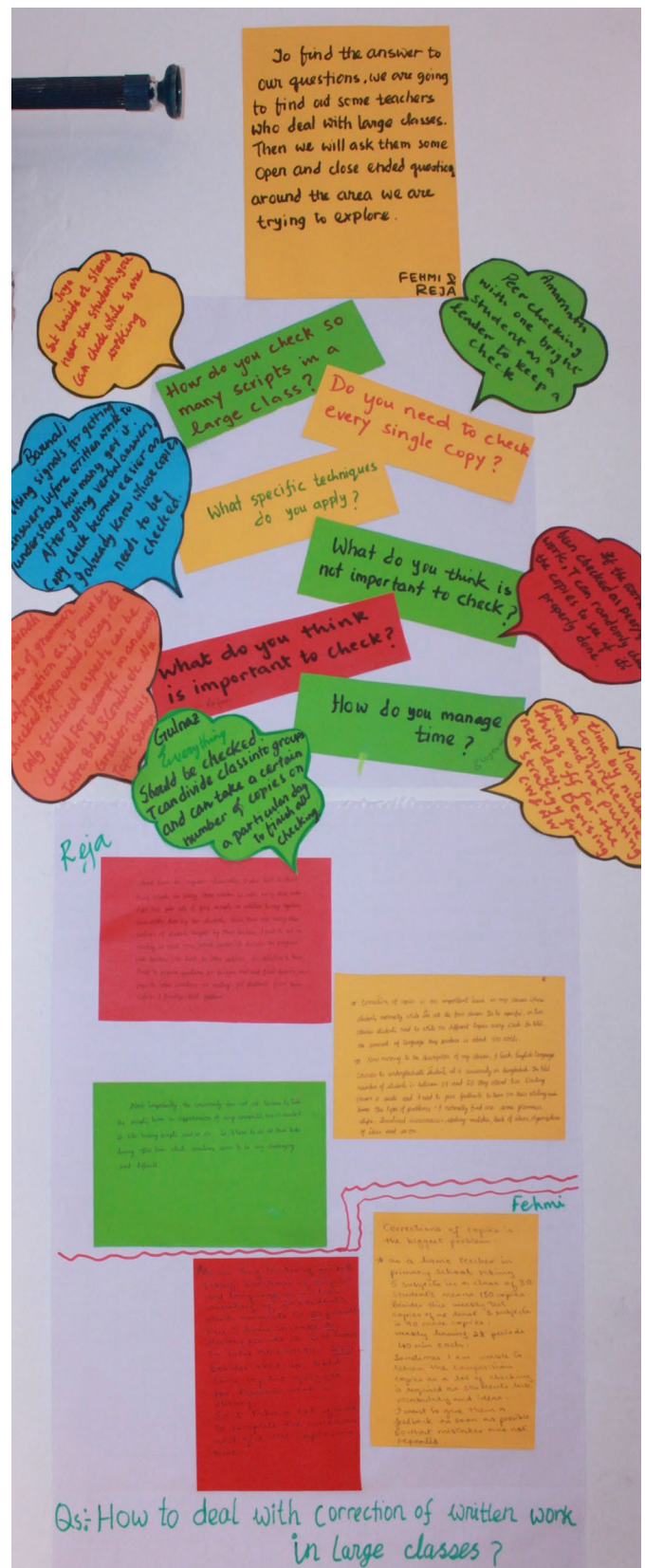
By noting (some of) these, we can help our students build their vocabulary, especially if they incorporate some of the suggestions given by the teacher in subsequent drafts. And we should always remember to praise good work, and good efforts, and to respond personally to the work – Were there any interesting ideas? What did I like about it? – and write a sentence or two about this.

Finally, some colleagues we had consulted had concerns about letting students correct their own mistakes. They worried that if errors went unchecked, incorrect language use would be reinforced. However, when I discussed this with the teachers I work with, they were of the opinion that language learning is a long process during which the learner will make many mistakes and if students are continually corrected they will become inhibited and less engaged, which is the exact opposite of what the teacher is trying to achieve.

What we tried

Fehmina

Together with the teachers I work with we decided that since feedback and correction is such an integral part of the learning process, we would devote time to this in the lessons. We created flashcards of words which students frequently made mistakes with and displayed these so that the students could refer to these to correct their own mistakes in groups. We also gave hints or clues on the types of mistakes to look out for by, for example, circling words with pencil and then letting the students think about how these could be corrected. Some teachers divided students into mixed-level pairs instead.

Most of us were of the opinion that we could use delayed correction and involve the students more. Rather than laboriously working through each student's text, correcting every mistake and often rewriting whole sentences, we decided that a quicker and more effective method would be to use a correction code. The students were given a copy of the code and then asked to think about their mistakes and attempt to correct them themselves. This correction method has been adopted and practised with senior students quite successfully and as parents also understand the code, it also makes it easier for them to help their children. Here is a sample of the correction code we use:

Correction code:		
Sp	=	spelling
Gr	=	grammar
?	=	not clear / rephrase
WW	=	wrong word used
(!)	=	punctuation
>>	=	a missing word

We have tried using the code in class. We monitor the students as they work and mark in pencil some mistakes e.g. Sp so the students can work in pairs and discuss how they can correct these mistakes. They are also asked to note anything they like about each other's work, either the language or the ideas, and share this with their partner. At this point we also give our individual feedback which we have recorded. Then the students rewrite the text incorporating the changes and feedback. Some of us give this for homework, while others put the students into groups, ask them to pool their ideas and monitor them while they write a group text on the same theme, in class.

Rejaul

I decided to try checking my students' work in the classroom while they are still writing. I monitor the students as they write and try to check the first paragraph/s during the lesson. I leave a tick mark on the page so I know what has and has not been checked. This has helped in terms of saving time, and when I discussed it with my colleagues, they agreed that it is a good idea. Another suggestion that also saved me time was dividing the class into groups and taking in one group's work at a time to mark. Nevertheless, I still had a problem on Thursdays. On Thursdays I have very little time for marking since I am obliged to attend a number of meetings and this means that I sometimes fail to return scripts to students and have to keep them over the weekend. As a result students lose the opportunity to integrate my feedback over the weekend. I decided to consult a colleague who is very good at getting work marked on time and he told me he actually marks work as soon as it arrives on his desk and he never leaves work until he has finished them all. So, to make sure that my students get their scripts before the weekend starts, I now try to arrive before nine o'clock on Thursdays and check them before classes begin.

Another suggestion I tried was grouping students so that there was a high level student in each group who could take some responsibility for correcting work. However, this was only partially successful as only some of the problems in the texts were noticed, even though I provided rubrics as support. What is more, not all students were happy about a student correcting and marking their work. What did work though was peer checking. For example, during the drafting of essays or summaries I would give the students clear criteria and ask them to check each other's work against this. The checklist consisted of a list of questions guiding the students to look for specific features e.g. Is there an attention grabber? Is it relevant? etc. They liked doing this and found it to be a more acceptable and valid form of correction. The benefits of doing this are that by the time I receive the final draft, the students have already dealt with structural issues and this means I don't need to spend as much time on each script. It also means they are learning and improving and are more likely to pay attention to those aspects of writing next time.

Being selective while checking open-ended answers and essays has proved very useful in making sure that students have structured their answers correctly. In my context, I still need to give detailed feedback, though as, each and every part of the essay is allocated marks. However, even though I feel that I should point out every type of mistake in students' writing so they are aware of these and can work on them, I do not focus on all types of mistakes at a time. From experience I've found that this demotivates learners and they lose interest. So, in the first few weeks we may focus, for example, on errors related to subject-verb agreement, and then address a different type of error.

Conclusion

Correcting written work should not be perceived as a burden; it needs to take place and is expected by the students. However, the manner in which teachers correct the students plays a vital role in whether students become confident in their usage or intimidated. Correcting students as a group, in correction sessions, at the end of the activities and involving them in the process encourages students to use English rather than worrying about making too many mistakes.

See Fehmina and Mohammed Rejaul reporting on the initial stage of their research on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/how-manage-correction-writing-large-classes

Reflection questions

1. How did Fehmina and Rejaul go about finding possible solutions to their problems? What problems do you face in your teaching context? Could you discuss these with your colleagues? Maybe they face similar difficulties and you can work together to find solutions. Or maybe they can suggest some tips which you can try out.

2. Have you tried any of these techniques with your students? If yes, were they successful? If no, which one(s) would you like to try?

3. Have you ever designed rubrics for your learners so they can peer check more effectively? What do you think about getting students to create rubrics, so they have a clearer understanding of what is expected of them when writing scripts?

Managing multiple classes in one room without partitions

Joya Senchowa – India; Bornali Gogoi – India
Babita Hapila – India; Krishna Deuba – Nepal

The problem we face

As a result of teacher shortages in our countries, we four all face the same problem – how to handle multiple classes together in one room with no partition. Additional problems arise when there is only one teacher in the school or when other teachers are absent, leaving only one teacher to manage all the classes. One of the main difficulties we share is maintaining a manageable noise level. With so many learners in one space it is difficult not to disturb other classes. And even though we try to occupy our other class(es) with activities while we are teaching another one, those learners become distracted, especially when we do interactive activities such as role plays, games or rhymes. Another issue is managing to give equal time and attention to each class, an issue which is compounded by the need to complete a heavy syllabus. We always feel that we cannot monitor the learning and progress of individual learners effectively.

