The Impact of a Bridge Course in Enhancing English Language Proficiency Skills among Post Graduate Students

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Abstract

In a class filled with students, every student is at a different understanding level. They are taught using the same curriculum but, in the end, their levels of comprehension, understanding and application differs from person to person. This matters even more in cases where students enrol for a new course, and they are from different educational institutions, economic backgrounds, social backgrounds and geographical locations. Their backgrounds have a lot to do with their understanding of things and their current comprehension patterns. This is the scenario where a bridge course shines. This is a scenario in which a bridge course tries and brings them to a level playing field such that before the actual course begins, the students will be brought to a level understanding. The present research is an action research conducted at Azim Premji University, where students enrolling for post graduate programs are given the opportunity to pursue a short bridge course, before their actual course begins.

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Introduction

Bridging courses are often necessary, especially in the light of the knowledge gap and knowledge loss after the entire covid episode. Higher studies require a higher degree of understanding and knowledge than Bachelor's degrees (Puhl & Swartz, 1989). Bridge courses are designed to make sure students from different backgrounds and learning levels may be ready for an academic degree by levelling the differences through relevant curricular training (Perez & Mardapi, 2015). Students typically need help with transitioning from a specific pedagogical style while studying in their Bachelor's to a much more research oriented academic reading in their Master's degree. (Arlys van Wyk, 2001)

The present paper draws inspiration from a **Pathways Program** being run at **Azim Premji University** for new entrants to the Masters in Education (MA Edu) and Master of Development (MA Dev) program. Students with language difficulties were identified for language support and requested to be a part of this program which would help them develop, imbibe, and inculcate language proficiency as a necessity for the actual curriculum courses.

This course helps students gain the ability and confidence to deal with the actual readings to come their way, throughout the timeline of the MA Education and Development Programs. The course was a three-week intensive program meant to help students in gaining all round development in regard to language skills both academically and socially. The course went on from the 26th of June to the 14th of July 2023. This course has been running for some time now and was interrupted due to the entire covid period. It had been first re-run in the year 2022, followed by a full-scale execution of the program this year, 2023, based on feedback from the last year. This course is supposed to run for years to come as a help for bridging bachelor's students into post-graduation.

The present paper is an intellectual work which belongs to Dr. Agniva Pal and Dr. P Arul Nehru and the results and opinions declared in it have no relevance or relation to the opinions and declarations of Azim Premji University.

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Objectives of the Course

The course intends:

1. To develop four key skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking

2. To develop language proficiency in the students by inculcating practice and understanding of grammar (in a descriptive way, rather than typical prescriptive traditions)

3. To develop speaking skills with sessions on speaking and tips on it

4. To develop writing skills by practising annotations, summaries, paraphrases and by understanding how to write critically by identifying arguments and basing their arguments on key viewpoints

5. To inculcate critical reading habits in students by helping them understand the real meaning of critical and to improve their skills of reading in general through multiple readings.

6. To introduce them to research and main concepts about research.

7. To improve active listening skills and class annotating skills in order to make their note taking skills better.

8. To understand the art of mind mapping as a valuable tool to create notes for complex ideas.

9. To inculcate an academic style of writing English in the students

10. To engage students in teamwork in order to inculcate group reading behaviour and better problem-solving approaches.

11. To engage students in class presentations based on readings handed out to them in order to develop reading skills in them.

Participant and Sample Selection

The bridge course selected the students through the entrance test that all entrants must take to be selected for post graduate programs at Azim Premji University. The test has sections on language comprehension, analytical skills, general awareness, quantitative awareness and so on. Students who scored lower than a decided value in the entrance test in certain sections were sent out a mail and informed that they could take up the bridge course, before their actual courses began. The bridge course was a one-month course. The total number of students who enrolled in the course were around 90.

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Throughout the span of the bridge course, it was found out that students enrolled in the bridge course were generally from geographical locations which are far away from big cities, either belonging to economically lower backgrounds or middle class and from regions with multiple languages. Many of these students were also students who needed scholarship to sustain themselves. It was also found out that these students had to comprehension problems with their own home language but issues with speaking or understanding a foreign language like English.

