Unit 15:
Everyday English: using the community as a source
The TESS-India project (Teacher Education through School-based Support) aims to improve the classroom practices of elementary and secondary teachers in India through student-centred and activity-based approaches. This has been realised through 105 teacher development units (TDUs) available online and downloaded in printed form.

Teachers are encouraged to read the whole TDU and try out the activities in their classroom in order to maximise their learning and enhance their practice. The TDUs are written in a supportive manner, with a narrative that helps to establish the context and principles that underpin the activities. The activities are written for the teacher rather than the student, acting as a companion to textbooks.

TESS-India TDUs were co-written by Indian authors and UK subject leads to address Indian curriculum and pedagogic targets and contexts. Originally written in English, the TDUs have then been localised to ensure that they have relevance and resonance in each participating Indian state’s context.

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Introduction

English is used in India for different purposes and in different ways in each part of the country. In the big cities, many people use English every day. English may be present in street signs, advertisements, in newspapers and magazines, and in popular music. These things that you and your students may come into contact with every day can provide you with valuable teaching resources in the classroom.

In remote villages, however, examples of the use of English in the community may be less common. But even here, English is often present. When you look for it, it may turn out to be more than you expect! Every village has a bus or train link with people who go to and come from a nearby town or city. Such people are effectively resources for language teachers, in that they can share their experiences about communicating with people from outside their own village and how they use English and other languages to do so. As a teacher, you can bring the English you encounter in the immediate and wider community into your classroom!
Learning outcomes

After studying this unit, you should have developed:

- knowledge of the presence of English in your community
- understanding of how to raise students’ awareness of the English used in their community
- skills in building on your students’ knowledge of English and making links between the English that students encounter inside and outside the classroom.
What is everyday English?

In India, many students come to school speaking more than one language, as most communities employ several languages. Because of the presence of English in our societies, students may also regularly use some English words in their daily speech, even though they may not be aware that these words are in fact English.

In our day-to-day language we often use English words for common objects and activities. For example, those of us who live in cities have holidays, we work in factories or offices, and we go to school with a bag full of books, pens, pencils and water bottles, travelling in buses on roads. Even those who do not live in cities may know many English words. For example, the words ‘post office’ or ‘bus station’ are understood all over India, while the Kannada words for them (respectively, ‘anche kacheri’ and ‘bus nildhane’) are not. Some of our new highways now collect a road toll, or ‘tax’. They have learned what these words mean without being explicitly taught them.

In a similar way, your students may bring knowledge from their own worlds into the classroom. Building on this knowledge helps them understand how the language you teach them in the classroom is used authentically in their community – that is to say, in the real world outside the classroom. When trying to understand the authentic English present in the community, students are often so focused on comprehending the meaning that they forget that they are also learning the language.

Activity 1: English resources in the community

Think about your own community. Which of the following resources in English do you think that you and your students could have access to?

- magazines
- newspaper articles
- film advertisements
- sports reports
- popular songs
- restaurant menus
- street signs
- shop signs
- tourist information brochures
- maps
- tickets
- comic books
- greeting cards
- bus schedules
- T-shirts
- calendars
- wrapping from food or medical products.

Over the next few weeks, carry around a small notebook with you to make notes of the English that you see and hear in your community. Think about the words you recognise and those that you don’t. Are there certain words that you see and/or hear frequently? What are they? Are there certain places where you are more likely to see or hear English? What are these places? Why do you think that you see or hear more English being used there? Figure 1 shows examples of everyday English that may give you a prompt.

![Figure 1 Examples of English in the community: (a) on packaging; (b) in an advert for mobile phone services; (c) on children’s T-shirts; (d) in an advertisement on a village wall; (e) on a bilingual sign in a school; (f) on a street sign.](image)

Once you have made your list, review it and think about whether your students will also be likely to encounter English in these contexts. Will they be familiar with the language? Are some of the words and phrases that you teach in your lessons present in the local environment? Can you draw on some of the examples that you have collected and use them in your classes?
2 Finding out what your students already know

You have looked at what English is available to your students in their community; now it’s time to define the words that they know.

