

Background

English skills for everyone – this was the mission of ELF Learning Solutions, the organisation we set up to focus on bridging the educational divide between rural and urban children. Most English programmes focus on the *how* - how to design content for English learning? However, we started with the *why* – why do we want children to learn English? Although clearing examinations and better employability are good reasons, the most important reason for children to learn English is building their self-confidence. Working with a large number of children from low-income families made it evident that, irrespective of their proficiency in other skills, children who cannot speak in English end up feeling inferior to those who can.

If English classes are about strict grammar and pronunciation rules, children only become more fearful of the language. This results in the majority of first-generation learners failing to achieve English skills. Even if some children finally learn the skills, they lack the confidence to have even a simple conversation in English.

English for first-generation learners

We started researching how English learning could be done in a way that children build confidence in the process of learning it. Our first endeavour was with teachers of forty-eight government schools in rural Tamil Nadu. There were two main principles that teachers followed in these classes – one, allow children to make mistakes and, two, to allow them to use vernacular words in English sentences when they attempt to speak.



We also started developing techniques that would make learning to read English simple for children, especially for those who encounter English only in school. In a language like English, where most words do not follow the phonics rules, it is very easy for children to get frustrated in their attempts to learn to read. They quickly decide that English does not follow any logic and that they cannot learn to read. Working with several school teachers, we developed a simple, graded, phonics-based structure for learning to read English.

Today, the ELF English programme is being used by 115 schools in India – these include 40 government schools in Mizoram, two in Assam and the rest (73) in Tamil Nadu. Time and again, the programme has demonstrated that when teachers set clear goals and go forward with the belief that all children can learn English, great results are achieved.

Methodology

Typically, each class begins with an audio or video



lesson followed by circle-time activities and small group activities that encourage conversation. Question and answer practice in pairs ensure that every child gets a chance to speak. Role-plays and songs help children overcome their fear of English. In a short period of four months, we found that at least 51% of the children were able to respond to common conversational questions in English.

We broke up reading skills into eight simple levels, starting with letter sounds and moving on step by step to words, sentences, paragraphs and stories. At every level, a few new sounds, blends and words were introduced. Careful grading of the content at each level was done so that a child encountered only words that he/she could decode with the sounds already learned. A few sight words introduced at each stage enabled children to quickly progress to reading sentences and paragraphs.

In this article, we share some of our learnings in this journey and how teachers can adapt these ideas to their English classroom.

Spoken English class

Listening before speaking

Before we ask children to say something, they need to see the teacher demonstrate what she expects. We do this with interactive videos in our classes, but a teacher can also use real-life examples or simple posters to help her *show and tell*. For example, if we would like the children to practise a simple conversation about objects in the class, the teacher starts with: *What is this? This is a pen. What is that? That is a fan.*



She points to the objects as she asks the questions. She chooses objects that children inherently know the English word for. For instance, words like *fan* and *table* are so deeply ingrained in the children's vocabulary, that in a government school in Vellore, children insisted that these were Tamil words and that they did not know the English equivalents!

During this activity, the teacher does not expect the children to respond – she asks and answers the questions herself while the children listen. We encourage the teachers not to translate each word into the mother tongue in an effort to make the children understand. Rather, teachers use animated movements, pictures and facial expression to help children understand what they are saying, without translating.

Circle time practice

Just after listening to the teacher, children get ready to practise the questions and answers in circle time. The first child asks his/her neighbour a question. After answering it, it is the second child's turn to ask the question. Questions and answers pass around in a circle to give every child a chance to speak. Mistakes are not corrected at this point. If children hesitate, the teacher role-plays with another child and demonstrates the conversation again.

Small group practice

The teacher forms groups of 4-5 children so that they practise the simple conversations they have learnt. Children in small groups do not have to worry about an overseeing adult; they can try speaking, laugh and have fun. Teachers slowly get used to the buzz of children's voices - after all a spoken English class can't be a silent one!

Describing pictures

John Holt said that when children are asked to *say something*, they can only respond if they have something to say. If we ask children to describe an incident or give their opinion on a topic at the very outset, they may struggle to organise their thoughts and express themselves.

Pictures are great conversation-starters. We use pictures to help children ask questions and describe what they see. If children are not ready to speak on their own, teachers can prompt them with simple questions – *Who is in the picture? Where are they? What are they doing?*

It is best if the pictures that we use in the class are set in the context of the child. By using objects and

scenes familiar to the child's environment, we help children regard English as less alien and closer to home.

Sequencing and storytelling

Storytelling builds sequencing skills that are important for communication. Each child is given a story card, and he/she tries to say one or two sentences about the picture. As a group, they learn how to tell a story together.

Simple How-to videos are effective ways of helping children form step-by-step instructions. For example, while a video of How to make a stick puppet plays, the children are encouraged to speak along in this way:

Step 1: Take a chart paper.