What we did

We formulated questions

We discussed our situations together as a group and then came up with some questions which we could ask our colleagues:

- What should our lesson plans look like?
- How should we deal with multiple classes at the same time, especially in a single-teacher school?
- How can we divide time fairly between classes which take place at the same time?
- In a single-teacher school, how can the school operate when the teacher is sick or on leave?
- How can we manage a 45-minute period when teaching two to five English classes at the same time?
- How can we manage behaviour?
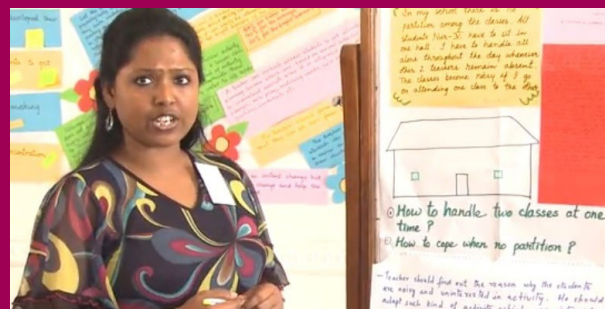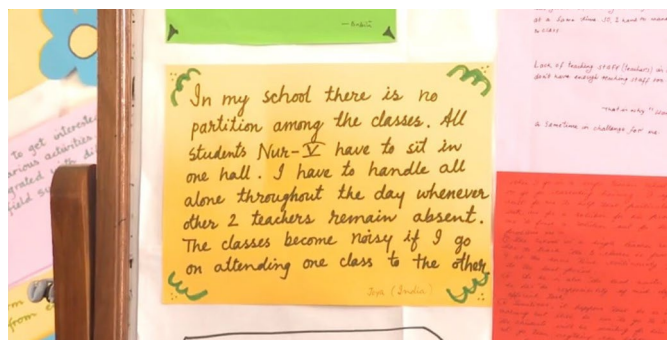
My name is Joya Senchowa and I am an Elementary teacher and teacher trainer for the government of Assam in India.

My name is Bornali Gogoi and I am an Elementary teacher and teacher trainer for the government of Assam in India.
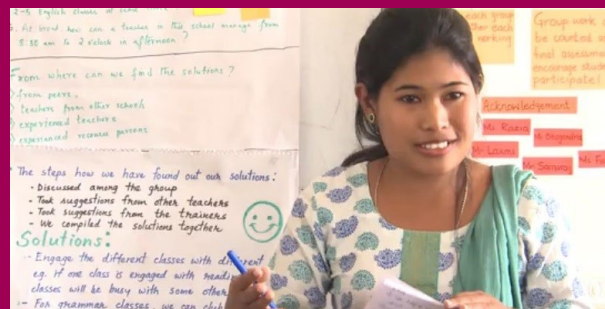
My name is Babita Hapila and I am an Elementary teacher and teacher trainer for the government of Assam in India.

My name is Krishna Deuba and I am an Elementary teacher and teacher trainer in Nepal.

We discussed our problems and consulted colleagues

We consulted colleagues and took their suggestions. We then compiled a list of possible solutions together.

What we learned

Use a mix of teacher-led and self-directed activities

We can set different classes different tasks. For example, while one class is engaged in a reading task which requires teacher presence, the other class(es) can be given a writing and drawing task or storybooks to read in groups. The important thing is that these self-directed activities are interesting and pitched at the level of the students; if not, they become bored and restless and noisy.
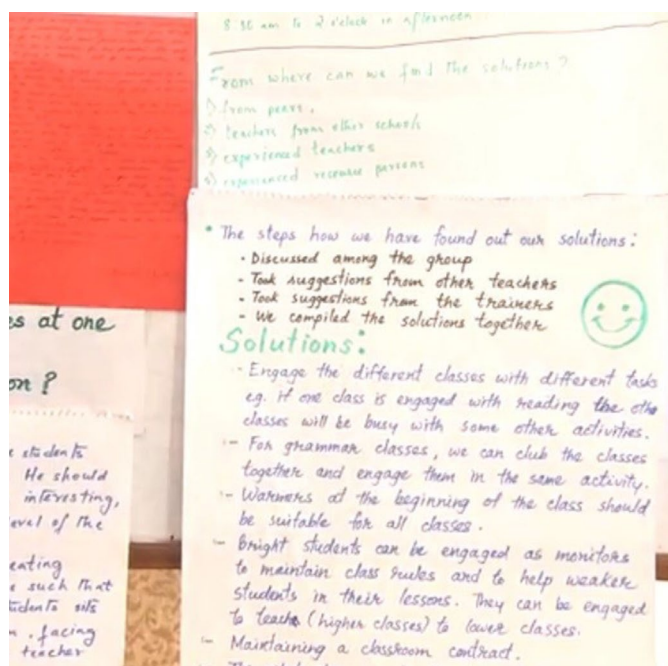
Use multi-class or whole-school activities

We can intersperse class activities with activities for all. For example, when we focus on grammar we can club the classes together and engage them all in the same activity. We can also bring all the classes together for warmer activities. With remedial teaching, we can form Onion rings* of mixed-level learners to encourage peer teaching.

Onion rings: organise the students in two concentric circles facing each other; the outside ring is facing inwards and the inside ring is facing outwards. There should be an equal number of participants in each circle. With a large group, you can make more circles. The students interact with the first partner, and then change partners by the outside circle moving one person to the right and the inside circle staying in the same place.

Manage behaviour

We can share the responsibility for managing behaviour with the learners by introducing classroom contracts.

Use classroom layout

If space allows, the classes can sit in the four corners of the room and we can stand or sit in the middle. This gives us a central position from which to monitor all the students. This is especially important when giving instructions. Ideally, we need to use a separate board with each class too.

Use monitors and mentors

In cases where a teacher is sick, especially in a single-teacher school, it is useful to have a back-up plan in place. We could organise for School Management Committee members or mother group / volunteer service members from the local area to help out. We can also appoint monitors and mentors from among our responsible and high-level students. They can help by making sure everyone follows the rules and supporting learners with difficulties. These students can even be asked to teach the younger learners and lower levels.

What we tried

When we returned to our separate teaching contexts, we also came up with other ideas to try in our classrooms. So, in addition to the above suggestions from our colleagues, we also focused on materials development and more specific classroom management strategies.

Joya

I focused mainly on planning and materials development in my context as a way of managing multiple classes. When I conducted practice sessions in different schools I took three different classes at the same time in the same room. What I did was to prepare a lot of materials and detailed lesson plans for those classes and this really helped me with the smooth management of each class. The learning outcomes were met and the children enjoyed the tasks and activities I had prepared.

In my school I found a lot of unused materials which I have now sorted out and renovated with the help of the students and I am using them on a regular basis in my lessons. These include flash cards, pictures, picture stories, word meanings, names of vegetables, fruits, flowers etc., picture puzzles, jumbled up words, building blocks, community helper pictures etc. and I use those mostly for vocabulary and grammar development. These materials are especially useful when I teach two or three classes at the same time as I get the lower levels on task with these materials while I teach the higher levels. The children really like them and enjoy using them.

I have also started devoting my break times to developing materials and classroom renovation. Along with that I try to engage the children in non-scholastic activities like dance, music, sports, games, drama, art and creativity and I also take remedial classes. This way, the children are more involved with me and more motivated and many of the struggling students have improved in their studies as a result.

Bornali

These are the ideas I have tried out in different schools in my cluster and which were also tried out by the teachers in my cluster:

I tried using multi-class activities on subjects and topics which two or three classes need to learn such as grammar (nouns etc.) or maths (addition etc.). I also introduced project work bringing three different classes together to form mixed groups. This was very successful as there was a lot of peer teaching going on. It was also a very effective way of building rapport among the students.

I also used the idea of engaging two or three classes at the same time in completing different tasks. For example, I asked class V to explore the school campus to find leaves and find out the names of the different plants (science) while class IV were busy with free writing in their own language. While both these classes were engaged in their group tasks under the supervision of group leaders, I was teaching class III. I found I was still able to monitor classes IV and V and I found this arrangement very productive as all the classes were on task.

I also used Onion Rings for remedial work, getting strong learners to teach those with difficulties in the same class. I even got a higher level class to teach a lower class this way while I was busy teaching a third class and found it very effective in terms of student interaction.

Finally, I got my learners to sit in the four corners of the room and my presence in the middle of the room kept them much more focused.

Krishna

The first thing I did was to organise for a plywood partition to be constructed in the big room to separate the two classes.

I then focused on developing classroom management materials. These consisted of:

Job chart: A job chart can be easily made from chart paper and used to assign different jobs to the students e.g. attendance checker, class monitor, water monitor etc.

Behaviour chart: A behaviour chart or rules poster displays what is and what is not allowed in the classroom. It can be negotiated with the students and even signed by everyone as an agreement between teacher and students. The teacher can simply point to it if a student is breaking the agreement.

Attendance chart: This can be used to track attendance and lateness. Each day the attendance monitor can fill in the chart using e.g. different colours for absence and presence.

Appreciation box: This can be made using a recycled cardboard box. The teacher writes the names of students who have behaved well, been helpful, done their duties, made an effort etc., and monitors behaviour, helpfulness, duties, effort, participation etc. on slips of paper and puts these into the box. At the end of the month, the teacher opens the box and counts the names. Those students whose names appear the most can be rewarded with e.g. a note book or pen.

These are some of the ideas I have tried out and which were also tried out by the teachers in my cluster.

Reflections

Joya

I would like to say that my multi-grade lessons are getting better and better. I've started to enjoy setting up the classes and I don't worry any more when I have to take two, three or even four classes at the same time. I've become a relaxed teacher and the children are having fun.

Krishna

It became easy for teachers to handle their large classes after starting to use the classroom management materials. All the materials have been hung on the wall and the classrooms seem well-decorated and attractive. And, importantly, students themselves are taking care of these materials and they are making new materials along with teachers.

1. How did Joya, Bornali, Babita and Krishna go about finding possible solutions to their problems? What problems do you face in your teaching context? Could you discuss these with your colleagues? Maybe they face similar difficulties and you can work together to find solutions. Or maybe they can suggest some tips which you can try out.

2. Do you work with multiple classes at the same time? How do you manage to maximise learning while maintaining discipline? Many of the suggestions above could be applied in a variety of teaching situations, not just multi-class contexts. Which could you use in your teaching context?

3. The difficulties of a multi-class context for teachers are clear but what about the students? Do you think there are any benefits from learning in a multi-class or mixed group environment?

See Joya and Babita reporting on the initial stage of their research on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/how-handle-multiple-classes-one-room

Increasing participation and managing group work

Mandeep Choudhary – India
Merium Aftab – Pakistan

The problem we face

We teach in very different contexts and work within different educational systems. Even so, there are some problems which we both face. Many of our students are reluctant to participate in speaking activities or in some cases, to even speak at all and this becomes even more apparent during group work. The particular problem I, Mandeep, face is that my learners are so passive and will not respond to even the most simple questions. They produce very little or no work and often misbehave. I, Merium, face a slightly different problem since my learners are quite active and responsive when they do individual reading and writing work. However, when it comes to group work, there are some students who do not participate, become disruptive and disturb the others. This makes it very difficult to maintain discipline and evaluate individual contributions.

