

Building Language Proficiency for Literacy Teacher Development: A Workshop Review

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Abstract

This paper reviews a two-day workshop held in the eastern part of Assam, India in 2020, aimed at enhancing English communication skills among rural school teachers in India. The workshop was facilitated by experienced educators and a Global Teacher Grant recipient. The workshop facilitators collaborated with language specialists to deliver comprehensive English as a Second Language (ESL) training for teaching emergent bilingual students (EBs) and using innovative strategies and technology to overcome geographical barriers. This review presents a contextual background, literature review, observation tools for evaluating workshop activities, and findings. It highlights the necessity for continuous teacher support and professional development for literacy teachers. Insights from the review contribute to a professional development program for ESL and English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) teachers in Texas, with an emphasis on improving students' language proficiency through innovative instructional approaches.

Keywords: professional development, workshop review, English as a Second Language programs,

India

India's global importance in economic, political, and technological fields highlights the necessity of English proficiency. Azam, Chin, and Prakash (2013) affirm the substantial economic benefits of English proficiency in India, noting that fluency is correlated with a 34% increase in men's hourly wages. This wage boost is comparable to the financial gains from completing secondary school and is about half as much as earning a bachelor's degree. English language proficiency is increasingly essential for

securing better job opportunities. Moreover, they posit that educated, experienced individuals gain higher returns from their proficiency in English language skills. The increasing emphasis on English proficiency has led to significant changes in educational curricula, especially in secondary education, where the focus has shifted significantly toward developing communicative skills. In India, according to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2013), the curriculum has evolved from a prevalent

emphasis on grammar-based written language to emphasizing the development of English communicative skills. Despite the challenges faced by educators in public schools due to limited language learning resources, providing effective professional development for English language teachers is essential, especially in rural areas where resource disparities remain a challenge (Meganathan, 2009).

With over two decades of experience teaching at a rural high school in eastern Assam, India, the author has firsthand insights into the challenges educators face in environments with minimal resources. The journey as a teacher educator gradually expanded beyond classroom teaching to developing training programs to support educators working in similar settings. Driven by a deep commitment to enhancing teaching and learning, the author applied for and received the Global Teacher Grant, part of the Alumni Teacher Exchange Program administered by IREX (International Research & Exchanges Board), shortly before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This opportunity came after the author participated in the 2012 International Leaders in Education Program (ILEP), sponsored by the U.S. Department of State.

In rural Indian public schools, students typically learn English as a second language while studying other subjects in one of the 22 regional languages recognized by the Indian constitution. Given their socio-economic backgrounds, these students have little need for English in their daily lives, as they primarily communicate in their regional languages. This limits their daily English usage. Because of this, opportunities for students to practice listening and speaking English are scarce. However, the increasing emphasis on English communication skills in recent curricula has inspired teachers to adopt active learning strategies to improve the English language proficiency of students who predominantly communicate in their regional language.

Motivated by this shift towards English proficiency in secondary education curricula and equipped with the teacher grant, the author

organized a two-day workshop enhancing English communication skills for teachers in rural Indian districts. Originally planned as an in-person event, the workshop was shifted to the Zoom platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these teachers were using Zoom for the first time, indicating the unexpected demand for virtual training in these communities.

The workshop took place on August 30-31, 2020, in eastern Assam, India, and targeted key stakeholders, including teachers, resource persons, principals, and district school inspectors. The goal was to significantly improve students' communication skills by enhancing teacher training through professional development programs- an essential competency in today's globalized society. Throughout the four sessions, active learning activities were introduced to facilitate effective communication skills. The activities included role-play, picture-story exercises, language games, and warm-up activities highlighting vocabulary, English pronunciation, spoken English, and reading. The workshop featured four resource persons, including two from the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT).

A total of 135 public school teachers, who teach English as a Second Language, attended the workshop. This review evaluates the activities and materials used in the workshop and offers key takeaways for developing professional development programs for English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) teachers in Texas.

This Global Teacher Grant provided a timely opportunity for the author to focus on developing a workshop that leveraged technology to create interactive learning environments and facilitate collaboration among educators from various districts. By overcoming geographical barriers, the workshop allowed teachers to share strategies and collaborate across distances. Participants found the sessions valuable, particularly the emphasis on using technology to enhance student engagement and teacher collaboration. The insights gained from this initiative are particularly relevant for teacher educators in regions like Texas, where similar

challenges are faced. By sharing these experiences, the author hopes to contribute to the development of professional programs that address the unique needs of diverse student populations, both in India and globally.

