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Developing English Speaking Skills through Blended Mode

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Abstract

Speaking a language especially a second language such as English requires regular opportunities to listen, respond, explain, and interact. The disruption caused by COVID-19 has made these opportunities difficult to continue. This article discusses how blended teaching can support speaking development among Indian students learning English as a second language. The article also distinguishes remote teaching from planned blended teaching and proposes activities using short recordings, telephone conversations, online meetings, and classroom interaction where permitted. It also considers access, multilingual support, teacher preparation, feedback, assessment, and privacy. The article argues that an effective approach should begin with students' communication needs and available resources and that digital activities should support meaningful speaking rather than simply increase screen time or homework.

Keywords: blended teaching, ESL students, speaking skills, India, COVID-19, digital access

Introduction

For students who speak English alongside their own language in the spheres of learning, work, and communication away from their local language community, it is important to be able to speak English. But terminology and grammatical knowledge are not sufficient to allow a learner to speak confidently. A student can read and grasp something in a lesson but cannot tell it to another student. The other might make it just right to prepare something but simply can't come up with a related question. It is thus necessary to impart language teaching that covers both prepared expression as well as interaction. It is important that learners have opportunities to develop ideas, listen, ask questions and communicate in understandable English.

With COVID-19 still affecting the way learning takes place, organizing speaking practice is a significant educational issue. The lack of normal class meeting closure and limited attendance during this period caused a disruption in classroom conversations and paired activities. Written notes or extended online lessons were not always a time for discussion. The challenge now is to bridge the gap between those times when students are at home to those when they are in class, linking the experience of distance learning to face-to-face communication. The transfer of lessons from face-to-face to online directions does not automatically address access and student wellbeing issues, and teachers must consider these factors when making decisions in this context.

There needs to be a difference between urgent remote learning and implementation of online instruction. In explaining this, Hodges et al. (2020) state that an emergency response is not a well-developed-online-education course and is intended for temporary access to instruction in the event of an emergency. This separation at the same time reduces wrongful assessment of teachers and digital learning. The quick fix to the closure of the institution should not be regarded as a benchmark for good online

learning. Conversely, the challenge of emergency teaching should not be ignored but should shape the rest of the planning.

Blended teaching implies that a planned connection between digital learning and face-to-face learning arises and is used when it is possible to attend. When a classroom closes, a combination of live online plus recorded/offline assignments is highlighted as a remote teaching model, rather than blended in the classroom. These arrangements may alternate, depending on the conditions, within the same learning sequence. This has importance as it is recognized that there were no universally similar closure and re-opening patterns for all institutions and in all locations in India. (ASER Centre, 2021).

Speaking Development and the Indian Context

There are a number of interdependent skills involved in speaking. Students should have sufficient vocabulary, grammar and a structure for communicating a message, mechanics that facilitate comprehension, but no more than a small delay between messages. They should also sequence and interpret information and react to listeners. Someone who talks fast can still provide a muddy speech. A slower speaker can speak in a successful way by selecting appropriate information and confirming comprehension. Thus, quality of communication, and not just speed and imitation of accents, should be the focus of teaching rather than grammatical accuracy.

There are various arrangements within online learning. Singh and Thurman (2019) examined definitions of online learning and presented why clarification is needed regarding the definition of online learning. A real meeting and a task to be completed after should not be considered the same experience for practical teaching. Recorded responses give time to prepare yet live interaction provides immediate responses. There is no automatic superiority of one over the other in each objective. Teachers are to make and clarify the arrangement that will facilitate a speaking activity, and relate it to the other parts of the lesson.

The Possibilities of Digital Education are identified under the National Education Policy 2020 and its importance of resolving the Digital Divide is recognized. It also sees the value of face-to-face learning and invites proper blending models; (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020a). These policy directions offer a starting point for discussing digital support next to providing classroom support. They do not imply that all institutions are equipped and prepared to take these practices forward adequately in the current context, or that students at all have the opportunities to access and utilize them. A policy proposal should not be confused with evidence of successful delivery of the policy.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020b) offers guidance for digital education with consideration for variations in access and learning (modes). In 2021, a statement by the Ministry of Education referred to ‘online, partially online and offline’ including the use of television and radio (Ministry of Education, 2021). In English, these resources can provide listening texts, but only a text that is broadcasted can be considered to be speech training. Teachers still have a need for a clear pathway for students to respond orally and for teacher feedback. Teachers continue to need a path to allow students to orally respond and to give them guidance.