Review of Literature

Most students in a country like India come from various and diverse backgrounds and there is a need for language proficiency before they start taking regular classes for a specific degree. There is a need to address the gaps in knowledge at times, when it gets to students enrolling for a degree. A bridge course helps in bridging that gap. It gets the entire student population who have newly joined the University, ready for the academic degree they have enrolled for. (Hess & Morton, 1996)

Students have also been seen to have left the degree midway in cases of paucity of comprehension throughout the degree. This happens due to their lack of readiness to attend regular classes for a certain subject. A bridge course may help them understand the basics of the subject well in advance before the actual course begins. A bridge course may help students in creating or paving a path for them into comprehending a course better. (Perez & Mardapi, 2015)

It is of utmost importance that students understand a language, at least to a certain level before they are educated or instructed in that language (Kusnandi & Linggar, 2012). They need to be brought up to speed with a certain language through means of a bridge course, in order to be taught using the given language (Khng, 2020). Students do not need to be masters in the language but understand the language and be able to speak or be comprehended in the language. (Puhl & Swartz, 1989)

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Methodology Employed

The present paper is the result of **action research** and is being written from the **first-person** point of view as researchers and teachers who have taught at the Pathways program. The present paper will be an action research-based narrative. The 42 candidates from both MA Edu and MA Dev programs attended the course. There were 9 instructors in all and a total of 48 sessions were planned for them. Depending on the fortes of the researchers and teachers present, they were allotted sessions. Language group educators, specialising in language research held sessions on Grammar, Vocabulary, Writing, Speaking and Reading while educators from Arts and Sciences domains helped students with a research-based orientation in general. Three students from the MA Edu senior year were chosen (they volunteered) to help with the smooth functioning of the program. They helped with the attendance, note sharing and university orientation. The first session started at 9.30 am and ended at 11 am, followed by the second session at 11.30 am, ending at 1 pm. The third session began at 2 pm and ended at 3.30 pm. The final session of the day was reserved for orientation done by the student volunteers.

Sessions and Teachings

We will only be sticking to the academic session for the following discussions. All sessions which have no relevance to academics will not be discussed here.

Day 1 Session 3 – Student introductions in a language they are proficient in followed by a session where students were told what to expect from the pathways course.

Day 3 Session 1 – A session on Listening skills with special reference to how a student may gain out of listening section.

Day 3 Session 2 – Integrating active listening skills in a class and how to gain from lectures.

Day 3 Session 3 – A Introduction to Grammar and Vocabulary through readings and problem solving. Students were given passages to read and teamed up for them to spot grammatical errors as well as make meanings of unfamiliar words.

Day 4 Session 1 – Introduction to Reading Skills. Students were helped with how to identify key words and main ideas in a text.

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Day 5 Session 1 – Deeper understanding of Reading and furthermore, note making. Students were introduced to the disciplined method of Mind Maps and were encouraged to make their own mind maps after the session.

Day 5 Session 2 and 3– Session on Summary Writing. The difference between summarising and paraphrasing was clarified. Students were read out a passage and then asked to summarize as well as paraphrase the passage, in teams. Students were then given a passage to read, following which they were again asked to summarize and paraphrase the passage.

Day 6 Session 1 – Introduction to types of writing and note making. Students were introduced to formal note making techniques in the class, as well as annotation techniques for reading.

Day 6 Session 2 and 3 – Introduction to Academic Writing. Students were introduced to the core structure of a research paper. They also explained the core concepts in research.

Day 7 Session 1 and 2 – Techniques of Writing – Summarizing and Paraphrasing were looked into and students were given ample practice with both. Students were also helped in identifying arguments and patterns in a text, in turn, helping them frame their own arguments.

Day 7 Session 3 – Students were told the importance of original work and what plagiarism is.

Day 8 Session 1 – Students were explained the ideas of a research paper and what kind of research they can expect to do at the University.

Day 8 Session 2 – Students practiced identifying arguments in a text as well as pointing out or circling out the central theme of texts, in order to incorporate it in their writing.

Day 8 Session 3 – Students made short presentations as groups on research abstracts, they wrote after day 8 session 1.

Day 9 Session 1 – Practice session on Grammar and Vocabulary using situations.

Day 9 Session 2 and 3 – Group discussions and dos and don'ts in group discussions. Students were also introduced to the concept of soft skills.

Day 10 Session 1 – Grammar and vocabulary using situations continued.

Day 10 Session 2 and 3 – Working as groups to present an idea. Students were formed into randomized teams and asked to present an idea selected by the instructor.

Day 11 Session 1 – Critical Reading skills – Students were introduced to inferences based on reading and critical comprehension skills.

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Day 11 Session 2 – Vocabulary building – Students were taught how to infer a meaning from context, using ample examples from the real world and textual references.

Day 11 Session 3 – Practicing Reading skills in the class.

Day 12 Session 1 – What all to consider before reading a text (per-reading tasks); the importance of asking questions. Students were also introduced to SQRRR method of comprehension (and text) reading (Survey, Question, Read, Review, Recite and summarize /paraphrase accordingly).