What we did

We formulated questions

Having shared and discussed our problems, we agreed that it would be helpful to focus on some specific issues, and seek answers to the following questions:

- How can we encourage students to participate in class discussions when they are not at all interested?
- How can we at least get them to speak?
- How can we get students interested in group work?
- How can we ensure that everyone in the group participates?
- How can we evaluate each member of the group?
- How can we control the noise level while students are working in groups?

What we learned

Motivation

As teachers we can motivate learners to participate using a range of strategies and appeal to different learning preferences. Many students are keen on movies so we can show movie clips in class once a week, pausing to ask simple questions at key moments. During the holidays we could ask them to write about a movie they've seen. Instead of insisting on communicating in English face to face, especially with those learners who will not speak at all, we could go for virtual speaking on the phone or communicating via the internet. We can also make a
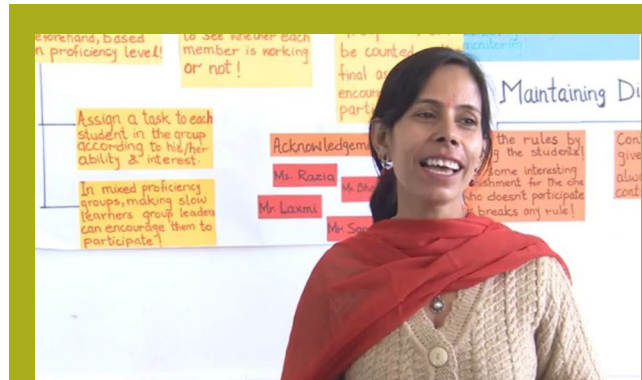
My name is Mandeep Choudhary and I teach in a government school. I teach a large class of students from very poor backgrounds where not even a single word of English is spoken at home.

My name is Merium Aftab. I teach young children at elementary level in a private school in Pakistan. The students come from a range of backgrounds.

conscious effort to be more positive and give positive feedback by writing comments such as 'good job' or 'well done' in their notebooks. We can even give merit cards for participation and performance.

Maintaining discipline

We need to establish some rules and we can do this by negotiating them with the students and agreeing on some interesting consequences for those who break them. We can explain that every game has certain rules so that is what we are going to do. We will set some rules and penalties together for not participating in the group work. We could also appoint group leaders to monitor and maintain discipline within their groups and control the noise level, although we also need to monitor efficiently to make sure all groups are on task and be available to assist where necessary.

Ensuring individual participation

We need to monitor groups carefully to ensure each member is contributing. It could help to group students according to proficiency levels, or in mixed-level groups give the lower-level students a specific role e.g. group leader. We can allocate clear tasks to different group members according to their interests and abilities. That way they each have a clear part to play in achieving the group task. Group work can also be assessed and rewarded. For example, those who participate and collaborate well could be given group leader or class helper duties.

Evaluation

While monitoring participation during group work we need to make notes about each student's contribution to achieving the goal. For this we can make an observation chart to grade each student's performance e.g. vocabulary, fluency, ideas or knowledge, depending on the type of task. This will help in identifying learners who are either having difficulties or not engaged in the topic, so that we can introduce tasks which are more suited to their interests, level or needs.
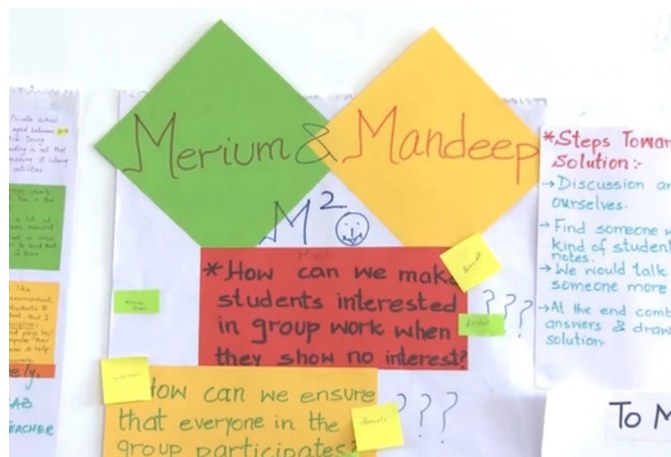
What we tried

Mandeep

These are some of the strategies I applied and that worked well.

I developed and maintained informal relationships with my senior students and that provided me with an opportunity to get to know them and bring them more on track, at least for answering questions in class. I even connected with some students via WhatsApp and consulted them about what they would like to do in the lessons. Gradually they became more open to me and communications improved.

I consulted the most passive learners on a classroom contract. This made them feel special and they started opening up to me and conversing with me both inside and outside the classroom.

Regarding group activities, I decided to let them choose their own groups and then when they had started to enjoy the activities I slowly introduced different groupings and it worked wonderfully.

As I got to know them better I found there were some artists among them. To raise their interest and involve them more, I brought them to the front to draw pictures related to the lesson on the blackboard. The whole class was engaged and encouraged to participate in general discussion.

Merium

At the start of the new session I was full of motivation and new ideas. I started by negotiating a set of rules with my students for classroom activities. This gave them a sense of ownership and they tend to follow some, if not all of them, during the activities. I also made gold, silver and bronze medals to award to the groups which maintain discipline and participate the most fully. Maintaining discipline has become much easier with the rules and the medals. Students who were previously not interested in working started participating for the medals.

For group work activities, after dividing students into mixed-level groups, I now make the least proficient students the group leaders. This gives them some confidence plus motivation and as a result participation levels have increased as has the desire to learn. I also found that because these learners were lacking in confidence, they were more helpful and less dominant as leaders.

To evaluate each member of the group I move around the class monitoring each student twice with a gap of around ten minutes. One other thing I do to evaluate them is to ask each member of the group to reflect on one thing they have learnt. This helps me to know if the students have actually picked up what I wanted them to learn.

Reflections

Mandeep

The most important thing that I have learnt is that sharing problems with other people can bring solutions. I can now talk to my friends or fellow teachers more openly about my problems or successes.

Merium

'Sharing is caring' is what I believe in now, since discussing my problem with others enriched my knowledge and I also found solutions. Small issues faced during teaching on a daily basis can be resolved by working with colleagues, as they understand the students and the system. I have also learnt that encouragement is effective in helping learning take place.

Reflection questions

1. How did Mandeep and Merium go about finding possible solutions to their problems? What problems do you face in your teaching context? Could you discuss these with your colleagues? Maybe they face similar difficulties and you can work together to find solutions. Or maybe they can suggest some tips which you can try out.

2. How do you maintain a positive attitude when faced with passive, unresponsive or unmotivated students? What changes can you make to build your learners' confidence and increase their motivation? Could you try any of the techniques above? Which would you like to try?

3. What do you think about communicating with your students by internet or mobile phone? Have you ever tried using a class wiki or blog? Why?/Why not?

How to deal with students from diverse backgrounds

Nida Akif – Pakistan
Sagun Shrestha – Nepal
Pankaj Dwivedi – India
Parmeshwor Baral – Nepal

The problem we face

We are a group of teachers from India, Pakistan and Nepal who face a common issue – the problems generated by diversified classrooms in terms of socio-economic, cultural, academic and linguistic backgrounds. Added to that, there is diversity in terms of students' interests too. Although we all work in very different contexts, and we do not share exactly the same problems, managing diversity in our classrooms is a challenge. Generally we find that students from low economic and social backgrounds do not fully participate and tend to fall behind. Communication between students also breaks down and bitter arguments result from cultural misunderstandings.

What we did

We formulated questions

Having shared and discussed our problems, we agreed that it would be helpful to seek answers to the following questions:

- Why are some students weaker than others?
- How can we address the problems of these students?
- How can we maintain harmony at linguistic, cultural and social levels in the classroom?
- Why can't some students reply in English?
- How can we ensure students do not fall behind?
- Do we have to teach all students at the same pace?

We discussed our problems and consulted colleagues

We shared our problems with colleagues via group discussion and we also interviewed several teachers who shared with us their experiences and stories of success. Their feedback helped us to identify several approaches and strategies which we could take back to our classrooms and try.

What we learned

Possible reasons why students do not participate or fall behind

There are many reasons why students struggle with their studies and fall behind. They may come from poorly educated families and have very limited exposure to English and other subjects outside the classroom.

My name is Nida Akif. I teach children from all ranks of military families, and therefore a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds.

My name is Sagun Shrestha. I teach English at higher secondary level (grade eleven and twelve) in Kathmandu, Nepal. My class is a large class comprising 45 students from different social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

My name is Pankaj Dwivedi and I work as a PhD scholar-cum-English-teaching assistant at the Indian Institute of Technology Ropar, Punjab, India. My students come from diverse linguistic, geographical, economic and cultural backgrounds.

My name is Parmeshwor Baral. I teach students from different linguistic backgrounds in the first year of an undergraduate course in a community college.

They may suffer from physical ailments or a range of learning disabilities. Some may be shy, lacking in confidence or may not see the relevance of education to their context. They may not respond or become involved for fear of failure or making mistakes. As teachers we may not be giving them the encouragement and support they need to engage with the subject matter and reach their full potential.

Pace of learning

Since students do not learn at the same pace, they should not be taught at the same pace. In fact, we can plan lessons to include activities for weaker learners so they can feel included and involved.

Mixed-level group activities

As teachers we can organise our students into mixed-level groups so they learn from each other during group activities. Peer teaching is very effective when managed well. We can also introduce aspects of good citizenship i.e. explore social and cultural diversity via group work using activities which require the students to put themselves in each others' shoes, show mutual respect, discuss moral values, share special religious or festive days, learn how to greet each other to build linguistic solidarity etc. We also need to find out what their interests are and plan lessons based on these topics.

What we tried

Nida

I tried organising my students into mixed-level groups and introduced grace marks to learners who were prepared to help others. This helped immensely because those who were previously not willing to help were now very keen to support those in need.

I also tried placing my students in groups according to their problem areas. I got them to discuss their separate issues and create charts and posters. They then displayed these

and with my assistance and guidance the rest of the class came up with possible solutions. This activity succeeded in bringing the class closer together. By sharing their concerns openly they became more comfortable with each other and were able to help each other in a way they had never done before.