The learning needs must be assessed at the level of the learner. This also highlights the presence of the differences between having a household with a cell phone and having a child with a cell phone that was documented by ASER Centre (2021) (section 7) which highlighted educational conditions in rural areas of India. It is not desirable to correct all urban school/college with the same method. However, it is helpful for planning purposes. Teacher also should be familiar with the time at which the learner will be able to access it, if it is available to play, and if assignments can be returned.

It's important to pay attention to confidence and willingness to communicate also. Lee and Drajati (2019) studied the informal digital English learning and willingness to communicate of the Indonesian university EFL learners. Based on their questionnaire-based study, they were able to identify some relationships such as the relationship between productive digital activities and affective factors. The

results are not conclusive of the recordings being effective in making Indian ESL students feel confident. They do, however, allow for the possibility of discussing "language practice" in the context of "language participation" and "language emotion". Here, assessing students' readiness to contribute cannot be done by a single index, which is simply the number of assignments done.

Dhawan (2020) elaborates on online education during Covid-19 crisis and its possibilities and challenges. In this article, it is assumed flexibility must be planned in teaching rather than taken for granted. The other persons in class with the same phone can complete a recording at a different time than learners. Another may require written directions to do a telephone task. Speaking objective(s) should be flexible, so that alternative means to achieve the goals are included. The meaning of it should not just be allow students to cope with problems on their own.

A Practical Framework for Implementation

A brief needs assessment and needs access audit should be carried out initially. Teachers can ask about the languages students speak, their places to use English, and what makes English difficult to speak. They should also inquire regarding gadgets, data, power, study time, and recording comfort. Use a brief oral exercise to get a glimpse of skill. Such information should be collected in a respectful and private manner. Students will not need to justify financial reasons or compete to show how well they have equipment.

One need to select a few communication objectives. Examples of suitable objectives include introducing oneself, explaining a process, describing an event, asking for information, stating reasons and responding to another opinion. The objective of improving English cannot be utilized to inform a single lesson. Explaining two reasons that someone might give for choosing an option & answer one question is an easier-to-teach, easier-to-assess activity. For those teachers, they can choose the language support that can be provided and whether they want the primary activity to happen in a classroom where allowed or remotely.

It is possible to have a working sequence of preparation, interaction, feedback, and more performance. Firstly, an overview of the topic and brief language model. The term interaction implies that the student must interact with another person. Feedback develops a manageable piece of teachable that is then put in place through performance. It can be a constant reminder, even if delivery mode adjustments occur, explaining the intent of the activities in an uncertain period.

A teacher may facilitate a short audio explanation and a written prompt which they can provide via an institutionally approved communication. If accessible and suitable a class messaging system could share it or a learning management system. This is to have a familiar/ manageable path and not too many new applications. Students shall be aware of where their instructions will be located, the amount of time which they will need to spend in preparation, and what they shall be required to say following their instructions. Consistency can help to minimize unnecessary confusion.

Often, unless a video is needed, the first choice of media should be audio. Expressions that include a reason and a request for help can be included in a clear voice model, without downloading images. A transcript is available to help people hear before they read. Materials should not be too extensive to revisit. Teachers should ensure that the recording makes sense on a cell phone. The goal is to hear and use a specific communication pattern, and background music, the decorative effects and long introductions do not contribute to that.

Interaction can continue when closures of the classrooms occur via short-term online calls and meetings if that is available, or via phone and voice messages as agreed. A live session should contain student speaking not all teacher explanation. Feature small group rooms on platforms if available, for teacher use after providing explanation of roles and tasks. If it does not, pair may swap answers at arranged times. These alternatives make no assumption that all learners have access to a live setting, or the same technical services.

There can be interaction in an asynchronous exchange. The first learner writes a recommendation; a partner poses a question and the first learner then responds to the question. The answer should be to the point and not be a complete scripted answer. However, this is not a easy always. Teachers should be aware of its use as a means for careful thoughtful dialogue and wherever possible allow opportunity for spontaneous spoken exchanges. The task types offer varying degrees of evidence of the learner's emergent competence in speaking.