Day 12 Session 2 and 3 – Vocabulary building continued, usage of dictionary (offline, physical), worksheets on grammar.

Day 13 Session 1 – Critical Reading skills in relation to the KWL chart (what I know, what I want to know and what I want to learn)

Day 13 Session 2 and 3 – Critical Reading and Writing session with relation to actual reading and writing. The session inculcated the meaning of the word 'critical' to the students and then went ahead with explaining how a critical read can lead to better understanding of a text. In session 3, students were introduced to theoretical underpinnings of critical reading practices.

Day 14 Session 1 – Critical Reading and Writing continued as a practice session.

Day 14 Session 2,3 and 4 – Informal reflections by the students about the entire course and concluding the program; paving the way for the actual course. This was followed by formal feedback through pen and paper mode.

Feedback and Outcomes of the Course

The feedback collected from the students can be divided into two parts:

a. Informal – Oral feedback from volunteers and from students directly and observation-based feedback from the volunteers.

b. Formal – Through a physical form shared with all the students which they were allowed to fill in (The same questions were also asked to the students directly in a feedback session which was held in the last hour of the last day)

It must be noted that the following points were compiled from all sources mentioned above:

Responses to Direct Questions Asked to the students (either written or oral; anonymous)

1. What is one word or phrase that describes the outcome of the program for you?

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In answer students came up with the following words: Excellent, meaningful, enthusiastic experience, fearless now, not afraid of being judged, non-judgemental, comfortable, friendly, peer learning, group learning and reading, helpful, marvellous, adventurous, thinking better, better us.

2. What is one change you would want in the entire program?

Less number of classes and more practise sessions in order to practice what was being theorised in the theory classes. The entire duration can also be decreased. The students had to sit in class from 9:30 am to 5:30 pm and they had very less time for getting acquainted to the university campus. They want more time to get acquainted to the University. There can be more sessions on core grammar and vocabulary.

3. How many of you will volunteer in helping with the new batch of students?

Most students agreed to volunteer for the academic orientation for the entire batch. It must be noted that when they came to the campus, they were not open to conversations. The same students are now ready to volunteer in academic orientation for the whole batch.

4. What do you think has changed in you?

Students came up with many answers for this question and were enthusiastic to answer the same. Answers ranged from 'we have learnt that we are not inferior if we cannot speak English' to 'we are more confident about ourselves'. Some mentioned 'we are now ready to handle the actual semester after this pathways course'.

5. You were chosen on the basis of your performance in the written test, followed by the interviews. You were written to through mail and were asked to join the campus 3 weeks in advance to the actual classes beginning. How many of you faced an issue with the timelines? (it must be noted that out of the 90 people mailed, only 42 students joined the pathways program)

Every student responded positively to this question and stated that they have had no issued with the short time given them to join the course for this pathway program.

Changes Noticed as a Part of the Formal Feedback Forms from Students

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The following has been directly received and paraphrased from the student feedback forms for the Pathways program. This section has been divided into the number of questions administered to the students through the form. The answers given by the students have been paraphrased herein.

1. **Write a few words to describe your feelings about the completion of the Program.**

By being a part of the Pathways program, the students already felt like they were an important part of the University, even before the actual program was initiated. It was a good opportunity to brush up language skills and improve confidence. They felt immensely happy about not being judged and having the opportunity of a neutral learning environment, including elements of arts and culture, indirectly. The program also oriented them with the major pedagogical approaches used at the University and got them prepared for the journey to come. The students were happy that these lectures were more about involving them rather than boring long monologues normally done in classes. The students were also enthusiastic about learning new vocabulary words. The students got an opportunity to learn teamwork and are apparently happy that they got to collaborate with people from backgrounds vastly different from theirs.

2. **Do you think your language skills have improved so far in the Summer Program?**

The two most common answers noted here were 'Yes' and 'Maybe a little bit'.

3. **If your language skills have improved, what is the improvement?**

The students allegedly learnt to communicate better without having to worry about judgemental attitudes. They feel more comfortable speaking in front of others, as well as in classrooms now. They are also much more open to constructive criticism and understand the value of classroom-based feedback. They further understood that language of communication needs to be lucid rather than being complicated filled with difficult words. They have also learnt presentation skills. They have found grammar classes helpful in which they were taught situational grammar, rather than textbook (prescriptive) grammar.

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4. **If you think that your language skills have not improved, why do you think so?**

The program was not an extensive on, in regard to time and students want more in depth training with the tools used in classrooms. They found some lessons shallow at best and more time with them would have solved it.