I also led a 'success story' sharing session. The students were encouraged to think and speak about hurdles they had overcome. This was not only positive for those who shared their stories but it also motivated others who underestimate themselves and boosted the morale and esteem of the whole class.

Sagun

I decided to create mini-profiles of my students in order to understand them better. To do this I sought help from their parents and close friends. Then once I understood their backgrounds better, I drew on this in my communications with them.

To build linguistic and cultural solidarity, I learnt some greetings in their languages and I would greet them in their first languages in class and around the college grounds, which helped them to open up. On special days, I would start the lesson by encouraging them to talk about their festivals and customs to motivate and involve them. The result was amazing; they were highly motivated to share their culture and customs with the other students and they were really interested to listen and find out more.

I also discovered that some of them were good at football and cricket so during the World Cup and other sport tournaments I got them talking in English about their favourite players and so on. Doing so encouraged all kinds of students to speak up and created a sense of solidarity. I created clubs too such as St. Lawrence Literary Circle and St. Lawrence Readers' Club where they took part in interaction activities on particular books after reading them. They even invited and organised talks by guest speakers. This developed a team spirit since everyone took on different roles.

Gradually they started to respond to each other and to me more positively. They became more able to express their concerns openly and I could help them on an individual basis. I started including warm-up activities where they could discuss any issues they had and this helped build rapport too. As a result of these small changes, I became a different teacher, one who is ready to listen and who takes an interest in my students on an individual basis. And my students now take notice of me and are much more willing to participate in the group and pair work activities I set for them.
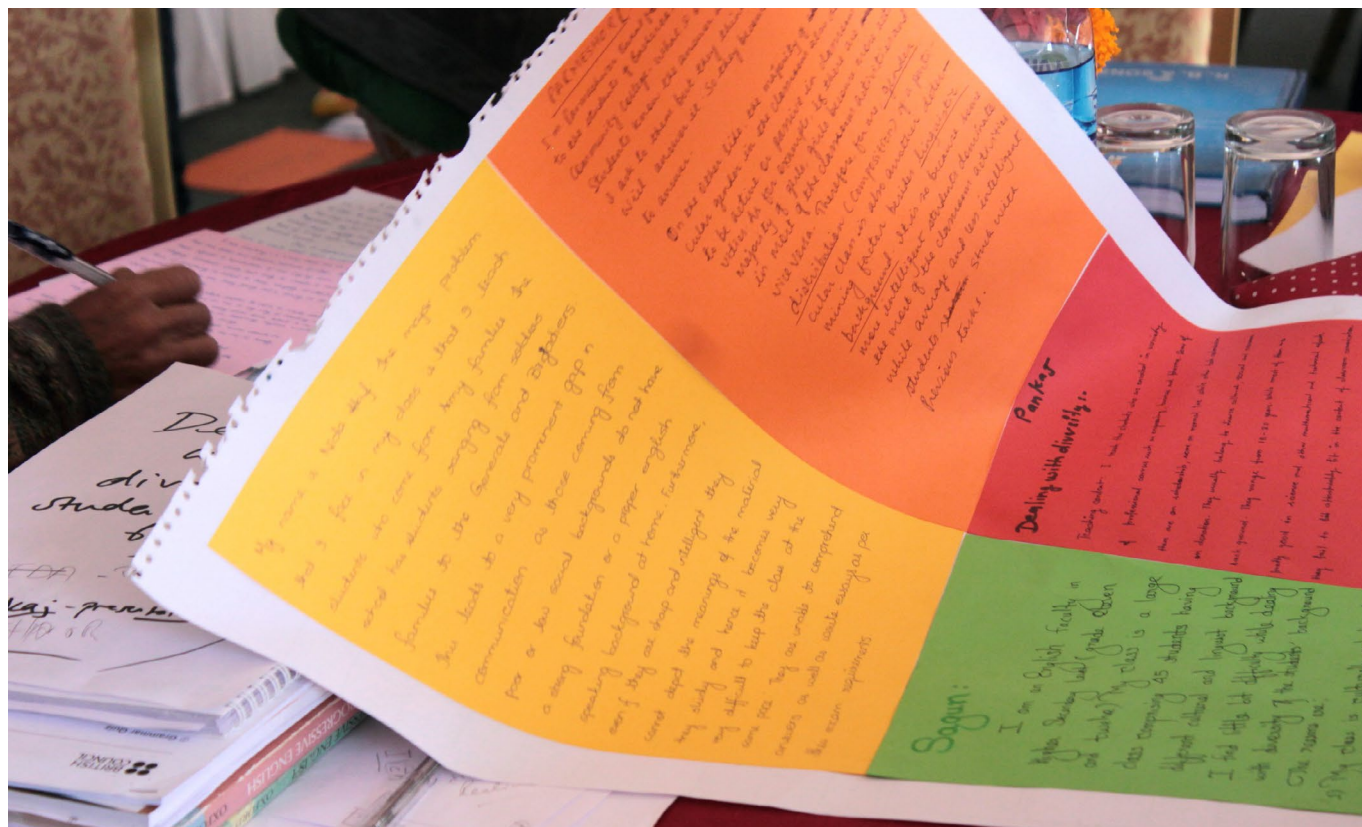
Pankaj

Since the communicative ability of my students varies greatly, I decided to encourage peer teaching i.e. engage the students in the process of teaching and learning. I grouped the students in such a way that the cumulative communicative competence of each group was quite similar. I created ten groups of four students. Each group consisted of one fluent speaker, two moderate speakers and one poor speaker. (The categories 'poor', 'moderate' and 'fluent' here merely indicate differences in the students' communication skills. The students were not told that they were 'poor', 'moderate' or 'fluent' in English).

All the students took notes during the lesson but then each group was asked to discuss the material and prepare group notes. During these group discussions, the fluent speakers initiated the discussion and then handed over to the other members. These fluent speakers were motivated to help the others with their confidence and communication skills and keep the discussions on track.

I also asked each member of each group to choose a discussion topic from their subject e.g. engineering, so each group had a list of four topics. Then I selected one of these for each group to discuss. During the discussion, the poor and moderate speakers were able to take the lead since they were knowledgeable on the subject matter. The fluent speaker in each group was tasked with recording the discussion using a smart phone and also preparing lists of mistakes which they handed over to me. I then addressed these.

I also organised group presentations where each member spoke for two minutes. These were evaluated. After each group had made their presentation, the other groups wrote comments and suggestions in their notebooks and at the end feedback was exchanged.

I also requested the students' subject teachers to note and praise any improvements in terms of participation, confidence and communication skills in their classes. Each fluent speaker also received a thank you note from the department head for their extra efforts.

I can say that organising mixed-level groups has proved successful on many levels. Here are some of the positive outcomes:

- Because there was a fluent speaker in each group, all the students had at least one classmate they could comfortably turn to for advice or help.

- On subjects of their choice, the poor speakers were actually able to correct their fluent classmates.

- All the groups ended up with fuller and more detailed lesson notes.

- Students got a hard copy of their usual mistakes, which were discussed and corrected within their groups and which they then worked on together.

- Four students are now working with two instructors on two different conference papers. The papers draw a lot on what we learnt together in the classroom.

Reflections

Mixed-level group activities, exploiting students' diverse backgrounds, and taking into account different interests, are key strategies in motivating students and building rapport. We never expected that we would be able to report so many tangible and intangible positive outcomes as a result of our collaborative small-scale research. Needless to say, teachers need to be dedicated to implement new ideas. We tried our level best to implement suggestions from colleagues and they worked overwhelmingly well. We believe that dealing with students from diverse backgrounds can create issues in many classrooms but we hope that the ideas we have presented here can be of use elsewhere.

Reflection questions

1. How did Nida, Sagun, Pankaj and Parmeshwor go about finding possible solutions to their problems? What problems do you face in your teaching context? Could you discuss these with your colleagues? Maybe they face similar difficulties and you can work together to find solutions. Or maybe they can suggest some tips which you can try out.

2. Do you work with diverse, multi-cultural groups? How could you exploit the different knowledge and experience they bring to the classroom to promote mutual respect?

3. How do you think creating student profiles could help you in addressing the individual needs of your learners?

See Sagun and Pankaj reporting on the initial stage of their group's research on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/how-handle-students-background-diversity

Working with differing levels of ability in an English language classroom

Zainab Rao – Pakistan
Rupinderjit Dhaliwal – India
Gulnaz Mondegarian – Pakistan

The problem we face

Even though we teach in very different contexts, we each face a similar problem – how to deal with markedly differing levels of ability within the same class. We find that there are groups of students who simply cannot concentrate because they are not able to understand and they do not have the confidence to ask for clarification. Even when they are able to comprehend, they have difficulty in retaining concepts and tend to repeat their mistakes time and again. These students generally do not attend regularly, come unprepared to class when they do attend and do not do homework. We have tried to implement remedial strategies but with little success due to various social and academic constraints.

What we did

We formulated questions

Having shared and discussed our problems, we agreed that it would be helpful to focus on those students who are unable to keep up and are failing to achieve, and seek answers to the following questions:

- How can we deal with students who are falling behind?
- How can we help students who have learning difficulties but have been promoted to a higher grade?
- How can we help students who do not perform well in assessments?
- How can we help students who keep making the same mistakes?
- How can we motivate students so they are interested in their studies?
- How can we help students who have not developed basic reading and writing skills?
- How can we increase these students' concentration span?

We discussed our problems and consulted colleagues

We shared our experiences with other teachers via group discussion and we also interviewed several teachers who shared with us their experiences and stories of success. The feedback we got from these teachers helped us to identify several approaches and strategies which we could take back to our classrooms and try.


My name is Zainab Rao and I teach English to students of grade 4 and 6 in a private school located in the city of Karachi, Pakistan.
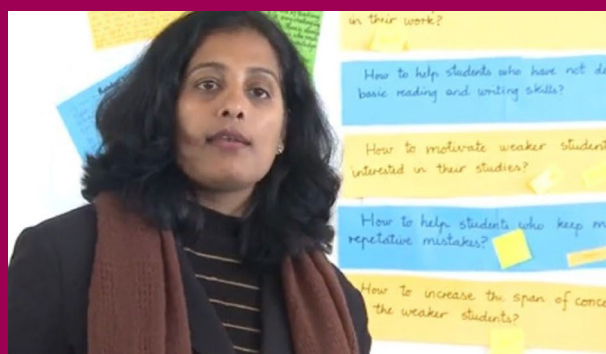
My name is Rupinderjit Dhaliwal and I teach English at a Government Girls Senior Secondary School in a remote area of Punjab, India. The school offers education from grade 6 to 12 and most of the girls are from low socio-economic backgrounds.