Step 2: Draw the picture of a dog on it.

Step 3: Cut out the picture.

Step 4: Paste it on an ice-cream stick.

Step 5: Your stick puppet is ready!

Role-play

Nothing builds confidence better than speaking in front of an audience. Children memorise very simple dialogues for role-playing. After practising in groups, children perform the role-play in front of the class. These role-plays need to be short and have simple sentences with repetitive dialogues that are easy to memorise. The focus is not on props or costumes or expert dialogue delivery – just on performing to improve self-confidence.



Word Bingo

Teachers create word grids and ask children to cross out words corresponding to pictures shown. Points are given for every row/column completed.

Reading English fluently

While speaking builds a huge amount of confidence, children also need to learn to read English text fluently. This not only helps them in school but also allows them to independently read stories and books that they like, building comprehension and vocabulary skills along the way.

Several phonics programmes teach letter sounds and blending. However, very few of them take the child beyond the reading of three-letter words. When children need to learn to read longer words and sentences, the phonics approach is often discarded. They are then taught to read by sight and memorise spellings, resulting in many children failing to achieve reading fluency. In our program, we used the phonics approach to take children from letters to not just reading small words, but also to reading sentences, short paragraphs and stories.

Just as a lot of confidence-building is needed when children learn to speak in English, the same is true of children taking their first steps to reading English. There are many techniques that help in building this confidence. Some of these are:

Play and read

Games are a great means of helping children read words. Teachers can make simple picture and word cards to create simple *Memory Match* and *Bingo* card games that children love to play again and again.



Memory Match

Children play in small groups to find the pairs of pictures and words that match.



The ELF Sentence Builder is a flip-book that helps children move from reading words to sentences. Teachers can make their own version of this flip-book using an old calendar or spiral notepads. Children can flip the left or right half to alter the beginning or the ending of the sentence, and read the new sentence that is formed. This activity can be done in groups as well as individually.

Repeat, repeat, repeat

Repetitive texts give beginner-readers confidence to read more.

She likes to jump.
 She likes to jump and skip.
 She likes to jump and skip in the rain.
 She likes to jump and skip in the rain all day.

Extended sentences that make reading easy



Expand the sentence
 Simple cards used to help children make and read sentences

Keep it simple

Beginner-readers need simple texts with decodable words. Sentences must be short; the font must be large and there must be a lot of white space between words.

Suitable for beginning readers	Unsuitable for beginning readers
Meera gets a new pen. The pen is red. She puts it in her bag. Meera likes her new pen.	Meera buys a new pen from the departmental store. The pen is shiny and smooth and has a golden nib. Her mother asks Meera to keep it inside her pencil box and promise her that she will keep it safe.

English beyond the classroom

How do we ensure that children use English beyond the classroom? In the schools we have worked in, we launched the *Walk 'n' Talk* programme to take English out of the classroom and into the child's home. We wanted children to use English when they went back home after school. But how would this work in communities where no one knows English?

In the *Walk 'n' Talk* programme, when children went home from school in the evening, they walked around their neighbourhood in groups, asking questions to adults in English. Children would translate the question in Tamil and teach their parents, grandparents and other adults how to respond in English. When children 'taught' adults the little English they have learnt, the entire community felt a sense of pride in them, and this built their confidence.

Celebrating every achievement

If the goal of English learning is building confidence, then children's achievements must be celebrated at

every step. Usually, only the toppers of each class are rewarded or appreciated. But if we want every child to learn English, then we need to celebrate *progress*, not *proficiency*.

At the end of each term, we conduct a *Skill Mela* for the children. The entire school takes on a festive atmosphere. There are *Letter stalls*, *Word stalls*, *Sentence stalls* and *Picture stalls* set up all over the school. Children can pick any stall at their level and try to read cards at that stall. They may pick up a picture and answer questions about it. If they answer most of the questions correctly, they get a sticker in their diary or card. In some schools, parents were invited to see the progress of their children. Every achievement, no matter how small, is celebrated.

It is not enough to believe that every child, irrespective of their social or economic background, can learn English; we need to make children believe it themselves too. When we build children's confidence along with their skills, we build a new generation of children who are confident of achieving anything they want to.



Chandra Viswanathan is the Founder Director of ELF Learning Solutions, an organization dedicated to the mission of ensuring English skills for children, youth and adults all over India, specifically catering to first-generation learners of English. Chandra and the ELF English team have developed several innovative learning materials for English learning that are being used by teachers and children in more than a hundred schools. Being part of an education non-profit AID INDIA, Chandra has over 20 years of experience in education research, curriculum, training and implementing programs in government schools. A resource person and trainer on primary education for the SSA, TN Govt., schools and NGOs, Chandra has worked with more than 10,000 teachers in Govt. schools towards improving learning outcomes in children. She can be contacted at chandra.aid@gmail.com