5. **What other skills do you think you need to develop more?**

Some students feel the need to develop social speaking skills in order to speak freely in front of others, as well as a group of people. Students need help with understanding how to identify arguments and premises in an article / reading given to them, so as to use that knowledge later on. Students need more help with identifying some rigid structures in English grammar that need to be learnt, such that they make lesser number of mistakes. They want more help with presentation skills, communication skills practice and technical skills of using certain software. Students also stressed on the importance of having more group activity such that they can improve inter-personal teamwork skills. They also requested for a practice-based session such that they can be involved into the habit of reading. Some students stressed on the importance of learning punctuality, time management in classrooms as well as outside as well as more activities which would require them to speak.

6. **Did the classroom atmosphere helped you participate and learn / prevent you from participating / kept you engaged?**

All the students agree with the fact that they were kept engaged till the end and that the sessions were engaging.

7. **Did you make friends with other people from different backgrounds in the program?**

The students found that fact that there were so many students from varied backgrounds very amusing. While most of them found friends from varied backgrounds and had lunch, dinner, and occasional walks around the campus together, some found the flocking of similar language speaking students mildly irritating and exclusive. Nonetheless, they liked the fact that they were all included in all activities in the class equally.

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8. **Which specific aspects of the program did you find most helpful in enhancing your language skills?**

Presentations made in the class were very useful and usable. Students also found the articles shared with them very useful and important for their future in the course. The found the vocabulary shared with them to be useful, lucid, and helpful. They liked the video-based content presentations as well. Overall, they liked all the aspects of the classes.

9. **Did the program adequately address the four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking? If not, which areas could have been improved?**

All students feel they have had a generous amount of hands-on training in all of the skills mentioned above. Few pointed out the need to have more speaking sessions where they get to speak a bit more, or the need to stress speaking skills to students who are mostly silent in the class. Some also pointed out that students who speak in the class may be politely asked to quieten down such that others may get an equal window to speak. Some have pointed out the need to have extensive listening-based activities since they will be listening to lectures all throughout their stay at the University.

10. **Were the program materials (readings, handouts, online resources) adequate and relevant for your learning needs? could you understand them easily? If there was any difficult material, can you please list them out.**

Students have faced difficulty with a couple of materials given to them. Students feel that if the teachers did a read along with them, along with preliminary simple explanations of difficult parts, they would be able to do much better. They are happy with articles pushing them out of their comfort zone, but they need some help all the more for the same.

11. **Did the program provide enough opportunities for practice and application of the language skills taught? If no, which part of the program do you think needs more time for practicing?**

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Students feel the need to have a better feedback mechanism during the entire duration of the Pathways program. They have had some assignments handed over to them which were graded but the feedback for the same was not given to them in details. They need more time with reading and writing. Some also felt the need for them to be pushed into more opportunities to present in front of the whole class.

12. Were the learning activities engaging and interactive? If not, what improvements would you suggest?

All activities were to the likings of the students however they felt the need to stretch out at times, especially in the classes after lunch. They also feel that while the sessions were very engaging, they needed to be shorter. They also pointed out the need to shorten the number of sessions held in a day, such that every session held in the day would have equal participation from their end. A couple of students have pointed out that some teachers involved were very serious and that was not to their liking. One student has pointed out the need to not make laptop-based skills compulsory.

13. Did the program encourage collaboration and peer interaction? If so, did it contribute to your learning experience? Explain.

Their sense of hesitation while speaking to others is now gone, according to their written feedback. They now feel the value of interaction while doing a group activity and the importance of getting to do things in a group. They have now learnt that the weaknesses of self can go away when working in a group. Some students have mentioned that some faculties have kept on forcing them to speak in English and that momentarily brought down their confidence in the class.

14. How well did the program foster your confidence and motivation in using the language skills you acquired? Explain in detail.

They have realised that no one gets to judge them even if they are making mistakes while speaking (because everyone makes mistakes). They have had a huge boost of confidence

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throughout this entire journey. They are not afraid to face the classes anymore, about to happen. They are now confident about speaking in front of a class, making a presentation and about their academic existence at the University.

15. Were there any particular challenges or difficulties you faced during the program? If so, please elaborate.

The biggest challenge students faced were in the reading materials given to them. They need more help with preliminary description of the readings or read along sessions with the teachers. Some wanted teachers to be bilingual such that they would be able to understand content better. Some faced difficulty in understanding the English accents of certain teachers. Some students felt like the classes were too lengthy and found it difficult to concentrate beyond a certain point in time. Some faced issues with the food because they were all new to the University, place and system. Many issues got smoothened out throughout the Pathways program but it's worth noticing that not all of them were addressed and if they were addressed, not all were equally addressed.