My name is Gulnaz Mondegarian. I teach at St. Joseph's Convent High School in Karachi, Pakistan and am presently teaching grade 5.
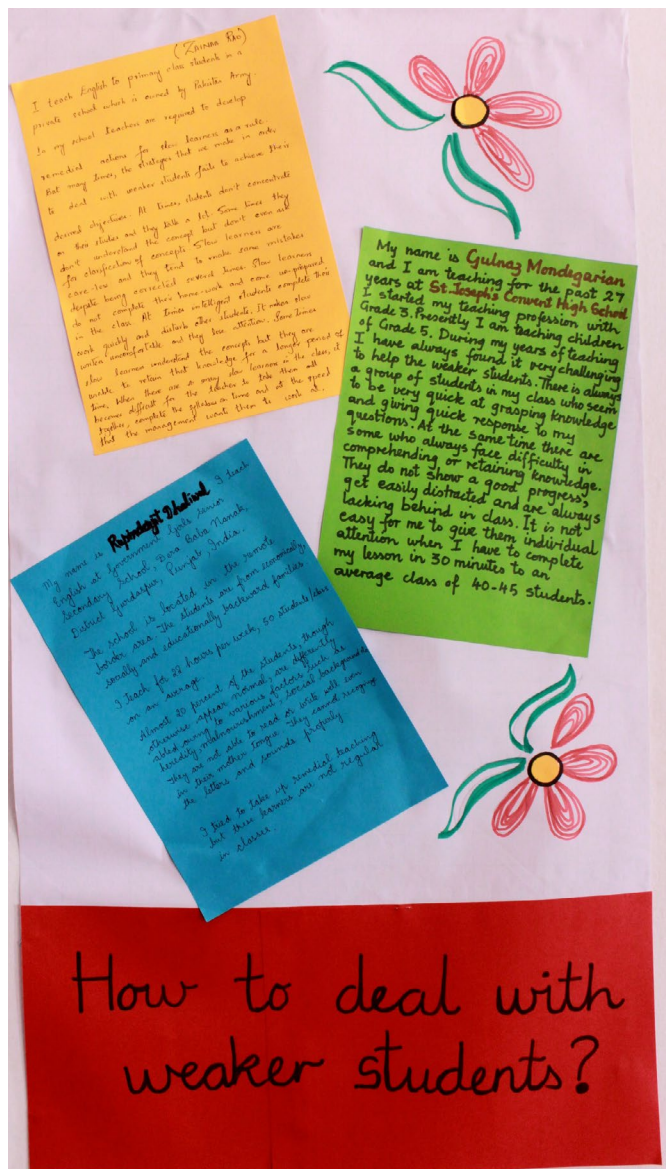
What we learned

Differentiation

As teachers we can help these struggling students by giving them tasks which they are able to complete. For example, when we ask the class to write a composition, some can be challenged to write twelve sentences while these students can be asked to write between three and five. All students will be challenged, but each one will complete the task according to their ability and each one will achieve.

Similarly, we can design assessments to accommodate differing abilities so that all students are given the opportunity to attempt some of the questions. The assessment should also contain more challenging items for high level students. For example, 40% of questions could be designed for below average students, 40% for average students, and 20% for high achievers.

A 'safe' learning environment

We also need to create a learning environment where learners can take risks and make mistakes without fear of reprimand. As teachers we can recognise that 'to err is human'. If students fear they will be laughed at when they make mistakes they will not experiment with language.

Encouragement

Encouragement and appreciation is very important for building self-esteem and developing confidence. For example, when we mark work, we need to appreciate effort and application before pointing out mistakes. If a student writes ten sentences and makes ten mistakes, we can focus on what is good before commenting on what could have been better.

### Mixed-level group activities

As teachers we can organise our students into mixed-level groups so they learn from each other during group activities. Initially, it is difficult for students to understand the value of teamwork and adopt it as an enjoyable way of learning, but with time groups gel and start working together. Once groups have formed, we can introduce competitive activities such as spellathons, poem recitations, role plays, quizzes, skits and story-writing competitions. Students will work as a team, helping and pushing each other to win and it is in the team's interest that all its members succeed.

A variety of activities

To motivate and engage students, we can plan lessons to appeal to a range of learning preferences. Concepts are more easily understood and concentration maintained when we adopt a multi-sensory approach and plan a variety of short activities. Multiple choice questions and gap-fills need to be interspersed with games, field surveys, role plays, project work and songs or rhymes.

Motivation to read and write

We can create a reading corner in the classroom. Students can be encouraged to read a book and respond to it by writing a short review; changing the beginning, middle or end; or drawing illustrations.
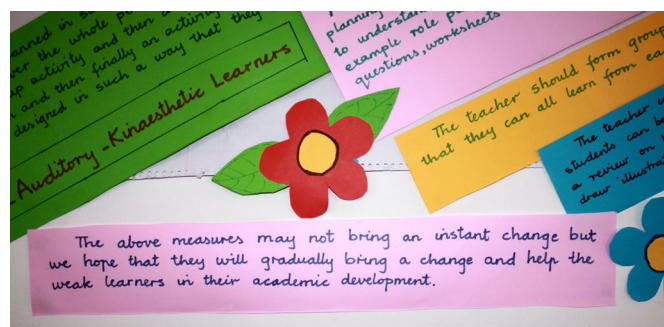
What we tried

Zainab

I tried dividing my learners into mixed-level quiz teams and promised a badge of honour award to the team that showed the best team spirit and cooperation. This motivated them to work together and the stronger students guided and pushed the others to score points.

During the last period of the day, the lower level students in particular get very restless so I got permission from my school management to conduct remedial classes with these learners while the others got on with different activities. I did this once a week and the learners responded well to studying with peers of a similar level. In the whole class others usually answer before these students have had time to understand the question, so I think they benefited from having more time to process and think before having to answer.

It was difficult to convince the school management to amend the structure of testing to accommodate the differing abilities of the students. However, they did agree to us creating differentiated assessments. This yielded good results not only in overall grades but also in morale; the lower level learners sighed in relief when they saw the improvement in their performance. The results reflected the changes made in the classroom as we had also adapted classroom activities to the levels of the learners. Actually, many teachers found this strategy unappealing because as teachers we want to see all our students working at the same grade level, but this is neither practical nor true in real-life classrooms.

When marking notebooks, we have now stopped making corrections in red all over the page. Instead, we put a small red dot under the mistakes and encourage students to make the corrections themselves in the correction column. We've noticed that some are making fewer mistakes and this has strengthened our belief that common, repeated mistakes can be corrected by repetitive reinforcement.

In order to encourage a reading culture we asked our students to bring one of their favourite story books in and share their reviews. Those books were then placed on the spare table in the classroom so that any student could borrow them and read them. This aroused interest in reading and because they had read the same books, they had experiences in common and could share their ideas and opinions with their classmates.

I also adapted some of the course book activities to make them more engaging and to appeal to different learning preferences. Students made their own puzzles by copying long sentences, cutting these up into words and then asking their partner to join them up again into sentences. They also covered prepositions or letters in words with pieces of tape, creating gap-fills to complete later. Using the course book as an exercise book was novel and they enjoyed it. It also saved me a lot of time creating exercises for them.

Rupinder

As per the action plan, my first priority was to provide the learners with a psychologically safe learning environment where they can learn without the fear of being scolded or laughed at for the mistakes they make. I made a conscious effort to appreciate and applaud the efforts of the learners before showing them areas for improvement and though I did not expect a sudden change, the seeds were sown for a positive development. Over time, I have noticed a change in the learner profiles. Those who shirked work out of fear or due to lack of interest are now seen making an effort and their confidence is gradually growing. I can foresee a time when there will be noticeable improvement in the skills of these learners.

Previously I had not used group activities much but since introducing these, I've noticed that learning opportunities have increased for all the students and I am able to manage the class better. I now divide my classes into mixed-level groups for a variety of tasks such as poem recitations, quizzes, role plays, skits, creating stories and reading comprehension. Instead of giving them tasks from the prescribed syllabus and grade level, I started giving them tasks with easier content but which require the same skills. For instance, for grade 6, I chose short reading passages from their English course book but framed multiple choice, gap-fill, true/false, correct the statements and short answer questions and distributed the different task assignments to the groups. Afterwards, they pasted their completed tasks on the classroom walls and, the next day, they were asked to go around, read and give suggestions for changes on the blank sheets of paper pasted next to the tasks. The following day the learners edited their tasks, came up with final versions and put them up on the walls. Though it took more time than that allotted by the Education department for a lesson unit, as a way of learning I found it better for all levels of learner. They were completely involved. They exhibited team spirit and their eyes gleamed with confidence and a sense of achievement. Further, the ease of the task helped me to give clear instructions which they could easily understand and this set the ball rolling for the group tasks to follow.

Despite all this, I was still far from satisfied as there were learners who could still not read or write well and therefore were too shy to respond or contribute much to the group tasks. So I decided to give the groups dialogue scripts which they were to prepare and present three days later. Peer work was evident and I found all of them involved and performing their part. They all learnt their scripts with the help and support of their peers.

To ensure I do not lose sight of learning outcomes when dealing with the lower level learners in grade 7, I have set different individual monthly learning targets specifying minimum levels of skills development. I review their achievements and areas for further improvement on a regular basis.

Gulnaz

I applied the method of setting my tests and assessments according to the abilities of my students. My papers are based on questions and activities which can be attempted by them all in addition to some which are challenging to the higher level learners. I cannot say that they have all started excelling in their work but I do not find that as many fail. As a result my students have gained in confidence and I did not have a single repeater in my class last session.

One of the most effective methods which I adopted was to make my lessons more student-centred. I get my students to work more regularly in groups and give them activity-based worksheets. Role play has also built the confidence of my students. You could never imagine how creative they can become when you allow them to make their own dialogues and come up with their own version of the text story. To make it more realistic I allow them to bring whatever costumes they consider suitable for their particular roles, without interfering much with their ideas and choices. I also encourage the more able students to help the others in their studies. I have started pairing them up so they can assist and support them and this has helped them to develop in confidence.