If the institutional environment is accessible and local regulations allow prep in the digital sphere while the student is attending the school in the physical sphere, we can continue with some of the preparations being digital and the classroom meeting being the traditional face-to-face communication. Students may listen to a model at home, and then solve a similar problem together within the class. Teachers should abide by the institutional arrangements and engage in activities that do not involve sharing of devices unnecessarily. When students are divided between in-person and remote learning, there needs to be an equivalent pathway for remote students. It is important that the feedback and learning does not become synonymous with attendance to class.

This framework can be improved by incorporating support in many languages. Students can talk about a challenging idea in a language that they know well, and then write an English explanation. A teacher can communicate bilingually while maintaining the ultimate communication goal. Adding this will help them understand content, not 1-to-1 translation of sentences. Learners can be inspired to use familiar English expressions, clarify unknown words by explaining them simply, and seek further explanation. They must be encouraged to use languages that they already know or understand as a means of support, basis for learning, rather than as a failure.

The approach is demonstrated within a unit on making requests. **For example**, the teacher can share two short cases of asking in polite and non-offensive ways about information. During interaction, partners share other information, and ask each other for missing information. The teacher can give later a comment on clarity and an appropriate expression. Students then try to make new requests in another context. The change has a role in verifying if they handle with changing the language instead of copying the base language.

A second unit might consist of writing about a local place, location, and/or venue. Each student creates keywords regarding a market, library, park or neighbourhood facility and without the student providing personal addresses. Listens and asks questions to help to imagine the place with a partner. The speaker then gives a more definite report, where the questions that lead them find any missing information. With a remote configuration, it can be done through text messages. It can be a pair task in the classroom where classes are resumed.

A third section might have students give ideas to improve their school. They make one suggestion and two reasons, and a possible problem. While discussing, it is needed to group the members. They can be allowed to compare to make some decision about what group should recommend. While using a written outline of the essay may be of assistance, students should not read the entire essay during the exchange. The last individual recording should describe why and what was done with the group and discuss one of the alternatives that the group considered. This will provide a connection between listening, discussion and organized speech and will enable the teacher to monitor students' own work.

When topics are selected judiciously, personal story could be incorporated as an aid to speaking. A description of how a learner learned a useful art or acquired a skill, or how he or she solved a small problem or did a small service to a family member. Teachers should not ask for an explanation of sickness, death or difficult circumstances regarding a family in the current scenario. A fictional example may be used if desired by the students. A student may ask what has happened and why it happened. Later retell that emphasis is placed on sequenced events. The task should allow for communication (spoken word, written word, shared gestures) without requiring unneeded personal sharing.

Let the pronunciation exercises focus on the aspects of comprehensible speech in various activities. It may be when the teacher detects an unclear ending to a word, an erroneous stress of an essential word, and rapid delivery of speech for listeners. The feature can also be used in an abridged passage, and can be rehearsed by students in their own message. Social interaction should make clear to the listener the effect of a change on helping them, and relate feedback on pronunciation to the purpose of the communication of the activity.

A learning record can help students to manage independent practice. Once they have completed the work, they can write down what they have learnt or what expression they used well, one thing they found difficult, and one thing they would like to try next. The record doesn't have to be another extended writing assignment. It should guide them in making a decision, maybe even a clearer opening or even more follow-up questions. Selected entries can be checked on a periodic basis by teachers.

The framework needs to be introduced slowly by the teacher. A recording session may take place during the first week, focusing on getting a recording of a model. A later stage may have questions from the partner(s) followed by a short discussion/explanation question. This is a suggested timetable, and not an official timetable. It should be customized to fit the attendance, age of students and the accessibility of the institution. The most important thing is to have the students comprehend what each new responsibility is after a few are added together. Taking on an ambitious program that often fails to include learners is less desirable than sticking with a small program that goes on consistently.

A weekly plan can be used to make expectations clear, but without the hard-line connotation of a required attendance. Teacher may provide one preparation task, offer an interaction time, and designate a feedback date. Devices can be shared with other learners; the learning process around these stages will be planned. The plan should give insights into the requirements of the activities and their optional nature. With access modification due to illness or family needs, teachers may modify their route and timing of access, but leave the communication outcome unchanged. Participation should be encouraged but shouldn't be forced while the activity shouldn't be a penalty because it was predictable.