16. Were there any technology or logistical issues that affected your learning experience during the program? If so, how were they resolved?

They need more help with understanding how to use Moodle (Learning management system used at Azim Premji University) in order to read their assignments and submit their assignments. Some were new to using a laptop for academics and found it difficult at the beginning. Some want the library to be open 24x7. They feel like their issues were listened to and mostly addressed in very less amount of time.

17. What additional resources or support do you feel would have been beneficial to enhance your language competencies during the program?

One week in the program may be increased and class timings may be cut short. They have suggested that the class be kept mostly in the morning and classes be made shorter, especially after the lunch break. They feel that all classes should be made more hands on, rather than theoretical in approach.

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18. Would you like similar language/academic support to be provided on a continuous basis throughout the semester?

All of them answered with a 'Yes' to this question. They want some sort of regular language support class to happen which would be voluntary for them to join.

19. What other academic support do you think you would require further?

Students feel the need for feedback for the assignments they have submitted throughout the duration of the pathways program. Some students pointed out that the lack of licensed MS Office packages found them in dire straits due to the teachers extensively using the same in the class and while making demonstrations of tools. Some felt pressurised by the entire amount of content covered through the program. Some students pointed out that the language support classrooms may also include support in terms of presentation making.

20. What did you enjoy most about the summer program?

While most students answered this with 'vibing with friends', some liked exploring the various topics covered in the course and the inclusive environment it created for them to grow and flourish throughout it. They loved the fact that through this course, they could socialise, learn, explore and could be happy.

21. Please leave any further comment/suggestion.

The duration of the classes may be reduced and the number of sessions in a day may be reduced, while the overall duration of the course in days may be increased. Some feel the need for better snacks during their breaks.

22. Would you like to talk to us further with any suggestions. If 'yes', please leave your contact number.

A few students left their numbers in order to be contacted later on. Most suggestions were already made in the previous points on the form.

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Changes Noticed as a Result of Observations from Instructors and Volunteers

The following observations were noted:

1. Students are now better at understanding how to approach a text, summarise it or paraphrase it depending on how it needs to be processed. They were unaware of the fact that something like academic English existed. They are now fully aware of the fact that academic English is the language used for academics and it is different than the English used for everyday conversations.

2. Students typically already had knowledge about grammar and vocabulary but they were never explained the differences between the prescriptive schools of grammar and the more relevant descriptive schools of grammar. They now understand the importance of society (dialect, language identity and culture) as a relevant variable while speaking a version of the language. They understand the importance of being understood rather than being deciphered.

3. Students now understand how to coherently approach a piece of reading. They now know how to annotate all the texts they are about to read, throughout the semester to come.

4. Students now understand the value of peer learning or learning in groups. They realise that learning is better and easier when done in a group after preliminary readings on their own. After a lot of team activities throughout the pathways program they have come to realise and understand the importance of peer learning.

5. Students now know how to plan a certain reading they are coming across.

6. Students have gained a lot of confidence from the time they joined the pathways program to the day it ended. On the first day students were afraid to speak but by the end of the program, they understood the values of asking questions and dissenting wherever needed.

7. Students learnt the virtue of planning things on time while being a part of a university timetable. The pathways program went on from morning today like a normal university schedule would and this oriented them to be on time, organise every other activity around the timetable and learn the importance of punctuality in time for the main sessions to begin.

8. Students can now differentiate between core readings and additional readings. Students were not in a habit of reading articles or conference proceedings. They were used to reading notes from websites on the internet or from their teachers. Students now understand the

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value of reading text directly before shifting to tertiary additional material to substantiate the core text.

9. Students appreciate the openness and approachability of teachers they have found throughout the pathways program.

10. Students are happy about the highly practical method of teaching used at this university and that has brought up the class performances. There were very low number of absentees from every class.

Future Prospects and Follow Up

The following future endeavours are planned to follow up to the course run at Azim Premji University:

1. Students can primarily approach the teachers who have taught at the Pathways Program, to employ their help regarding topics they have taught at the program, in case they need to.

2. Selected instructors will be running an ELSC (English Language Support Course) course throughout the next semester which would serve as a follow up for the Pathways program. The Pathways program was the first step.

3. The next iteration of the Pathways program would consider all the feedback encountered during the Pathways program and make it better for the students such that the efficacy of the program increases.

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