STIR Education
Micro-Innovations that raise results

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE
Dr. Indira is an experienced teacher of science at DTEA School who also takes responsibility for CCA and the administration of CBSE at the school. Dr. Indira is very passionate about providing opportunities to children from low-income backgrounds. She has maintained her commitment to education by developing new techniques and getting involved with different aspects of school life.

DTEA School, Moti Bagh is one of 7 government aided DTEA schools originally set up to support children of Tamil origin in Delhi. The children at the school receive all the benefits provided in all government schools – such as a midday meal and a uniform fund – and the vast majority are from very underprivileged backgrounds.
Children in English medium schools need a solid grasp of English if they are to access rest of the subjects on the curriculum. Dr. Indira saw many students score very well in Mathematics but really struggle in other subjects because their poor grasp of English meant they were unable to understand key questions and texts. When the same children were asked the same questions in home language they were often able to articulate their thoughts and answer questions.

Dr. Indira realized that her students are ‘tongue tied’ when it comes to speaking in English because they are not being taught English as a foreign language (which it is for the children at her school).

“I knew that children have the ability to progress and achieve highly. I just needed a way that could develop strong enough English skills to make sure they can access the curriculum. I had to recognise that English is a foreign language for the children I teach.”

Dr. Indira’s innovation is to teach English to her students as a foreign language. She has developed a specific curriculum for students who are first generation learners with no background in English at home. The curriculum includes question words, the use of pictures and repetitive use of learned vocabulary and adapting phonics to suit the Indian context. In particular, Dr. Indira is making sure that all the words she uses as examples of specific sounds are familiar to Indian children and that, initially, there is a lot of emphasis on speaking in English in order to build confidence. She is also producing a set of songs, created specially by the school music teacher, to help them learn sounds and words.
Dr. Indira teaches standard 1 children using her technique for one hour every morning and is seeing rapid progress in their learning. She is now working hard to expand the technique to other classes and schools within the DTEA network.

Could you use Dr. Indira’s method of teaching English at your school? How could you organise your school day to ensure children develop a solid foundation in English? How else could you make sure your approach to teaching English is appropriate for children who are first generation learners?

You could introduce the teaching of English as a foreign language in exactly the same way that Dr. Indira has (see Step by Step guide) or you could develop your own curriculum. The key is that you recognise your students’ learning level and teach them accordingly.

Dr. Indira’s innovation is successful because it recognises that children need to be taught at a level that is appropriate for them. Children learning English for the first time need to be introduced to it as a foreign tongue and build very strong foundations.

Dr. Indira has three important pieces of advice for teachers considering introducing the teaching of English as a foreign language:

1. **Speak as much English as you can to the children in class** – the more they hear English being spoken, the more they will learn and pick up.

2. **Focus on getting children to speak** – concentrate initially on common phrases and help the children to recognise.

3. **Use a lot of gestures and signs to help children understand your meaning** when you begin to speak to them in English – this will also help develop their understanding.
To begin teaching English as a foreign language as Dr. Indira has, follow the steps below:

1. **Select a class that you want to begin teaching English as a foreign language** (Dr. Indira started with Class 1 to help them develop a solid foundation in English at a young age).

2. **Start by wishing the children “Good Morning”,** saying “thank you” to them and using common phrases that they will gradually recognise. Make a rule that in class you will not use the children’s mother tongue but stick to English and use gestures to communicate with students. The more English the students listen the more they learn.

3. **Start with just two questions and encourage them to answer in full sentences.**

   Model this for them several times.

   For instance:

   a) “What is your name?”
   My name is _______.

   b) “How are you?”
   “I am fine, Thank you.”

4. **When the students are able to comprehend** what you are asking them, **begin to ask different questions,** for instance: “What is this?” “This is a pen/ desk/ chair” and “Who is this?” “This is Divesh” (while pointing to different children).

5. **If some children understand and pick up the phrases more quickly than others, you may wish to separate the children into two groups and teach them at different, appropriate paces.**

6. Once the students are able to comprehend the questions above and answer using full sentences, **introduce them to plurals.**

7. You can gradually introduce children to new vocabulary using pictures – for instance of farm animal and different foods – and the “What is this?” model.

8. You can **give children rewards** for trying hard to use English at all times.

9. Finally, Dr. Indira is introducing the children to reading using phonics sounds and the words that are very common to Indian children so that they recognise the words and can begin to use them regularly.
WHAT DO OTHER TEACHERS SAY?

POSITIVE BENEFITS:

“The children are learning very quickly and developing confidence to use English. It is very important to reward them for trying to speak English even if they make mistakes.”

CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME:

“It can be hard to stick to speaking to children only in English – especially if they mis-behave – but it is worth it overall.”