Case Study 1: Kundu realises how much English his students already know

*Kundu is a teacher of English in Class I–III in a tribal school in Orissa. He speaks Oriya and Hindi, but only has a little knowledge of the local language, Savara. This is his story of how he found ways to make use of the English that the students already knew.*

The students I teach are from a very poor background and many come from environments that are not ‘print-rich’. If I taught in the city, I would expect that students might hear English spoken at home or that their parents might read English newspapers. But I didn’t think that the students I was teaching in the village would be exposed to much English in their local environment. I was wrong!

One day I asked the students about the games that they like to play. Not surprisingly, all of them responded with ‘Cricket!’ What surprised me was that the students knew a number of cricket-related English words. So I started writing these words on the board. After some time, the list got so long that I started to use a notebook to keep track of all the words they knew. Within a few days, this list grew from words and phrases about cricket to other sports as well.

By the end of that week, I had made a list of more than 100 English words and phrases that the students already knew: words used in the market, words for professions and words relating to transport and vehicles – the latter because their parents or other family members were often truck drivers, guards and transport workers. They knew words like ‘Jeep’, ‘tyre’, ‘brake’ and ‘lights’, and words relating to the maintenance of vehicles and any associated tools: ‘wash’, ‘polish’, ‘water’, ‘air’, ‘petrol’, ‘nut’, ‘bolt’ and ‘pana’. I didn’t know the last word. Then from the students’ gestures and description, I realised that this was their word for ‘spanner’. I then introduced them to the equivalent English word.

Soon I had many lists. I started to think of ways that I could use them with students to help their learning. First I went through the lists, looking for words that also appeared in their lessons. I started to think more and more about how I could remind the students of what they already knew when teaching the lessons from the textbook.

Having read Case Study 1, now it’s time to find out what English words your students know.
Activity 2: Finding out what your students already know

Have you noticed that your students are already familiar with some English words and phrases? Look at Table 1 and think about what words and phrases you use to speak about one or more of the topics in the left-hand column. Or, better still, ask your students to list the words that they know that are related to these topics. Are some of these words and phrases from English? Compare your students’ contributions with the examples in the right-hand column and, using a copy or printout of the table, tick a word that the students say – even if they say it in a different way, as in the ‘pana’/’spanner’ example in Case Study 1. Did they mention any other English words?

Table 1 Do your students know any English words related to these topics?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Examples of English words or phrases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cricket or other games</td>
<td>Bat, ball, game, out, team, point, score, stadium, field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs that people have</td>
<td>Police, teacher, guard, driver, doctor, nurse, engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicles we use, and related words</td>
<td>Bus, car, scooter, train, cycle, petrol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses and the things in them</td>
<td>Gate, door, bed, TV, computer, kitchen, phone, bulb, light, current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools we use</td>
<td>Hammer, tape, pencil, rubber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What we eat and drink</td>
<td>Cool drink, juice, bread, biscuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of entertainment</td>
<td>Film, actor, dance, mike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers, technology and mobile phones</td>
<td>Computers, text message, mobile phones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Prescriptions, cough syrup, vitamin, tonic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To support this kind of activity, you might find it interesting to talk to teachers of particular subjects within your school. Sports teachers often use English words and phrases such as ‘Run!’ or ‘Stand in a line!’ Similarly, science teachers often refer to equipment using their English name (e.g. ‘microscope’) and a teacher who talks about health and hygiene may mention words like ‘antiseptic’ and ‘bandage’. You may find that your colleagues will find this kind of discussion interesting too! (See TDU 9, *Content and language integration: coordinating, planning, implementing and assessing*, for more on using English to learn other subjects.)
Pause for thought

In Case Study 1, Kundu started to compile a list of words that students knew on the board. But this list grew and grew. Can you think of ways in which you could compile a list of English vocabulary that students are familiar with from their communities? How could you draw on this list to consolidate students’ learning?