One method which we all agreed upon and which I have always practised throughout my teaching career is 'appreciation'. It is a wonderful way to help students gain confidence, interest and eagerness to learn. Complimenting students verbally is the simplest and the most effective way of showing appreciation. I praise my students for their enthusiasm and participation, even when they come up with an incorrect answer to a question. This has highly increased the number of volunteers in my class. They have started trusting me and feel at ease while learning.

I have observed that it is very important for a teacher to create a learning environment for students which is based on trust and understanding. I am mindful to be very attentive when my students speak for it makes them feel that I care. I also motivate my students by asking them about their interests and plan my lessons based on these.

One of the more successful activities I decided to introduce is acrostic poems. I used this on the first day of my new class and was quite amazed to see how my students came up with words and short phrases to describe themselves with the letters of their names. I used it again on Mothers' Day and was very impressed with the beautiful words they used to describe their mothers. It was so good to see them all so engrossed in their work trying to come up with the best words and phrases. Some of the more creative ones even decorated the borders with beautiful patterns.

Reflections

Zainab

Before doing this research, I thought I could do very little to help the struggling students in my classes as my efforts had come to nothing. I was on the brink of giving up. However, after making this action plan I felt a sense of renewed hope because I knew I was taking home a small but useful bag of novel ideas that I could apply to my teaching context. It was like starting afresh. Admittedly it took me a while to put anything into action as I soon became bogged down again by my daily routine, but little by little I started to make small changes. I know that these small measures may not bring instant change but I hope that gradually they will help all my learners with their academic development.

Rupinder

Taking part in this research has re-established my faith in my learners' ability. Now I know and firmly believe that they can and will learn. Only consistent and continuous efforts at reinforcement of learning are required. And, I must also recognise that not everyone can learn everything to perfection. As teachers we have to come down from our high pedestal and look upon our learners' efforts in the same way a mother takes pride in the first unsteady steps of her toddler. Learning should be an enjoyable experience.

Gulnaz

I have realised that it is my responsibility as a teacher to help motivate all my learners in as many ways as possible. I have learned to be as resourceful as I can be, with the few resources at my disposal.

See Zainab, Gulnaz and Rupinder reporting on the initial stage of their research on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/how-handle-weaker-students

Reflection questions

1. How did Zainab, Gulnaz and Rupinder go about finding possible solutions to their problems? What problems do you face in your teaching context? Could you discuss these with your colleagues? Maybe they face similar difficulties and you can work together to find solutions. Or maybe they can suggest some tips which you can try out.

2. Differing levels of ability in the same classroom is a common issue teachers face. Zainab, Rupinder and Gulnaz tried mixed-level grouping with success. What are the benefits of grouping learners in this way? How could you try this in your teaching context?

3. What do you think about task differentiation or assessment differentiation as a way of helping all learners achieve? How could you try this in your teaching context?

Improving speaking and writing skills

Hassan Mehmood – Pakistan; Saima Iqbal – Pakistan
Amarnath – India; Rajan Kumar Chharahang – Nepal
Indumati Mehta – India; Govind Sharma Bashyal – Nepal

The problems we face

Even though we teach in different countries and different contexts, we face similar problems with developing and improving speaking and writing skills. Generally the level of our learners is very low and they lack confidence in expressing themselves in English. They have very little, if any, exposure to English outside the classroom and therefore very few opportunities to use the language. Even within the school, they use their own language to communicate. In the classroom too, it is difficult to create an 'English' environment since English is often taught via translation and due to the heavy demands of the exam-oriented syllabus there is little or no time for developing skills. To compound the problem many students are required to learn many languages from childhood, i.e. own language, national language and religious language simultaneously and they are not proficient in any of these when English is introduced. As a result interference hinders the development of speaking and writing in English.

What we did

We formulated questions

We shared and discussed our problems and formulated the following questions to seek answers to:

- How can we create an English speaking environment in our schools?

- How can we motivate students to speak and write in English?

- How can we help students overcome the fear of making mistakes?

- How can we use the textbook to improve students' writing and speaking skills?

- How can we cope with a heavy syllabus and include writing and speaking activities?

- How can we assess writing and speaking skills?

- How can we minimise the interference of other language(s) while teaching English?

We discussed our problems and consulted colleagues

We consulted with colleagues via group discussion and they gave us suggestions and ideas from their own experiences. These helped us to identify several approaches and strategies which we could take back to our classrooms and try.
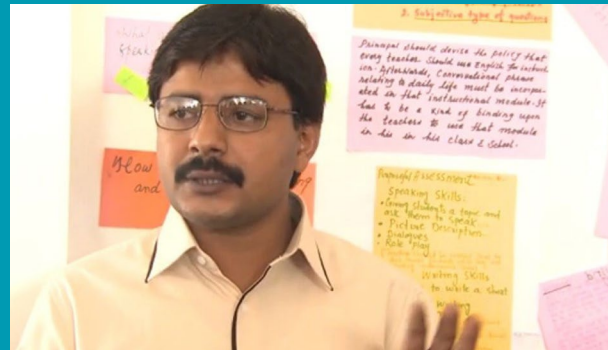
My name is Hassan Mehmood and I teach in a very low-resource school in Pakistan. Most of the students come from poor and uneducated families.
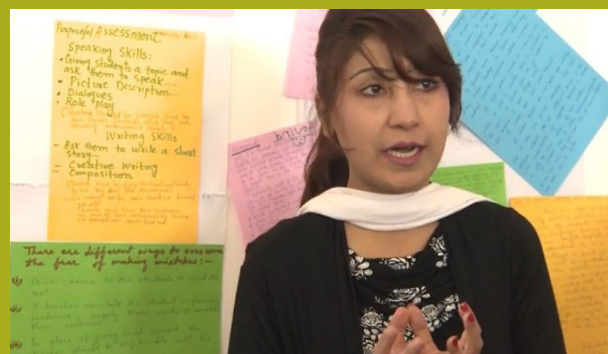
My name is Saima Iqbal and I teach grade 10 students at KMA Girls Secondary School in Karachi, Pakistan. Most of the girls come from low socio-economic backgrounds.

My name is Amarnath and I teach at the Government Girls Senior Secondary School in Bhagalpur, Bihar. My school is established in the centre of town and students come from town and the surrounding villages.

What we learned

Change school policy

If we really want our students to communicate in English then we need to seek a change in school policy. We can petition principals to ask all teachers to use English as the medium of instruction. Then gradually conversational phrases related to daily life can be incorporated in that instructional model.

Motivate students to use English

In order to motivate our learners to use English we can use warmers at the start of lessons. Warmers are useful in waking students up and getting them thinking, but they also relax students ready for learning. A good warmer can make learners feel positive about the lesson and also get them into 'English mode'. Some ideas we can try are telling short anecdotes, poems or jokes. We also need to include plenty of exemplification and contextualisation throughout our lessons, demonstrating how language relates to the real-life situations of our students. Introducing interesting and motivating tasks with clear and simple instructions is also important in addition to specific feedback so learners can improve.

We also need to remove the fear of making mistakes by giving students sufficient time to think and answer, and by supplying them with the words they need and helping them to frame sentences. Instead of finding faults we can focus on good points and ensure that students do not make fun of others, thereby creating a positive learning atmosphere.

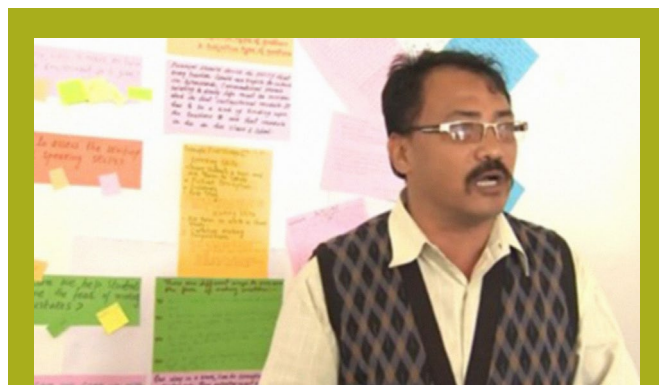## Use the textbook as a basis for speaking and writing activities

Instead of going straight into a new textbook chapter, we can lead into the topic by drawing on the students' knowledge and contextualising or personalising the theme. After reading a text, we can ask objective and subjective questions to enable students to respond to the text too. Then, we can use the text as a basis for developing speaking and writing skills by creating a variety of interesting tasks such as character writing, classroom discussion, group activities, debates, picture description, ordering sentences, relating the text to other texts or stories, and preparing reports.

Incorporate fun activities into the syllabus

We can set aside one lesson per week for fun activities. These activities should be engaging and enjoyable but at the same time a source of learning for the students. Activities could include role play, project work, creative storytelling and writing.

Make assessment purposeful

With assessment we need to set meaningful and interesting tasks. For example if we are assessing speaking skills we can ask students to describe a picture, create a dialogue, perform a role play or speak on a topic. To assess writing we can ask learners to write a short story or a composition etc. What is most important is that feedback should be positive, and a specific area for improvement should be focused on rather than commenting on every mistake.

My name is Rajan Kumar Chharahang. I teach in a private English medium school, Bal Batika English boarding school in Biratnagar, in the eastern part of Nepal. My school is in an urban area but is not well-resourced. The students come from low socio-economic backgrounds

My name is Indumati Mehta. I teach English at a rural high school in India.

My name is Govind Sharma Bashyal and I teach English at secondary and higher secondary level in Butwal, Lumbini, Nepal.

