

Computer literacy and English education: Overcoming challenges

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Computer literacy and English language skills are necessary to build a competent employee required by the corporate sector. However this competency is absent in many educated youth. This is in spite of increased government and parental spending.

These two important subject areas have not reached the expected level of achievement because they also have been taught by teachers at classes but not been learnt by the students. They did not learn English or ICT because they had not used either, in the process of learning.

This dilemma reminds us about the famous Chinese proverb, "You forget what you hear and see, but remember what you do".

We have been teaching computer skills and English but it had no immediate use to the learner, especially to those who live in rural environments. In such an environment, it is difficult to motivate them to learn and especially motivate them to consolidate what they have learnt.

Possibilities

Hence, if we are to promote the two subjects within the rural community, we should find out an immediate application for those within such communities.

If ICT and English can be used to develop the village, then there is a need for the lads and lasses to learn. If there are tourists with whom they have to transact in English, they would learn English. If there are enquiries for their products from foreign countries, they would learn English and ICT to communicate. If the village is benefited by information provided by the web, they will look into the web. If the web allows them to get an application form (download) that they have to go miles to collect, they will search the web. If that can be filled up and sent electronically, they would gladly look for the web.

Mahavilachchiya Initiative

There is one particular experiment that stands out with regards to English and ICT education. This was referred recently even by the President, on the

topic of education. He talked of the necessity of having similar initiatives in the other villages of Sri Lanka.

The interest expressed by the Head of State on the subject has brought many to think about getting similar results. However, any replication has to be tried out after careful study of the success factors. If one is careful enough to study what had happened in Mahavilachchiya he/she will find that there was more to it than teaching ICT and English. Both those essential elements were used to transact with the rest of the world to get assistance to this village. Hence, ICT and English were used and both those were learnt.

What the pioneers at Mahavilachchiya did was to create the necessary environment for the children to learn English and ICT. The children had something more to achieve by learning both; other than learning for the sake of learning. They had to use those to realize the expectations of the village and the education system that was set before them. They had aspirations to meet, which they could not do without English and ICT.

More than Technology and Knowledge

To take this kind of initiative you also need a person more than an English

teacher with ICT literacy. It requires a person who is environment-sensitive and also with a knack for self-learning.

Contents are taught at school. But you need to understand the context in which you are supposed to apply those. Contexts have to be self-learnt by being sensitive to the environment and by engaging with it. It is learnt in the process of dealing with it.

Most of our school products fail in this experiment. They are scared to interact and learn; they expect somebody to spoon feed them like was done in school. But contexts cannot be taught; they are different; they are time and space bound.

Only entrepreneurship will provide this initiative of interacting with the context with a view of learning it.

It is difficult to teach entrepreneurship but you can identify the potential entrepreneurs and empower them.

Entrepreneur at Mahavilachchiya

Mahavilachchiya had such an entrepreneur in the name of Nandasiri Wanninayake. We need to have similar entrepreneurs in the villages that we are going to replicate the same (e-village programme). Once selected, they have to be empowered. They will then join

with English teachers and ICT literates to create the e-village.

Identifying and empowering Entrepreneurs

Hence it is suggested that we put some effort in identifying these entrepreneurs in the selected villages and empower them through a facilitation programme, where brain storming sessions would be the basic methodology in getting them oriented towards the initiative.

Empowering entrepreneurs is not hard but identifying and selecting them is. The reason is that they are not available in large numbers given the education and training environment that exist in the country.

The e-village programme can meet the expectations of the educationists with this kind of intervention (identifying and empowering entrepreneurs who will use the two tools- English and ICT- in bringing change in the village). The Secondary Education Modernization Project has understood this position very much and is in the process of facilitating this.

The same model could be applied to other subjects as well. The motto should be, "One should use something if he wants to learn it".



File photo: Children of Mahavilachchiya: They formed the first e-village in Sri Lanka