- Could you make a display on a classroom wall of words and pictures?
- Could you keep a class notebook that you could regularly go through with your students?
3 English in the community

Since there is so much English being used within our local languages, some students may be using English without being aware that they are doing so. There are several ways that you could make your students more aware of the English in their community. Here are some examples of activities that some teachers have tried:

- Taking students to the railway station, where they looked at all the signs in English and discussed what they meant.
- Bringing in a toothpaste advertisement that said ‘Brush your teeth every day’. This led to a discussion of the irregular plural form of the word ‘tooth’: ‘teeth’.
- Giving the students a homework task to look out for the English words used in their community over one weekend. One of these students had been to the cinema and came back to report on the signs saying things like ‘Entry’, ‘Exit’, ‘Tickets’ and ‘Toilet’. Another student noticed signs on the roads that say things like ‘No parking’, ‘One way’ and ‘No entry’. The students then discussed the words that were familiar to them and those that weren’t.
- Pointing out that a student was wearing a T-shirt that had some writing in English on it. After that, the students regularly checked each other’s clothes for any text in English and talked about the meaning of the words and phrases they found.
- Asking the students to note down any English words and expressions they could find in the school building.
- Telling the students to look at the weather forecast in the newspaper or on television every day. Through this activity, the class learned a lot of weather-related vocabulary, like ‘hot’, ‘warm’, ‘cold’, ‘windy’, ‘rainy’, ‘misty’, ‘overcast’, etc.
- Asking the students to listen to the broadcasts in English on the local radio station—or to watch a television programme in English. Even when the students did not understand very much, they benefited from hearing English being used authentically and enjoyed being able to recognise some of the words and phrases used.

Activity 3: English in the community

As homework, ask your students to take note of any English that they come across outside the school. They could also bring into class any written or printed text that they found in use somewhere in the local community. This could vary from a bus ticket to an advertisement in a magazine.

- As a class, identify any English vocabulary that is already familiar to you and your students. Are there words that have been taught in the textbook? Are there other words that they recognise?
- Together, use a dictionary to look up any words you’re not familiar with. If you are not familiar with some of the words, don’t be afraid to
let your students know that you don’t know everything. Bear in mind too that some words and phrases may not actually be ‘proper’ English, or may be nonsense. It can be fun to discuss this with your class.

- Talk about the purpose of the text. Is it trying to sell something? Is it about sharing information? Why do you think the text is in English rather than the local language? Who is it aimed at?

The more the students engage with the English that is in their environment, the more likely they will be able to use English for authentic communicative purposes in their daily life. Similarly, the more they consciously recognise what they already know, the more confident they will be in building on their knowledge.

Many English newspapers in India contain supplements for younger readers, which may be of interest to your students. Even if they contain no supplements, students usually enjoy looking at the colourful advertisements and pictures. If you have access to an English language newspaper or magazine, you could bring it to class. The next case study is about a teacher that uses an English newspaper article in class.

Case Study 2: Asma uses an article from an English newspaper

Asma describes how she used a story from a newspaper supplement with her young readers in Class V. Note that this text is more appropriate for older elementary students, but easier texts could be used in a similar way with younger students.

I found a short article called ‘They have long legs’ in a newspaper supplement for young readers [called Young World, part of The Hindu]. I thought my students would enjoy learning about all these creatures with long legs. I realised that the text was a little difficult for Class V students, as I had to look up some of the vocabulary myself. I didn’t know what a cranefly was, for example, and I had to remind myself what ‘vulnerable’ meant. But the text was predictable in that it moved from talking about insects to birds and then animals. So I thought that my students could follow it as long as I helped them.

In one class, I read the first two paragraphs aloud, translating some of the key unfamiliar words into the students’ home language as I did so. These first two paragraphs were the most difficult, but the text became easier as it went on. The next week, I read out the first part of the text again, and then continued with the rest of it.

Craneflies are insects with slender bodies and extremely long legs, which is why they are sometimes called daddy long legs.
They are slow flyers and vulnerable to predators. When they perch on plants or on the ground, they bob up and down, due to their habit of alternately bending and straightening their legs.

The black-winged stilt has the longest legs among birds – not the longest in absolute terms but longest relative to its body length, the legs making up 60 per cent of its height.

The giraffe’s great height – it is the tallest animal – is due to its long legs and neck …

The students were amused by the name ‘daddy long legs’ for the insect. My drawing of the crane-fly on the board made it clear what it was. The ideas and words in the phrases ‘up and down’, ‘bending and straightening their legs’, and ‘habit’ were familiar to the students. The difficult parts were about ‘vulnerability to predators’, and the concept of ‘perching’ (sitting). I quickly explained these words in the students’ home language.