Promote English language use

It is difficult to reduce interference in language learning but creating an English speaking environment within the classroom and the school could prove effective. Relating English to the students' real lives and increasing motivation and participation could also help. We could also explain to parents, guardians and students how English is relevant to their lives and futures and why it is worth learning.
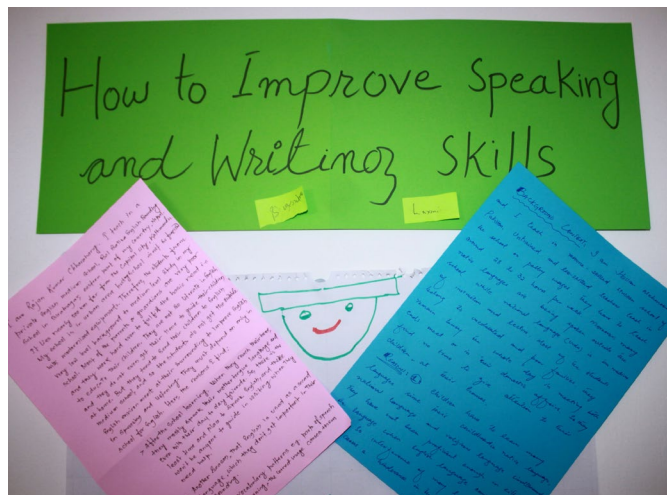
What we tried

Hassan

I started by focusing on using English as the medium of instruction and provided all school teachers with handouts comprising words, phrases and sentences to be used in the classroom ranging from greetings to giving lectures. The school administration is rigorously implementing this scheme.

In my lessons I incorporated a variety of speaking activities such as presentations, storytelling, speeches and role play. Here are some examples of how I introduced these activities.

Presentations

The learners themselves selected presentation topics at the start of the academic session. They then prepared these together with a series of questions for the other students to answer at the end. Students also submitted a written copy of their presentations. I asked the more able learners to present first not only to demonstrate how it should be done but also to highlight key vocabulary on the board which others could then use. Each presentation was followed by a short discussion.

Storytelling

One day a month is now devoted to storytelling using elicitation. I perform the story, creating a situation in the classroom where learners take on the various characters. Pictures and key vocabulary are given on the board and learners are encouraged to predict events using these pictures and words. Once the story has been enacted, the learners write the story in their notebooks.

'Stupid stories'

Learners are given word groups and asked to match these to characters and situations in the book. They are then required to create their own 'stupid stories' using the words.

Picture description

Learners are given pictures and vocabulary and are asked to describe the pictures generating their own sentences. After this, the papers are shuffled among the learners and they are asked to spot the mistakes.

Picture stories

Learners are given cut-up picture stories and are asked to sequence the pictures into a meaningful plot, then write a story based on this sequence.

Speeches

Each learner is given a written speech at the start of each session which they practise and prepare and deliver at some point during the session.

Role play

Basic conversational sentences which they are likely to come across in real life are given to the learners, and they are asked to role play those situations in the classroom incorporating the sentences.

'Games day'

Saturday is 'games day' and the learners have fun playing games like Back to the Board, Race to the Board, Mingle, Scavenger Hunt, Running Dictation etc.

Introducing these activities has not only helped to develop my learners' speaking skills, but also their writing, reading and listening skills. Their grammar and vocabulary has also improved as a result.

Saima

I am proud to report some of the initiatives I have taken as a result of what we learned during our research.

As Head of the English department, I immediately forwarded a proposal for a change in the English curriculum for Grades 6–8 as it was not supporting teachers in the development of English skills. I also proposed using a textbook which focuses on skills development and both these proposals were accepted and approved by the school management. I immediately started designing the new curriculum and my core objective was to bring a significant change in teaching methodology.

As a first step to improving students' writing skills, I introduced creative writing with all classes. Students were encouraged to write their views and opinions on different topics they had read about in class at the end of each unit. I have instructed all the teachers in the English department to motivate students to write by themselves and not to use red pen to mark their mistakes but only give positive and

encouraging remarks in response to this work. In my own class, I have observed a noticeable change in my students' attitude to writing. Before, they used to be afraid or hesitant to write but they have now started to enjoy and take an interest in writing in their own words. I have given them various interesting writing tasks such as report writing, interviews and poems, and facilitated them throughout the process. Even though they make many mistakes, I think that it will prove to be the foundation stone of the development of writing skills.

It is difficult for students to express themselves well in speaking and writing if they do not have the words they need. To improve the students' vocabulary range I have introduced 'Word of the Day' chain. Every day I give students one word and explain its meaning in Urdu together with an example sentence to show how it is used. I then ask the students to use it in a sentence of their own. I dedicate at least five minutes for this and have noticed how students use these new words.

To create an English-speaking environment, students need to be encouraged to speak English in their day-to-day communication so I announced on the first day of the session that everyone in the class should speak only in English. I encouraged them by setting some rules and giving incentives for those who tried their best. I told them that if they lacked a particular word or phrase they could ask me and I'm delighted to share that everyone did it. To appreciate their efforts I introduced 'Speaker of the Week' which really motivated them and created a positive competitive spirit in the class. Every Monday I wrote the name of one student on the board who I had observed performing well in speaking activities and classroom communication. I am proud that English is now used as the medium of instruction and the language of communication in my classes.

Armarnath

I introduced more interesting and creative writing activities. One example is newspaper stories. I told my students to collect some English newspaper cuttings and tear out the headlines and pictures which interested them. I asked them to separate out letters of the alphabet from the headlines so that each student in the class had a set of all 26 letters of the alphabet to make words. Next I divided the class of 50 students into five groups and told them to agree on one picture to write about. I asked each group to frame five sentences. They stuck their sentences onto a piece of paper and then copied them into their exercise books to share with members of other groups. I then made ten new groups by taking one member from each original group. I told them to share their sentences with their new group members. They then returned to their original groups and wrote about the news stories they had heard about.

Rajan

I tried introducing some different and more interesting writing activities like writing poems, creating a monthly student magazine etc. The best ones are pasted on the notice-board so the student can feel proud and to encourage other students to participate in such activities. I also introduced election campaigns to help students understand how a general election takes place. We followed the election procedure using locally available resources and working fairly autonomously the students succeeded in electing a school captain, a sport captain and house captains.

In fact, my teaching style has changed in many respects and instead of 'lecturing' my students I now encourage them to involve themselves in different ways in finding solutions in groups. I also encourage them to discover important concepts for themselves instead of describing and explaining them. For instance while teaching 'diversity' in a Moral Science class VIII, I asked the students to draw two pictures of a house, or flower or anything they like and colour one of them using different colours. They did this and then I asked them which one was more attractive i.e. the colourless one or the colourful one. In this way I defined 'diversity' and its importance.

I have used role play too for teaching drama and we are now planning to make job cards, birthday cards, calendars and so on.

Reflections

Hassan

Doing this collaborative research was a great platform for sharing our difficulties in teaching English as a second language and was a great help in identifying hidden hindrances. Seeking solutions infused motivation in me to experiment and practise new things in my classroom. These have worked wonders as far as my students' learning is concerned.

Saima

Doing this research made me realise how the curriculum, the textbook and the course planning in my school were simply not supporting our objectives, and as a result English was being taught merely as a subject rather than as a language. The intensive process of sharing, collaborating, consulting and exchanging ideas with colleagues from other countries gave me so much insight and boosted my confidence to bring significant changes to the pedagogy of language teaching in my classrooms and my school.

Rajan

Finding out different suggestions from teachers of different countries and trying these techniques and methods in my teaching has proved really effective in helping my students use English and helping me to change the way I teach.

See Saima and Indumati reporting on the initial stage of the group's research on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/how-encourage-students-speak-out

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Reflection questions

1. How did Hassan, Saima, Armarnath, Rajan, Indumati and Govind go about finding possible solutions to their problems? What problems do you face in your teaching context? Could you discuss these with your colleagues? Maybe they face similar difficulties and you can work together to find solutions. Or maybe they can suggest some tips which you can try out.

2. Do your learners also have difficulties with speaking and writing in English? What can you do to motivate and support them in developing these skills? Which of the approaches and strategies above could you try in your context?

3. What can you do to create an English-speaking environment in your school or classroom? How can you create an environment which encourages learners to use English and not be afraid of making mistakes? Which of the activities above could you try with your learners?

Use of the learners' own language(s) in EFL/ESL classrooms

Janak Raj Pant – Nepal
Bhogendra Lamichchane – Nepal
Samaraj Dulal – Nepal

The problems we face

In our different teaching and training contexts, we each face the same problem – how and when to use the learners' own language(s) in the classroom. In Nepal there is a dominant use of the learners' mother tongue(s) in English lessons and the reason for this is largely because teachers find that students cannot understand English and are not interested in using it. Moreover, because learners are taught English through translation, they have very little exposure to or opportunities to speak in English. They are mainly concerned with getting good examination results which they can achieve through writing in English. We have tried various strategies to encourage the use of English in the classroom but with little success. We believe that using the learners' own language(s) may hinder the development of communication skills in English, but insisting on English may hinder classroom communication itself. It is difficult to know when to use the mother tongue(s) and when to insist on English, and also what to do when the learners respond in their own language(s).

What we did

We formulated questions

Having shared and discussed our problems, we agreed that it would be helpful to seek answers to the following questions:

- How can we avoid situations where we ask questions in English and students answer in their mother tongue(s)?
- How can we motivate students to learn English in a bilingual context such as exists in Nepal?
- Should we use English all the time? If not, when should we use it and when shouldn't we?
- Should the students be expected to use English all the time? If not, when should they use it?

### We discussed our problems and consulted colleagues

We interviewed other teachers and colleagues to find out if they had had similar experiences and to seek answers to our questions. We then discussed their answers in relation to our contexts and identified some possible solutions to take back and try.


My name is Janak Raj Pant and I work mainly in the field of in-service teacher training programmes for Nepali-medium community schools.