Literature Review

Considering recent education reforms in India, there has been a significant shift from a focus on grammar-based written English, as outlined in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2013), to prioritizing proficiency in practical, operation-based English learning in high schools (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2023). As a result, learning to communicate in English becomes essential for students to prepare them for professional success. To effectively learn a language, it is important to engage in interactions where English is not commonly used as a medium of communication. However, establishing a motivating English learning environment is essential for improving English communication skills. Chen et al. (2021) noted that “to prepare students to cope with continued globalization for future careers, teaching English for specific or occupational purposes is one of the primary goals of recent education reforms” (p.1). Although many studies have emphasized the challenges faced by second language learners and their need to improve language skills, there is still much to explore. Valuable insights can be gained by examining research that focuses on the specific needs of English language learners in developing countries where English is used as a second language.

The review highlights the shift in English education towards practical and career-focused proficiency. While these reforms target broader goals, specific support for ESL learners remains crucial. In recent years, literacy and language researchers have identified two support systems that are crucial for language learning.

Culturally Relevant and Age-Appropriate Resources

Incorporating culturally relevant and age-appropriate resources, as well as personal stories and experiences, can have a positive impact on the academic success of English language learners (Flint et al., 2019; Stewart et al., 2015; Wessels, 2014). This can be further enhanced by integrating a pedagogy of care that fosters the relationship between students and teachers, as well as incorporating literacy, engagement activities, and communication through collaboration, creativity, and linguistic support. Using translation devices and visuals can also help overcome language barriers and support language teaching. Along the same line, Wessels (2014) examines how bilingual stories can influence children’s literacy learning. The study further finds that supporting parents in maintaining their children’s first language can affect children’s academic success in school.

Use of Technology and New Media

Researchers have shown that using technology and new media can enhance language acquisition and literacy development among adolescent English language learners (ELLs) and immigrant youths who learn English as a second language (Black, 2009; Chen et al., 2021; Stewart, 2014). One effective method of enhancing literacy and writing skills is engaging through online fan fiction writing and literacies on social networking platforms. This approach can provide ELLs with various opportunities to connect and socialize with other members of their community, regardless of their non-native English-speaking status, thereby helping the learners develop language skills. Along the same line, Chen et al., (2021) found that virtual reality-assisted problem-based learning can effectively engage learners in applying English to real-world problems related to their future careers. Therefore, incorporating technology and virtual reality can be an effective tool in English language learning for emergent bilingual (EB) students promoting more immersive and practical learning experiences.

The review highlights the importance of supportive learning environments for EB students through culturally relevant resources. It

also emphasizes the need for a pedagogy of care and linguistic support to enhance language proficiency, particularly in rural public schools where English is not the primary language of instruction (Black, 2009; Flint et al., 2019).

Contemporary Literacy Lens

Traditionally, literacy is focused on reading and writing, but technological advancements have revolutionized teaching and learning. Literacy now encompasses “multilingual and multimodal” dimensions, reflecting the dynamic changes in communication intensified by information technology. Schools play a pivotal role in preparing learners for real-world communication across various domains such as work, citizenship, and community life (Kalantzis et al., 2016).

Aligning with contemporary literacy principles, students must engage in literacies relevant to the modern workplace, public participation, and personal/community contexts. This approach supports theories that emphasize literacy's critical role in understanding the world, fostering critical thinking and learning, and shaping individual and collective identities (Kalantzis et al., 2016). To support emergent bilinguals, classrooms can adopt linguistic diversity and provide access to these literacies, offering multimodal tools to enhance language development. This would create an inclusive learning environment that acknowledges and values students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

What This Means for Scholars and Educators

By aligning with contemporary literacy principles, this workshop review aimed to contribute to the ongoing discussions on literacy's role in preparing students for the complexities of a globalized society. One of the goals was to provide culturally relevant literature via technological platforms to effectively motivate language learners to engage in English communication, a critical challenge in rural India's public school systems. This strategy

may also serve as a significant motivational tool for English language learners in Texas.

Based on the findings of the literature review, there is a prominent gap in understanding the implications of English as a second language learning, particularly in the context of public high schools in India. Researchers are encouraged to further explore this area to provide meaningful support, address the gap, and pave the way for further advancement in language skills for second language learners. Several important implications for educators have emerged, guiding effective strategies to improve English language education for these learners.

Method for the Program Review

Data Collection

A two-day workshop on communication skills for high school teachers was reviewed using two methods to evaluate the activities and materials: an interview with a participating teacher and a needs assessment observation tool. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics within a qualitative framework.