The students now added the word ‘insect’ to their vocabulary, along with the words ‘bird’ and ‘animal’, which are in our textbook. In the part about birds, to explain the relative height of the leg compared to the body, I used my hands and fingers to show 50 per cent (half), 60 per cent and 40 per cent.

Something interesting happened when, before I read out the third paragraph, I asked: ‘Now you know a long-legged insect and a long-legged bird – can you think of a long-legged animal?’ Many students immediately mentioned the word ‘giraffe’; some said they had seen one on television. So when I said that the giraffe was indeed the animal that the newspaper mentioned next, the children crowded round me to look at the newspaper. The pleasure of correctly guessing what an authority like the newspaper had said was very great indeed!

(Adapted from Amritavalli, 2007.)
4 People who use English in the community

Your students may know people who use English regularly for personal or professional reasons. Heightening their awareness of these uses of the language can reinforce the value of learning English.

Activity 4: Thinking about how people use English

Ask your students some questions based on the following prompts:

- Have they seen a family member fill out a form in English (to get a driver’s licence or a birth certificate)?
- Have they seen someone in their family receive or send letters and/or emails in English? Have they received or sent letters and/or emails in English themselves?
- Have they seen someone in their family write their address in English? Can they write their address in English?
- Have they seen a doctor write a prescription? Was it in English or the local language?
- Have they seen a policeman write a ‘challan’ to fine someone? What language was this in?

Then ask them to create a table with two columns. In the first column, they should list people they know, e.g. their doctor, a policeman, their grandmother, etc. (They can also draw pictures.) In the second column, they should list what they have seen these people do with reading and writing in English.

Pause for thought

Would it be possible for you, or someone at your school, to contact someone who would be willing to come to your class and speak to the students about whether they use English in their work, and if they do so, how? Could you contact a doctor, postman or policeman? The students could prepare for such a visit by looking around for examples of English used in these professions.

After the visit, the students could write the person a letter or email in English, thanking them for the visit.
5 The use of English and technology

Both the English language and alphabet are gaining increasing popularity in Indian communities, in part because of their role in technology. These days, almost everybody has a mobile phone. Now people commonly send each other text messages, often employing English phrases to do so. The roman script is increasingly used to write texts in local languages as well.

Activity 5: Using technology and English

Ask your students to work in groups and brainstorm the answers to the following questions. At the end, each group reports back on the things that they thought of.

How do the students communicate with each other and their families – both those family members they live with and those who live elsewhere?

- Do they use the telephone or a mobile phone?
- Do they send text messages?
- Have they ever used a typewriter?
- Have they used a word processor (computer)?
- Do they or their parents write letters or emails?

Once they have thought about these questions, ask them to think about what language(s) they use for these activities – is it English, Hindi or their local languages?

Then help them to think about what determines which language they use for each activity. Is it easier to use English because of the computer keyboard? Do they use the roman script for transliterated Hindi words?

Pause for thought

Are there ways in which you could use technology in your lessons?

Could the students send an email or text message to someone, inviting them to their class, or thanking them for their visit? You could compose the text together on the board, or students could draft the message in groups. Then someone could type it into a computer or a mobile phone.
6 Presenting English back to the community

In the previous activities, you have thought about the English that is available in your school community and how it can be brought into your classroom. There are also ways that you and your class can reach out to the community.

One way of doing this is to plan an English assembly. Once or twice a year, you could plan an event that brings students’ parents to the school, or brings students from one school to another. This event could be an exhibition of the kind of language work suggested in some of these units – poems that students write, accompanied by drawings, for example. It could be a song, dance and play evening where students recite these poems, sing a song in English or perform a short play in English. (The play could be a poem that they act out, or a part of a story. It need not last more than five to ten minutes.)

When you plan for the event, students can write invitations in English. Similarly, they can write thank you letters to all those who attended afterwards. In order to spread awareness about the event, they can make posters to display around the school and community.

In delegating the roles for the event, make sure to involve every student in the class:

- Some can greet and welcome the visitors in English (‘Good afternoon! Please come in. Please sit down’).
- Some can make the announcements during the programme (‘Now we will have a poem by Class II students’).
- Some can use letter flash cards to make up words like ‘Welcome’ and ‘Thank you’.

You will find that, as the students prepare and put effort and attention into what they are doing, they will reinforce their use of language. They will learn not only their own parts in the performance but from listening to other students’ parts as well.

