

Dr. Santosh Kumar Mahapatra did not grow up speaking English, and studying English in secondary school was not easy for him. In fact, he almost failed the subject in Grades 10 and 12. Later, after he earned a master's degree in English Literature but still felt he could not speak the language well, he improved his English-speaking skills while earning a second master's degree. Now, he not only holds a PhD in English Language Teaching, but he has also designed courses—including one called English Conversation Skills.



Dr. Santosh Kumar Mahapatra addresses one of his classes.

Dr. Mahapatra teaches a variety of courses at the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS) Pilani, a private, nonprofit university in Hyderabad. He has taught Introductory Psychology, Linguistics, and Print and Audiovisual Advertisement, but he said that his focus is on English language teaching. He mainly teaches Technical Report Writing to first-year students and Advanced Communicative English to second- and third-year students working toward their bachelor's degrees in technology or engineering fields. He teaches two or three Technical Report Writing classes, depending on the semester, to approximately 130 students per class.

One strategy Dr. Mahapatra uses to overcome the challenge of teaching large classes is to use pair work to assess in-class writing. After giving students time to write, he displays a rubric on the overhead projector and asks students to exchange essays with a partner and grade one another's essay by using the rubric. During this time, he is available to answer any questions that students may have. Once they have finished grading the essays, students return them and talk about their evaluations. He cautions that students must be paired carefully and that this technique works best with students who have at least an intermediate English proficiency. Fortunately, he reports that he has capable students. The students' evaluations might factor into final grades, but Dr. Mahapatra uses the pair-work assignments for formative assessment as well.

Each classroom at BITS Pilani is equipped with projectors, audiovisual equipment, and Internet connectivity (these are resources that not all universities in India have). There are two styles of classrooms—those with stadium seating and “flat” classrooms with immobile furniture. Dr. Mahapatra says the inability to move the furniture is unlike the situation in which he studied English language teaching. When he was studying, he said, the teachers-in-training had “roundtables where we sat together; we had discussions, and the teacher was moving around while we completed activities or tasks, and that was much more interactive.” He describes his teaching style

as “unorthodox,” and he deals with the fixed seating by using pair-work activities, moving around the classroom, having the students move to sit around him in the front of the class, and creating opportunities for drama and skits.

Luckily, BITS Pilani welcomes innovative teachers. Because all four of the BITS Pilani campuses require first-year students to take Technical Report Writing, there is a standardized curriculum and textbook for the course. However, Dr. Mahapatra has the freedom to supplement with materials that he generates himself or that he finds on the Internet or in other textbooks. He has even designed two courses that are about to be approved by the institution—the previously mentioned English Conversation Skills course and one called Introduction to Critical Pedagogy. When discussing his approach to designing courses, Dr. Mahapatra stresses the importance of flexibility. He sets topics for the course, but he also waits to see who enrolls in the class and asks for students' feedback at the beginning of the term. Once he discovers their needs and interests, he can adjust the readings, assessments, and his teaching method.

The courses that he has created are for undergraduate students. Introduction to Critical Pedagogy includes readings by Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, and others, with the intent of encouraging students to think about alternatives to mainstream education. The English Conversation Skills class uses drama and technology as foundations, so skits and media are integral components. For instance, Dr. Mahapatra asks groups of four or five students to write a script on a social issue or any other topic they find interesting. Each group presents its skit while the other students use rubrics to evaluate them. The rubrics themselves are flexible, as Dr. Mahapatra might change them depending on the aspects of language he wants students to notice and assess. After students complete the rubrics, they discuss their opinions in groups and then with the entire class. While many Indian students can write English fairly well, many



The entrance of Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani-Hyderabad Campus

of those same students struggle with speaking informally in day-to-day situations, and Dr. Mahapatra hopes his English Conversation Skills class can help his students decrease the gap between written and spoken English.

Dr. Mahapatra can identify with that challenge because he was once a student who struggled to express himself orally in English. He said that after earning his first master's degree, in English Literature from Berhampur University in Orissa, his home state, he was "able to write grammatically correct English, and I could pass the exams, but I could not speak. So whenever I went to a job interview, I was rejected because my English was bad." According to Dr. Mahapatra, his spoken English started to improve when he attended a postgraduate diploma program in the Teaching of English. That program was his formal introduction to teaching English language and applied linguistics. He said his teachers there helped him improve his English enough that he could get a job, and he started teaching primary school after completing that program.