Interview

The first method of data collection for the program review involved conducting qualitative interviews. As described by Bhattacharya (2017), an interactive, conversational interview was conducted with a teacher participant who attended the workshop. It was an informal semi-structured interview conducted on Zoom with Aanya (a pseudonym), an English as a Second Language teacher from northeast India with 13 years of teaching experience. These questions were designed to delve into the content-specific aspects of the workshop. Aanya actively participated in these interviews. Some sample questions include:

1. *When did you first hear about the 'Workshop on Communication Skill' conducted on an online platform?*
2. *Can you recall any previous online program participation before this workshop?*
3. *Describe your experience attending the online workshop from start to finish.*
4. *Recall a specific session where you learned something new and elaborate on it.*
5. *How did you integrate the workshop sessions into your teaching? Describe the classroom dynamics post-integration.*
6. *Share a memorable learning experience from the workshop.*
7. *What aspects of the workshop did you particularly enjoy?*
8. *Were there any aspects of the program that you disliked?*
9. *What are your expectations after attending a week-long program?*

The interview was transcribed using Descript and was analyzed in three cycles using the Deedose electronic tool. Further, three cycles of analysis were carried out to complete the entire process of analysis.

Needs Assessment Observation Tool

The second source of data collection method was the Needs Assessment Observation Tool model, which served as the primary tool for reviewing the workshop's activities and various aspects. Developed by the author, this tool focused on five key categories: Purpose, Literacy Processes, Experimental, Conceptual,

and Applied. These categories were adapted from Chapter 11 of Wepner & Quatroche (2021). Observations were assessed using a three-point Likert scale (Never, Sometimes, Always).

Data Analysis

Data Source #1 Interview

All significant statements are extracted from data source #1 using Deedose. Through three cycles of analysis, 36 significant statements and three specific themes emerged. Examples of significant statements include the following: "It was my first experience and learned many new teaching strategies;" Also, "The whole workshop was interesting," and "I learned new language activities." The three specific themes were language, pedagogy, and communication.

Data Source #2 Observation Tool

The Needs Assessment Observation Tool was used to evaluate the two-day workshop by the author. The observations revealed many things. First, participants seemed engaged in the hands-on activities given but did not get opportunities to show their creativity using language in different contexts. Secondly, the workshop lacked effective strategies to encourage active student participation in class interactions for developing communication skills. Moreover, despite practice materials focused on contemporary literacy, there was no insight into participants' reflections on their learning experiences. These conclusions are based on the author's observations of the filmed workshop using this tool.

Findings

Data Source # 1 Interview

The interview, conducted on Zoom, revealed the teacher hardly found any opportunities to suggest alternate categories for developing communication skills. In addition to the three precise themes of *language, pedagogy, and communication*, the interviewed teacher participant happily stated, "It was my first

experience, and learned many new teaching strategies.”

The interview with the participant revealed that the program uncovered some relevant areas that potential stakeholders could investigate further in developing language skills. Furthermore, the interviewee suggested developing a longer program where the educators could come and share their experiences, receive guidance on preparing practice materials, and get immediate feedback.

Data Source# 2 Observation Tool

The findings based on the observation tool indicated limited opportunities for participant interaction regarding their needs and issues. The lack of resources for students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds adversely affected language learning. The findings also indicated that strategic planning and innovation can bridge the language proficiency gap for multilingual teacher educators in places like Texas, supporting the needs of diverse students where English is taught as a second language.

Table 1

Observation Tool Findings

Categories	Never	Sometime s	Always	Comments
Purpose	1	3	0	Participants did not find opportunities to share issues and ideals
Literacy Processes	1	3	0	Participants didn’t find opportunities to practice multiple skills using technology developing 21 st century literacy and language skills. Inadequate practice materials.
Experiential	3	2	0	Participants didn’t find exposure to reflect upon learning
Conceptual	1	3	0	Interaction was mostly one-way, and no opportunities were provided to connect with concepts.
Applied	2	2	0	Activities were engaging but didn’t show creativity using language in different contexts.
Total	8	13	0	

Additionally, the workshop lacked materials for developing 21st-century literacy skills. Despite this, the program attracted teachers from various districts and regions, and participants expressed interest in future programs, as noted by the interviewee. The comments column in Table 1 provides a clearer view of the findings from the *Needs Assessment Observation Tool*.

Discussion

The analysis of both the interview and observation tool findings offered valuable insights into the workshop's effectiveness and areas for improvement. The review revealed that not all activities achieved the program's intended goals and outcomes based on the author's evaluation of the data. The study of the review highlighted the need for additional teacher support to effectively prepare learners for life in an increasingly interconnected, globalized, multicultural world (Kalantzis et al., 2016). There was one participant and the author was the facilitator of the professional development and developed the observation tool, so this limits the generalization of the findings. Interview data (Data Source #1) showed the participant's strong inclination to participate in future training sessions aimed at enhancing language skills, specifically focusing on activities for developing language skills in public schools catering to students learning English as a second language.

