

Report

Online Lessons: New Platforms for Teaching-Learning

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Unprecedented situations demand novel responses. The Covid-19 pandemic has pushed the education sector into redefining its outlook, priorities, and modus operandi. The English language team at Vidya Bhawan Education Resource Centre (VBERC)—the academic partner of two major projects, Siksha Sambal Project (SSP) with Hindustan Zinc Ltd. and Saikshik Samvardhan Karyakram (SSK) with IndiGo Reach—has similarly been pushed into unfamiliar territory and new learning experiences.

By the end of March 2020, as physical classrooms were suspended, VBERC shifted to the online mode of teaching-learning and had to network with a maximum number of students possible through class-wise WhatsApp groups, or phone communication. The responsibility for networking was taken by the Field Personnel (FP) who had so far been working with students in several schools. In the case of SSP, 59 WhatsApp groups involving around 1800 Class X students were created. The process of creating groups for Class IX students is currently on-going. In SSK, a total of 1038 students from classes VI to IX are currently engaged. Government school teachers, principals and other officials such as the District Educational Officers (DEO) also are members of these WhatsApp groups.

Developing the FPs

The capacity of the FPs was built through daily assignments. Initially, the VBERC team worked on grammar elements and reading comprehension and shared some reading material. Regular feedback and discussions with each FP were conducted out over the phone, email or WhatsApp. This not only helped both VBERC members and the FPs to get familiar with the online mode of working, but it also strengthened communication channels

Working with Students

The ERC subject team developed daily worksheets for students. All the worksheets were first shared with the FP team, who solved them and shared their responses and feedback with the ERC team. The responses and suggestions of the FPs, in turn, helped the VBERC team to anticipate how students may receive the worksheet, and how the team should move forward. This process not only enhanced the capacity of the FPs, but it

also prepared them to administer the worksheets to students better. The FPs were given the authority to make changes to the worksheets based on the particular needs of their students.

The Materials

The first worksheets were designed around basic comprehension and writing skills. They combined some tasks which had been consciously pitched below the expected language levels of the respective classes and others that were more challenging. The difference in the pitching levels was to allow for the difference in students' learning pace, especially since most of them were engaging with online learning for the first time. Subsequent worksheets covered higher level reading comprehension and expression through writing, along with grammar.

For Class X students, based on the feedback received from FPs, we recently started sharing worksheets derived from chapters in their textbooks. These included pre-reading activities and comprehension questions to ensure that the student had understood the chapters. They also incorporated post-reading tasks which helped to summarize the chapter, and practice questions based on the examinations.

Main Stages in Process

To summarize, the process (as of now) involves three main stages which synergistically build on each other:

- The VBERC team develops and compiles study material suitable for online teaching-learning and shares it with the FPs.
- The FPs solve the questions, share their feedback, and, on its basis, the study-materials are refined.
- The FPs share materials with the team

Challenges and the Road Forward

Online teaching/learning is raising several significant questions. The issue of equitable access to learning material cannot be overlooked. Reports from the field indicate that the majority of students who had already been struggling with learning in the classroom were either unable to connect to, or were inactive on the online platform. It certainly did not help matters that direct interaction between the teacher-student/student-student was missing.

We are yet to engage in a critical self-assessment to ascertain how well we can use the digital platform to augment please reading and creative writing. Moving in this direction will help to engage children in deeper aspects of language education.

Yet, it is impossible to ignore the optimism about the road ahead. The current challenges have shaken the rusted joints of our education system. There is a shift to student-centric learning. The mainstream schooling system is now relying on technology more than ever. In the common discourse, a mobile phone in the hands of a student is being promoted from the role of a villain to that of a confidant. All these changes have broadened the scope of education, and consequently of the VBERC projects too. Our team looks forward to incorporating multimedia materials and technology into learning. Virtual learning platforms such as Blackboard, Moodle, and videoconferencing tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, Skype, etc., can be used to create online teaching-learning spaces. More resources and better content delivery can be ensured if the technical issues are resolved inequitably.