Students need to be taught to prepare, not by writing a full script and reading it. Teacher can illustrate the difference between a paragraph and a short expression of ideas. Learners can say a start or an introduction, two important points and an ending or finish. Questions about subjects not covered in the outline may be asked by the partners. This way, the learner will be prepared and provide the opportunity for a genuine response. It also allows teachers to gauge if the student can expand upon what he has memorized.

Different roles in the group to solve problems related to unequal participation. During a discussion one learner can pose the question, another learner asks for reasons, another learner summarizes the options, and another learner reports the decision. Roles need to be rotated throughout the tasks so that a learner does not always present with others not listening to them. The teacher should also assess the individual understanding. Being recorded as a group sometimes can conceal differences in contribution. A brief individual follow-up question, to gain insights into the learner's agreement and reasons, about participation and speaking can be more informative!

Tasks should focus on the same theme but not unnecessarily require students to do more than is applicable. A role play of a public announcement can practice clear instructions, but it is inappropriate to provide medical advice and nor is it appropriate to repeat unclear health advice. Content can be provided by teachers and assessed by them with regards to how students deliver the facts. Other topics may be a description of a timetable, a request for clarification of assignments, a description of a favorite book, or a comparison of study routines. Students know the material, which helps to eliminate redundant research requirements and focus on the linguistic content to be used for speaking.

The shift towards classroom interactions coming back in these times must be intentional. Students may have gotten used to stopping and starting and recording privately. The teacher can start by short

exchanges of two or more students and then come to longer discussions. Classroom tasks may add details or questions for review on-line or be introduced on-line and reviewed in the classroom, not looking for students to record the same script twice in front of the class and are trying to link to preparation and actual communication, not asking students to record the same script.

Feedback, Assessment and Institutional Support

Student feedback on different time intervals is fine, while teacher presence is still a big deal. While the COVID-19 crisis has disrupted university education, Rapanta et al. (2020) highlight the significance of designing learning experiences and balance between teacher presence and online teaching most of the time. The meaning of presence is that it means setting clear direction, responding to issues, supporting learners to make progress. There is no need to have to be on the Internet all the time. Support can be given in the form of a predictable feedback schedule and a feedback pathway that has been agreed upon for questions, rather than for teachers or students to be always on call.

Feedback should be brief, easily used. Following a speaking task, the teacher may be able to pinpoint one strength, and direct attention to one priority. A learner will require a more explicit rationale, better structuring or correction of a sequent language problem. When feedback is to be given, it should be in relation to a specific part of the response if possible. The reason 'Give an example after second reason' is preferable to 'Improve your speaking', because giving an example is a much better way to demonstrate an idea rather than speaking. Students should subsequently have a chance to try a revision or similar activity. Guidance is part of teaching sequence there is an opportunity to apply guidance.

Peer feedback can help to alleviate feelings of loneliness, and also offer an actual audience. Students will be able to tell what they got, find a good tip, and have one question. They can't be expected to catch all the grammar mistakes or be the final judge on accents that they don't know. Respectful comments can be modelled and teachers can discuss that comments are related to what they say, not to them personally. Organizing participation should take into account that each learner should receive a response. A digital collection composed of a large number of recordings, but limited (or minimal) listening time would provide lower quality documentation of significant interaction.

It is important to use more than an edited recording in the assessment. Careful planning and revision may be demonstrated in a well-prepared response, and listening and spontaneous response in a short live exchange. In case of interruption in school attendance, teachers may change the time and/or route to retrieve these. The criteria need to remain one and the same. Clarity/Relevance/ Appropriate Language/ Pronunciation/ Responsiveness can be used as construction guides. Not every aspect of a video should serve as a criterion in English proficiency with appearance of background, expensive equipment, confidence in editing or video quality should not.

A baseline assessment and a later speaking task can serve as a tool for looking at progress. The tasks need to be like in level of difficulty but not be likely to lead to rote learning one answer. A student may offer a description of a more familiar process first and then a description of another more familiar process. Teachers need to document what is being supported and whether the response was written or if it was parents who were writing it. It is helpful to have some form of later improvement as evidence but it is an insufficient one if it is concluded that blending caused the improvement. There may be other learning experiences, as well as other task conditions, involved, which may also be different.

The students' views also give another type of information. A quick look and listening can provide insight and clues into

(a) whether voice tasks were manageable or not,

(b) whether the feedback was clear or not, and

(c) whether students felt they could participate or not.