My name is Bhogendra Lamichhane. I teach using English as the medium of instruction in a government college in Kathmandu, Nepal. My students are from remote areas and most of them have learned English through the medium of Nepali.
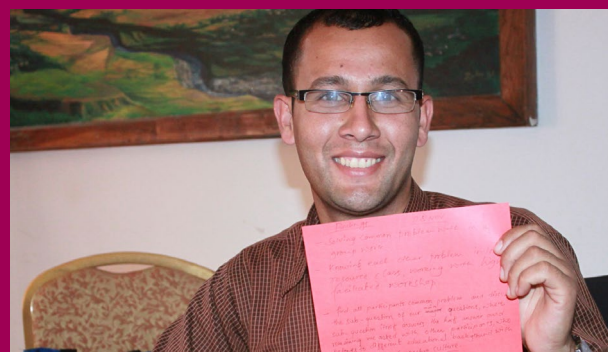
My name is Samaraj Dulal and I teach in a government higher secondary school in Banepa, Nepal. I teach six students in grade 12 English as an optional subject. I teach English language and literature within the context of literature (poems, short stories, essays, and plays).
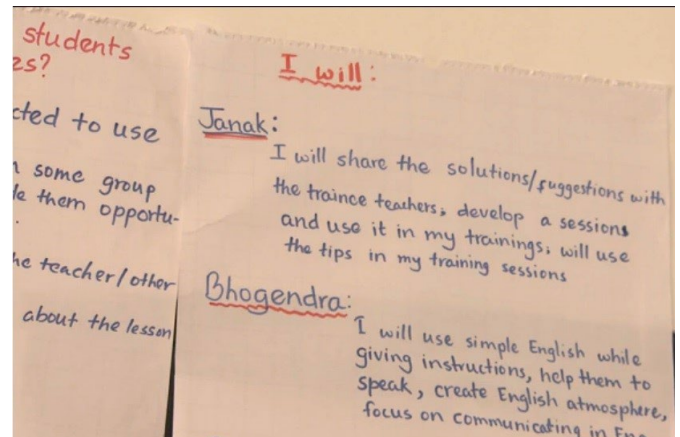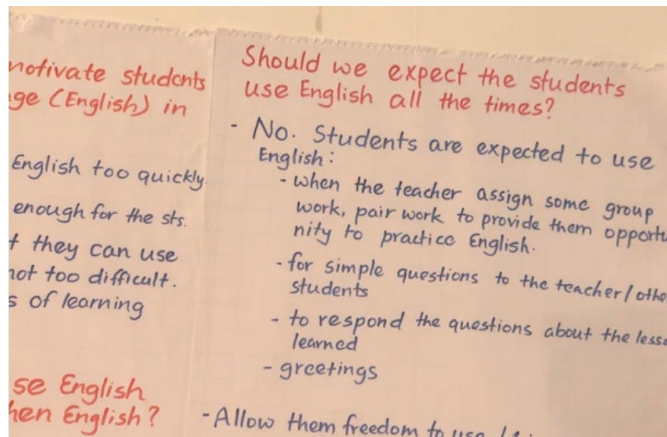
What we learned

Encourage responses in English

We can refuse to accept answers in the mother tongue(s) and instead ask and support the learners to answer in English. We can help them to do this by providing the vocabulary needed to answer the questions. We can also make a classroom agreement to try answering in English and acknowledge or praise those who make an effort. This will encourage others to try too. We can also make a point of framing questions in such a way that they are easy for the students to understand and respond to.

Establish classroom norms

By establishing clear routines and classroom norms, we can instil in our students a code of language use. We can be very clear on when students are expected to use English and when they have the freedom to use their own language(s). For example, group work and pair work are used to provide opportunities to practise English and therefore English should be used. English should also be used during routine greetings. English should also be used when asking and responding to simple questions. On the other hand, learners should be allowed to use their own language(s) to share learning difficulties or anxieties. The mother tongue(s) can also be helpful when discussing the meaning of vocabulary or grammar concepts.

As teachers we can use English for simple instructions, to focus on the target language, and when the class is behaving and the lesson is flowing smoothly. For concepts and abstract ideas it can be useful to revert to the mother tongue(s). Similarly if there are discipline issues or problems with classroom management, it is advisable to use the learners' own language(s).

Introduce English gradually

We can introduce English gradually to give the learners time to get used to it. We can begin with simple greetings and simple questions and gradually show the students that it is not so difficult to do. We can explain and discuss the advantages and benefits of using English too.

What we tried

Janak

I decided to share these suggestions with trainee teachers, develop a session and use it during training. I would also actually use these suggestions during the training to encourage trainees themselves to use English. I did this and the participants found all the ideas helpful. We also agreed that it is easier to make the students understand when the teacher makes a point of using short, simple sentences.

Bhogendra

Based on what I had learned, I decided to incorporate some of the suggestions and solutions into my daily lesson plans and implement these with my first year BEd students. The first thing I did was to reach an agreement with my students that they would try to speak at least 60 % in English through a participatory approach. Previous to this they always spoke in Nepali while I spoke in English. In order to measure English use, I developed a specific form containing each student's name, the total number of all spoken contributions and how many of these were spoken in English or Nepali. It was not possible for me to evaluate each student and fill in the form so I assigned this job to a different student each day who observed and filled in the form during group work, pair work and discussion activities. Data was collected over a six-month period and shows that my students now speak about 80% in English, which is a tremendous achievement. Those students who used to speak about 10% English in November were speaking around 80% English in June.

I started acknowledging and praising students who answered in English and supported them in asking questions too by providing simple vocabulary and phrases. Now the students have started to ask me questions like 'What is .... called in English?' and they seem more confident to speak out. Increased group work and pair work has also contributed to greater confidence in speaking English.

Finally, one of my challenges in English teacher training is that the teachers are also reluctant to speak in English so to encourage them and to build their confidence, after each workshop I got them to share brief success stories in English.

Samaraj

Previously I had dealt with literary texts by explaining them line by line, first in English and then in Nepali. I summarised the text in both languages in a lively manner but the students often became confused. However, since our discussions about the use of the mother tongue(s) I have tried different approaches.

With stories and novels, I began by suggesting the students read a summary of the fictional work in Nepali before we started on the English text. Then I summarised the text in English, translating some difficult words. This helped and the understanding of the students increased daily.

I am now teaching grade 11 Management stream students at Khwopa Higher Secondary School who become easily bored and confused if I insist on English throughout the lesson. With these students I have taken a different approach, using group discussions and presentations. I also get them to draw a word diagram every day in order to increase their vocabulary. I also speak English with Science stream students and they too make presentations in class.

Reflections/conclusions

Bhogendra

Though my research approach was not systematic or scientific, it provided me with a means of addressing issues I face in my daily teaching. I recognise that I am a novice in this and still need to learn so many things in order to improve my English language teaching but I am optimistic and continue to explore different classroom problems. I have also shared what I do with my colleagues.

Samaraj

If we speak the mother tongue(s) in the English language classroom we are not being fair to the students. Being an English teacher in Nepal is quite interesting but quite challenging as students want to learn English but through the medium of Nepali. We need to explore ways of getting them into the habit of speaking English in the classroom.
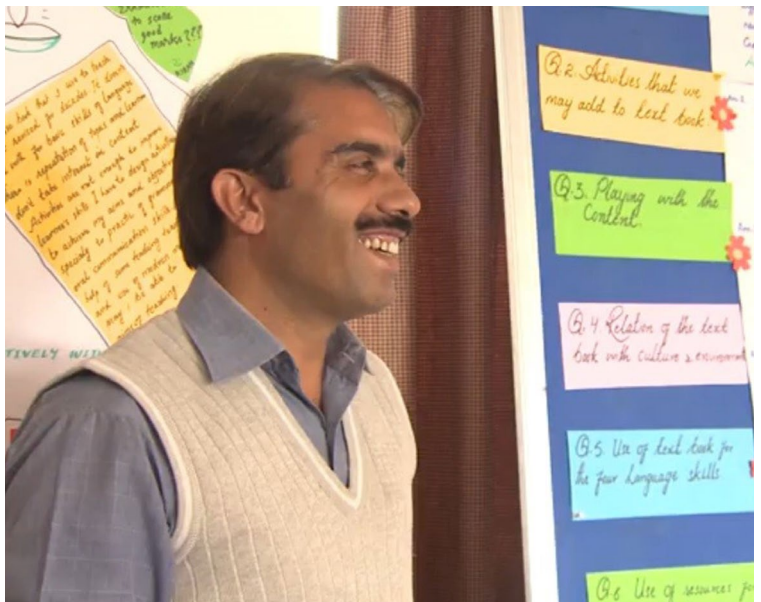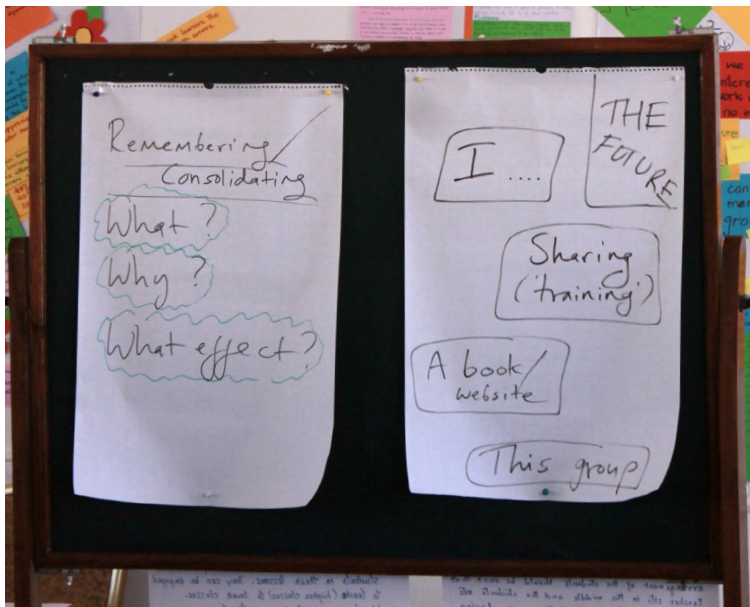
See Janak reporting on the initial stage of the research on video:

http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/how-should-learners-own-languages-be-used-classroom

Remembering/
Consolidating

What?
Why?
What effect?

I ....   THE
              FUTURE

Sharing
('training')

A book/
website

This group

Throughout the world English is often taught in 'low-resource' classrooms, but there are few training materials which are derived from and which reflect this reality. This book, with associated video, is intended to help fill the gap.

The book is an edited collection of stories of success and of teacher-inquiry. These are authored by members of a group of 34 teachers and teacher educators from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, who came together for a five-day Hornby Regional School in Kathmandu. Based on an 'enhancement approach', the materials show that there is particular value for teachers in difficult circumstances in collaboratively sharing examples of successful teaching as a starting point for their own further development. They also show that a useful approach to developing appropriate methodology for such circumstances is teacher-research on a basis of initial and ongoing collaborative work.

The book and associated video materials can be used informally by teachers as a stimulus for reflection and inquiry or for discussion in teacher associations, English teacher clubs or other forms of self-help group. They can also be used in in-service training workshops. Each individual story is followed by questions for reflection and discussion to help with these uses. The stories can also be used by teacher educators in initial teacher training programmes for student-teachers who are likely to be teaching in relatively difficult circumstances.