Parents (especially parents of first generation students) are often eager to see what their children are learning in school. They might be unsure of what their children can learn outside what is in the textbook. When they see their children speaking in English, performing rhymes, songs and plays, they will be proud of them. They may then also understand that there is more to learning English than writing in their school notebooks.

Now watch the video below, which shows an assembly for parents. If you are unable to watch the video, it shows the students engaged in making invitations and posters, performing songs and poems, greeting guests, and displaying the English that they know. You may also find it useful to read the video’s transcript.
Now watch the video clip. If it is unavailable or has not been provided separately, you can find it at the TESS-India YouTube channel. You will find the transcript at the end of this unit.
7 Summary

In this unit you have explored ways of building on your students’ pre-existing knowledge of English and how you can bring the English that is used in the community into your classroom. You have thought about the presence of English in your school community and some classroom activities that draw on these uses of English. You have also thought about ways in which you can involve members of the community in your English language classroom, either by inviting them to speak about how they use English in their lives and professions or by inviting them to attend an English assembly.

Now reflect and make some notes on the following:

- Identify three key ideas or skills you have learned in this unit.
- Identify your strengths in making links between the English used in the community and the English used in your classroom.
- What skills for teaching and using English in the classroom would you like to develop further?
References

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Figure 1: images courtesy of Beth Erling.

Video: thanks are extended to the heads and students in our partner schools across India who worked with The Open University in this production.

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Transcript

Narrator: In this video parents have been invited to visit a school for an English performance the teacher also takes the parents around the school to showcase the English work done by students.

Teacher: Good afternoon parents, we are very happy to have you here. Your request of promoting the language of English in your children and your wish to see them talking fluently in English, this is the first step we are talking in that direction. Today we have an English elocution where you will see your children performing on the stage. So, I hope you will appreciate the efforts put in by your children. Please everyone clap for him.

Students and Parents: [claps]

Nitin: I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me and what can be the use of him is more than I can see. He is very very like me, from the heels up to the head; and I see him jumping before me when I jump into my bed.

Students and Parents: [claps]

Teacher: Thank you Nitin. Our next speaker is Anika. Every one clap.

Students and Parents: [claps]

Anika: When you grow up you won’t be able to read or spell and people will make fun of you. Oh! Well I learnt from you then said Peter, half worried and half angry. Well, begin at once.

Teacher: Parents, I appreciate your cooperation or हम आप हमारे साथ आगे बढ़े और अपने बच्चों को आगे से जाने के लिए हम कुछ ठोस कदम भी ले सकते हैं। हमें समझना है, हमें राय है, जैसे आप घर पे बच्चो के रिडिंग कराउंगे छोटी छोटी किताबे जो वो पढ़े जोर से पढ़ Loud reading everyday newspaper reading can done by the children आप उनको कभी कभी हेल्प भी कर सकते हो उनके साथ बैठे के पढ़ते हैं। It will become an activity.

Parent: Ma’am, I am really very happy to see my child yes improved a lot. Now, he can speak English very fluently, मैंने चाहती हूँ की आप ये चीज जो कर रहे हो उसे ज्यादा से ज्यादा बढाया दो एण्ड जैसा मेरा बेटा, जैसे मेरे बच्चे ने इतना अच्छा करा मैं चाहती हूँ बाकी बच्चे भी अच्छा करे।

Teacher: I hope parents ये कदम ये छोटीसी सलाह will help us take our children ahead in the foray of language. Thank you parents.

Students and Parents: [claps]

Teacher: Parents, you can see this is all the work done by your children आप देखिये यहाँ पे this girl has read a book and it is a favourite book सबसे ज्यादा पसंद ये फिल्मा और असले उस में किताब की एक शार्ट समरी लिखा है सो आप देख रहे है की बच्चा किताब पढ़ रहा है, समझ रहा है, अंडरस्टैंड कर रहा है
So, I am highly thankful, thankful to you that के आप इस तरह बच्चे को मदद कर रहें हो। So parents, please see the work.

**Parents and Teacher:** [discussing]

**Narrator:** This kind of assembly can be done for the parents of your class. Alternatively, your class can do an English assemble just for the school.

Students can write invitations in English and greet parents or class mates in English before the event.