



BAFEL aims to eradicate backwardness by joining hands with knowledge. Teaching spoken English to the labour class is a step towards achieving this goal.

WORDS | GUNEET OBEROI

It won't be wrong to say that conversation is the second most important thing in the world. The most important is language. And English is one language which, over the years, has become a widely accepted mode of communication in India. With the huge influx of foreigners in the country, auto rickshaw and taxi drivers and rickshaw pullers had started finding it really tough to communicate with their passengers. From educating these people

to setting up educational institutes in Naxalite hit zones, Alka Gupta has done everything possible for the past 25 years to uplift the backward sections of society.

“This idea came to my mind during the Commonwealth days when various tours and travel companies came forward to train their cab drivers,” elaborates Alka, the brainchild behind BAFEL – an organisation which works



Alka Gupta with a group of rickshaw pullers

The training approach in BAFEL incorporates methods like active listening and public speaking

towards teaching English and life skills to the labour class. A strong believer in dignity of labour, Alka asserts that if people in America can pay the paddy cab driver well, why can't an Indian rickshaw puller get the same respect and remuneration?

BRINGING CHANGE

Keeping this in mind, she designed a module which included spoken English, communication skills and life skills, especially for this section of society. They cannot be

taught grammar; they need to be taught English in the conversational style, which helps them communicate in the language and makes their lives easier. This in turn would help increase their employability prospects and confidence to be at par with the urban people. The training approach in BAFEL incorporates a combination of methods like active listening and public speaking. These are done through various role plays which are based on day-to-day situations that the 'students' face. Alka feels that for speaking any language, the first step is to "comprehend" it by active listening. This ensures that an individual's first introduction to language is in its spoken form; and then he gets acclimatised progressively for being receptive towards the more complex genres of teaching/training techniques. So at the end of a productive training session, a trainee of BAFEL is an overall package – of a well-groomed individual who has comprehended the art of effective English speaking and is well versed with oral communication, etiquette and manners, social behaviour and business communication.

BAFEL believes in focusing on a curriculum based on situations. The situations are structured in the form of role plays which not only trains them to speak in English but grooms them on personal and social hygiene as well as personal and public manners.

SUCCESS STORIES

Shiv Kumar, a rickshaw puller, never went to school. When he came to BAFEL, he didn't know a single word of English. Now he has learnt to communicate in English with his customers. He has understood the importance of the language, sends his children to regular school and also to BAFEL centres, to learn English and life skills. He earns much more and is able to save ₹5,000 every month, which he sends to his parents in the village.

He is a better professional who speaks to his customers fluently; his attitude has improved as he has been trained in interpersonal skills as well.



Enthusiastic
'students' ready with
their answers

After learning to communicate in English, rickshaw puller Anil's income increased manifold

Anil, 20 years old, is also a rickshaw puller. Since he came to BAFEL, he wants to study more from open school so that he can 'earn and learn' together. After learning to communicate in English, his per day income has increased and now he can save up to ₹3,000 every month.

There are many like Shiv and Anil who have benefitted from BAFEL's trainings. It also grooms them in various faculties of personality development, making them better and more sought-after individuals. Plus, the training curriculum sharpens their decision-making skills and educates them on various other factors like managing stress, finance and also their children, by giving them proper education

opportunities. This improves their status in society, ups their self-esteem, and gives them a sense of pride in their jobs. They learn to greet customers pleasantly, impressing them enough to earn additional tips. So the training curriculum achieves its aim of providing the trainee business value as well as financial value.

CROSSING CHALLENGES

Any social work involves various kinds of challenges. This organisation was no exception. The money to fund these programmes has been a constant worry for Alka. "The main challenge has been regarding the finance to support and carry out this work at a larger level, in the rural areas," she says. Then there are the challenges related to safety, security

and cooperation from the local administration – these can be taken care of, but providing salaries, travelling, lodging, boarding and the daily commuting the team does, all require a certain amount of funds.

This class cannot pay the fees, but why should they be deprived of this kind of training which can bring so much of enthusiasm and awareness in their lives? "These kinds of ventures are looked after by the profits made by my commercial ventures," Alka tells us.

"Do not give a fish to the hungry; instead, teach the hungry how to catch fish," has been the motto of Alka's life. The lower strata of our country needs to be made capable of equipping themselves to earn well. Learning the language will open more doors of information and opportunities for them – a whole new world of enlightenment. ●●