These responses may contribute to enhancing the programme but confidence and satisfaction are not equivalent to measured gains in speaking. Students can have a great time in an activity without making

much progress or they can make great progress in an activity but find it challenging. Assessment should however take into account learner experience as well as actual performance and provide explanations regarding the possible contribution of each source of information.

There is a need for teacher preparation for this work. Teacher preparedness due to emergency remote teaching is discussed by Trust and Whalen (2020). Practical support might involve presenting information in an audio form, arranging for small group dialogue, handling the submission of materials, and feedback on assignments involving speaking. Training need not be a demonstration of scores of uses but an educational exercise. Time must also be allotted for teachers to share activity/outcomes and what went wrong. Knowing how to use a platform isn't enough to design a successful platform for effective oral interaction.

A teacher who has many large classes will never be able to make detailed comments on all recordings every week. Institutions can involve teachers to rotate individual assessment, adopt common assessments for common challenges, and analyze selected tasks in depth. Students are able to do some practice without formative assessment marks. Departments can share resources rather than having each teacher design these resources individually. A sustainable programme should incorporate time for productive listening, responding etc. not evaluate work based on how many tasks are completed.

Alternatives are necessary to ensure equal opportunities that the learning goal is maintained. If a student cannot turn in a video, he or she may turn in audio, and if a student has poor communication skills, he or she may have a brief call if possible. Printed prompts may aid in preparation, but they cannot completely substitute for oral preparation. Schools or institutions need to find out what is missing and make a feasible means for the learner to be heard when contact happens. Trying to evaluate those who fail to submit to an access check should not be considered unwillingness to learn rather than missing submission. Using alternative arrangements, do not publicly identify students according to their economic statuses.

Communication should be based on privacy and wellbeing. Standard is to have recordings in the approved learning space with information defined regarding how who will be able to hear the recordings. No activity should be forced into being innovative by being held up in public posting. For minors, the institutions should have suitable consent and protection systems.

Teachers should establish reasonable contact times and avoid repeated demands late at night. Students should not have to display their homes or remain on camera to prove attention. An audio response can often demonstrate the relevant speaking performance.

The accessibility needs of learners who are not addressed by the provision of a device should not be lost. Published cues, visible or audible directions, written scripts and submission options may assist other students to participate. Teachers are encouraged to discuss individual adjustments they need to provide and should ask for support from the Institution if necessary. Learners might need extended preparation time or an alternate method of responding. Such decisions should strive to maintain the intended communication skill, to the extent possible. There should not be a single uniform technical procedure that is more important than a fair opportunity to demonstrate learning.

Parents or carers can be given very basic information about what school level tasks are for. They aren't responsible for writing the speech or perfecting each sentence, their job is to find a suitable time, if at all possible. This should be emphasized for teachers to prevent an expectation that they will be able to help them further if necessary. To manage their communication directly with college, learners can choose to enter the college level. In both contexts, a supportive intervention should be designed to consider pressures within the household, and should not be presumed to be able to address all home contexts with an available helper who speaks English.

Words and line emphasis should be for meaning and be selected according to the function needed, not popularity. Comprehensible speech should be used in a helpful model, and an example of the

communication feature being taught should be included. Teachers are able to scan expressions they don't know and cut out of the way parts of them. They should cite their source and use it under the correct license. Using examples that are drawn locally, but are meaningful, can be useful. But a teacher-made recording should also be reviewed, so that it is clear and accurate. Knowing about a resource does not ensure it is appropriate for the learners and/or for the task.

Useful digital activities can be kept on file to be used alongside resumed classroom teaching, with ongoing assessments of whether or not the digital activities are working to meet learners' needs. Practices should stick around even if they get comfortable during an emergency simply because they are beneficial to learning.

Conclusion

Blended teaching is an effective means to link alternative online teaching with ongoing need of classroom communication. Digital preparation, interaction, feedback and additional performance may be provided in Indian ESL programmes, as well as in the case of limited access, can be combined. When attendance is affected, remote arrangements should continue to keep the students connected and practicing oral interaction and, in the case of classrooms where remotely accessed content is available, help to facilitate live content. Implementation requires reasonable tasks, assistance from teachers and fair evaluation. The goal is to have frequent, supported English communication, using technology as a means to this.

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