

Digantar English Curriculum: A Brief Overview

Theory

Theory of language learning and teaching

A combination of comprehensible input-rich environments¹ and more explicit language instruction are important for learning English. The curriculum implements this approach while remaining sensitive to available resources and the varying needs and skill levels of students. All efforts are made to represent language as an important basis of human understanding and communication, rather than considering it just a set of grammatical rules and vocabulary to be memorized. We believe that language is best acquired through meaningful interaction and use in varied situations.

¹ NCERT National Curriculum Review, p. 134.

Objectives

To develop functional competency in English

We identify three main goals within functional competency:

- (i) Successfully use English for comprehension of ideas expressed by others through (a) listening, and (b) reading.
- (ii) Successfully use English for expressing ideas (including emotions, attitudes, opinions, and observations) through (a) speaking and (b) writing.
- (iii) Successfully use English for thinking, organizing one's own experiences, gaining knowledge and understanding.

This curriculum is a weighted curriculum: while the goal is overall functional competency, special emphasis is placed on content that is especially rewarding to our students. Emphasis is also given to material that is within the proficiency of Digantar teachers.

To develop students' knowledge of language learning

The curriculum is designed to help students learn skills and techniques to continue to study language independently and become autonomous learners.

To develop a multicultural sense of language as a means of communication and of understanding other cultures

Digantar children are already developing multilingual and multicultural skills when English instruction begins. The curriculum teaches English using these developing skills, rather than in isolation from them. We also use English instruction as a vehicle for learning about other cultures and places.

Pedagogical Challenges

Teacher confidence / proficiency

The English proficiency of Digantar teachers is varied. The curriculum must be accessible and useful to teachers of all language skill levels. It must also help build teacher confidence in English and English instruction.

Availability of teaching materials

While a context and language-rich environment is ideal for learning languages of any kind, a wide variety of authentic and pedagogical texts for learning English may not always be available.

The curriculum must strive to, whenever possible, avoid dependence on materials that may not be available to teachers or students. In addition, the curriculum must prioritize and help teachers prioritize the importance of different types of teaching aids, so that teachers may make informed decisions when faced with limited resources.

Long-Term Approach

Years 1 and 2

The first year of English study is spent mainly developing familiarity and language awareness through stories, poems, songs, skits, and basic vocabulary building exercises. While the first three months of this period focus mostly on listening, the rest of the year includes speech and interaction activities. After about 10 months of language study, basic literacy activities are introduced, beginning with story reading and letter and word recognition activities.² The approach to learning letters is phonic-based, using rhymes and similar sounding words to help children become acquainted with English spelling.

The second year of English study continues this approach, slowly shifting the emphasis from simple exposure to acquisition. Students are encouraged to make more attempts at communication in English, supplemented by body language, gestures, and mother tongue. They can also understand basic classroom management and protocol in English. Literacy activities (from the second year onwards) combine two essential approaches:³

- (i.) Top-down approach – this approach promotes visual recognition of whole words or large chunks of language through story-reading and providing a print-rich environment when possible.
- (ii.) Bottom-up approach – this approach teaches letter-sound mapping and print decoding, as well as using phonic concepts like rhyming word groups to reduce the arbitrariness of English spelling.

Years 3, 4, and 5

The third and fourth years of English instruction continue to expand the range and registers of formulaic phrasing and vocabulary. We begin to introduce slightly more abstract concepts and ideas. More emphasis is given to authentic texts and classroom management, and discussion is increasingly in English. Students are encouraged to make more lengthy contributions to the class in English, whether through drama, story-telling, or short descriptions of their surroundings or opinions. Reading and writing exercises also become more lengthy, including basic stories and personal writings. The fifth year continues earlier work, adding more advanced story reading and writing activities. Grammar instruction is also begun at a basic level, introducing parts of speech and basic verb tense forms.

² Drawn largely from NCERT Syllabus for Language Teaching, English, p. 17-18.

³ Almost a direct quote from NCERT National Curriculum Review 2005, p. 138.

Methodology

Digantar teachers already have a well established and effective teaching methodology. Rather than restate Digantar's philosophy of teaching, this document simply outlines relevant concepts that are specific to teaching English.

Using the cognitive abilities of students⁴

While the English abilities of the students may be limited, their mental abilities are not. Where applicable, activities are designed to have academic content that is more sophisticated than linguistic content. In other words, every effort is made to provide appropriate and engaging content for students, even if the English is at an easier level.

Use of the mother tongue⁵

While the use of the mother tongue is unavoidable, especially during early stages of language learning, we try to limit explanations of texts and activities before English meaning is attempted. Rather, the mother tongue is used to reconstruct meaning after attempted expression in English. If used in this way, the mother tongue can be used in the teaching of English in an engaging and meaning-driven way. Similarly, in the appropriate context, comprehension or lesson objectives may be discussed in the mother tongue after exposure to a difficult English text.

Error correction

The philosophy on error correction varies with the ability of the students being taught. In general, error correction is done by demonstrating correct speech, rather than explicit error correction. With first and second year students, almost no error correction is necessary. Errors are a natural part of language acquisition: we prefer that students build confidence at trying new forms and expressions. For students beginning more formal language study, simple mistakes (slips of the tongue) do not need to be explicitly corrected. Even consistent errors do not need to be corrected if they do not interfere with understanding. The only corrections made concern consistent errors that interfere with understanding.

Clearly articulating long-term and short-term objectives and methods to students

The objectives and methods of the curriculum are clearly articulated to students throughout the language learning process. This increases the effectiveness of individual units and exercises because it helps students to focus. It also gives students a clear sense of progress: a road map of their language learning.

⁴ NCERT National Curriculum Review 2005, p. 137.

⁵ NCERT National Curriculum Review 2005, p. 141.