Observation data (Data Source #2) revealed a shortage of opportunities to practice multiple skills through technology, which is essential for developing language and literacy skills. Although participants appeared to appreciate the new teaching strategies and found the workshop engaging, there were missed opportunities to explore alternative approaches to developing

effective communication skills. The findings suggested that future workshops or professional development programs should provide more opportunities for teacher educators to collaborate and engage in activities focused on enhancing student literacy skills.

Evaluating this workshop on communication skills can greatly benefit ELAR teachers in Texas. By identifying gaps in participant interaction, resource appropriateness, and 21st-century literacy materials, the findings can point to crucial areas for development. For language arts teachers, especially those working with multilingual and diverse student populations, this evaluation suggests the need for tailored resources and strategic planning. Implementing the suggested improvements can help create more effective professional development programs, equipping teachers to better address their students' unique needs and enhance their instructional practices.

Despite these shortcomings, the author's observation is that the workshop's greatest strength was its ability to unite educators from various regions on a common platform. The findings highlighted the need for extended programs where educators can share experiences, receive guidance, and incorporate feedback—elements that were insufficient in the limited scope of a two-day workshop. The participants' feedback on the workshop and the use of the Needs Observation Assessment Tool by other reviewers would have added more valuable information to this review. Adding these insights, the observation tool findings reveal limitations in participant interaction and resource availability. The lack of resources for students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, as well as the limited availability of materials designed to support

literacy and language, underscores the need for strategic planning and innovation.

This study suggested that implementing a comprehensive literacy program or professional development initiative, such as micro-credential programs focused on developing language and literacy skills, can support teachers in public high schools where English is not the primary language. Key components of such programs should include standards and curriculum, instruction, and assessment. To ensure the sustainability of evaluations and the ongoing effectiveness of literacy initiatives, educators, administrators, students, parents, and the vast community must address the nuances of literacy and language proficiency. This includes understanding diverse learning needs and employing effective instructional strategies.

Given the importance of English proficiency in today's global landscape, it is imperative for stakeholders, particularly educators, to collaborate and tackle the common challenges faced in public schools where English is taught as a second language within a multilingual context. Establishing discussion groups within schools to address the various components of English language proficiency by grade and age is essential. This initiative highlights the dynamic nature of the teaching-learning process and reflects educators' ongoing commitment to improvement and innovation.

Limitations

Facilitating and reviewing the workshop presented several challenges and provided valuable insights from my roles as a participant, organizer, and observer. As the recipient of the Global Teacher Grant and the primary organizer, my experience

offered key lessons for future professional development programs:

- I did not have the opportunity to interview more participants to enhance the reliability and validity of the workshop review.
- While the workshop successfully attracted many teachers from diverse districts and regions, it did not fully meet its intended goals and objectives.
- As both the facilitator and an observer, I realized that no pilot project was conducted beforehand to assess participants' needs and goals.
- I was unable to follow up with participants to evaluate the long-term implementation of the strategies they had learned, as this was discontinued after a certain period due to personal limitations.
- A participants' survey was conducted; however, the absence of a structured feedback system limited its incorporation into the workshop review.

Implications

The original workshop followed a top-down approach, but a shift to a bottom-up model is recommended for future iterations. This approach would focus on the specific needs of both teachers and students in public high schools, helping teachers develop self-assessment skills, improve English communication, and enhance student outcomes. Here are some suggestions for designing similar workshops for U.S. teachers:

- **Adopt a Bottom-Up Approach:** Involve teachers in the planning process to ensure the workshop

directly addresses their classroom challenges.

- Pilot Programs: Conduct a pilot program before the full workshop to assess participants' needs and goals.
- Follow-up Support: Build a follow-up system to evaluate the workshop's long-term impact.
- Specific Needs for ELL and EB Teachers: Adapt workshop content to address the specific needs of teachers working with English language learners (ELL) and emergent bilingual students (EBs), providing practical strategies for language development, classroom management, and culturally responsive teaching.

Implementing these strategies could result in inclusive, practical workshops for U.S. teachers that benefit educators and students in diverse linguistic and socioeconomic settings.

Conclusion

As the forces of globalization, cultural, and social diversity shape our learners' experience, communication modes must offer opportunities for participation in literacies relevant to a new workplace, public participation, and personal and community engagement (Kalantzis et al., 2016). Effective collaboration among educators, administrators, students, parents, and the broader community is crucial for sustained progress and preparing students as proficient learners. The workshop review offers a model for future programs and provides insights into collaborative strategies for educator development, all aimed at enhancing children's education (Wepner & Quatroche, 2021). Ample professional development in partnership

with local schools can equip educators with innovative teaching strategies to improve English communication skills for English as a Second Language (ESL) and Emergent Bilingual Students (EBs).

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Nabanita Baruah is a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. She has 25 years of experience teaching English as a second language at a public high school in rural India. Her research interests include literacy processes, language acquisition among diverse populations, multilingualism, teacher education, and social identities.

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