Dr. Mahapatra then decided that he wanted a "proper" Bachelor of Education degree in

order to obtain a government school job, so he moved to Hyderabad in 2007 and enrolled in the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU). He said, "I had the habit of listening to the radio, the BBC ... all the time. I didn't have the money to buy a computer, so I depended on the radio to improve my English. When I came to EFLU, the shopkeeper there spoke better English than I did." Dr. Mahapatra made every effort to speak English rather than rely on Oriya, his mother tongue, and to interact with people whose English-speaking skills were more advanced than his. "I didn't have a single friend who spoke Oriya at EFLU," he said. "I spoke only with those who could speak good English, and the motivation was to learn English."

He also spent time in the computer lab watching YouTube, and he wrote for university magazines to improve his writing. He returned to EFLU and earned his Master's in Philosophy in English for Specific Purposes, and he completed his PhD in English Language Teaching, with an emphasis in language assessment, from the University of Hyderabad in 2015.

Helping students familiarize themselves with technology encourages them to become independent learners.

To maintain his English skills today, Dr. Mahapatra said he continues “writing and interacting in English as much as possible. My wife doesn’t speak my language, and I don’t speak hers much. Our interactions are in English. All of my interactions with students and colleagues are in English, so English is my language now. Now, I’m reading academic journals and writing to improve my academic writing skills.” He has authored articles in academic journals and book chapters on language assessment and teacher education.

Dr. Mahapatra regularly participates in professional development by attending conferences and workshops. Recently, he has attended workshops addressing assessment, international publication, and materials development. He also had the opportunity to take part in several online classes, including two U.S. Department of State E-Teacher Scholarship Program courses, “Exploring Web 2.0: Tools for Classroom Teaching and Professional Development” through Lewis and Clark College and “EFL [English as a foreign language] Assessment” through the University of Maryland, Baltimore. Since taking those courses, he has led a workshop to train teachers to use technology and Web 2.0 tools, and the teachers he trained have created, and now maintain, electronic portfolios documenting how they are using the tools in their classrooms. Dr. Mahapatra also offered an online class teaching assessment using Web 2.0 tools and wrote an article about the experience, which was recently published by the British Council in an international conference volume titled *Innovation in English Language Teacher Education*.

Technology plays a large role in the way Dr. Mahapatra interacts with his students. He said one of his biggest teaching challenges is that he struggles with making classes interesting and keeping students motivated

each day. He calls games “useful shortcuts,” and he occasionally incorporates them in his classes to keep his students interested in the topics he teaches. Other times, he brings technology into the classroom to keep his students engaged because he understands that his students value it, so it is advantageous for him to stay abreast of the latest technology. Dr. Mahapatra uses technology to help him relate to how his students think and feel. He said, “Technologically, I’m more advanced than my students. They don’t know about most of the online web databases, Web 2.0 They don’t know how to create presentations using Prezi, so I have to teach them.” He lists SpiderScribe and Moodle as tools he enjoys using in his classes.

He also said that VoiceThread, a feedback tool, is among the most popular of the tools he has used with his students. Dr. Mahapatra asks his students to make presentations in class, and he records them with a video camera. After class, he uploads the presentations into VoiceThread and uses a microphone to comment on each presentation. Students can go to the website and check the feedback he has given. What they really like is that they can log in while preparing for future presentations, watch their previous presentations, listen to the feedback again, and try to improve. Dr. Mahapatra said the tool is a “huge hit” with his students.

Helping students familiarize themselves with technology encourages them to become independent learners, which is one of Dr. Mahapatra’s favorite parts of teaching. He said that what he is particularly proud of in his classroom is that the “people who attend my class develop concrete information and want to learn more about the discipline, and they are in a position to learn on their own.”

He laughed as he told the story of former Bachelor of Technology students who have

graduated and have good jobs in multinational corporations, but, he said, “They want to learn more about linguistics! The money that they earn now is pretty good, and they will have to get their master’s and a PhD [in Linguistics], which will take seven to eight years, and the money that they’ll get at the end of that is nothing when compared to the money that they are making now, but they are welcome to pursue their interests. But I am happy that I have inspired them to think like that, learn more, and that they are interested in it.”

Dr. Mahapatra continues to challenge himself professionally. He wants to have an article published in an international journal within the next two years, and he would eventually like to pursue a postdoctoral fellowship in the United States or United

Kingdom. He also plans to attend more workshops in India and hopes to speak at an international conference to network with other professionals interested in linguistics and language assessment. Not long ago, the idea of speaking at an international conference would have seemed far-fetched to someone who struggled to speak in English. That Dr. Mahapatra has come this far is a testament to his dedication and perseverance—qualities that he now hopes to pass on to his students.

This article was written by **Blaire Creamer Hart**, a 2015–2016 English Language Fellow in Hyderabad, India. She taught English for Employability at the Siasat Daily Initiative.

All photos by Blaire Creamer Hart



The auditorium and grounds at Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani-Hyderabad Campus