

Need for Local Language content to connect with the Last Mile Learner in India

iDream Education · 16 January 2018

To engage and connect with the last mile learner in the best way, we must adopt digital learning with local language content. Read more to find out why

Besides being one of the fastest emerging economies, India is also one of the largest Internet user bases in the world. In the era of dynamic technological transformations, a part of India is gradually waking up to the calling. We are talking about that India which still resides in villages and small towns.

A recent stat is: Over 74% of internet usage today is happening on mobile. More than 28% of that comes from rural India.

These small town and villages is the domain where the next wave of immense growth and potential lies. However, we are a diverse country where multitudes of cultures, heritages and languages meet. Penetration and acceptability with this audience is no less than a challenge.

Languages and India

In our country there are 23 official languages and vernacular is enormously inculcated in every medium. Therefore, reaching out to masses with just one language is a complete no brainer.

Local language dominates every sphere of a typical Indians life. That ranges from vernacular newspaper and television serials to regional radio stations. Which is in contrast with English, which currently dominates the Internet space (an estimated 55% of websites are in English). By the year 2021, almost 201 million Hindi and 110 million other language speakers are estimated to be active on the Internet in our country. At this juncture, only 0.06% websites are in Hindi, which reflects a huge demand and supply gap.

Various research show that with the growth in Internet reach and a decrease in cost of Internet resources, people are consuming more amount of digital content in their local languages. Real challenge is therefore to understand how do we integrate vernacular rich content for all non-English speakers. That too in a way which can engage the rural audience. It should allow them to optimally reap the benefits of exponential smartphone and Internet penetration in India.

How to penetrate in Rural India?

We highlight below 2 key reasons why local language should become the preferred mode of communicating with the rural audience:

Also read about our work on: Support Digital Education in Local Languages, says PM Modi

a) Huge Target Audience:

As of December 2016, there were 163 million Internet users in rural India. By 2025, we will have 850 million online users out of which close to 50% will be from rural India. All these users communicate in

local language. Therefore it is difficult to expect them to run a mobile application in a global language

b) Better response and engagement by users:

Language represents culture and people are emotionally attached to their culture. Local or regional language content therefore helps users to respond in comfortable ways and helps in driving higher engagement

Recognizing the challenge and the multifold growth potential of this arena, many organizations are building the Indian Language Internet. Not only are the Internet giants like Facebook or Google but also, startups, are racing to bridge the language gap by investing heavily in Indian Language Internet based solutions. From companies like Twitter, which has hashtags in Indian languages to support regional tweets to 'Project Bhasha' by Microsoft, which aims to take IT to the underserved users through local language computing, the prominence of regional language over the Internet domain is solidifying.

Even, Indian government isn't far behind in the race. We have initialized some initiatives such as Digital India. It has goals to bolster digital literacy and make digital resources universally available in Indian languages. Government, NCERT and other education bodies have realized the need for local language content and delivery. To engage and **connect with the last-mile learner** in the best way, we must adopt digital learning with local language content. They are now driving efforts in this direction by collaborating with NGOs and social impact organizations working in this domain. These initiatives are on the way to enhance numerous digital platforms and applications by magnifying their user base across India.

Rural India connects in Rural Language

We have talked about this in our previous blogs as to how tablets and smart phones especially android based will transform the way our rural learners will learn. The smart classes have led the way to shift our classrooms from being the traditional chalk and board set up to the one where digital technology is used to engage the students. As we now enter into the next century and take a huge leap of faith towards personalising the learning experience for every user, it is critical to deeply understand the psychology of the child and build solutions accordingly. And the importance of delivering learning in local language is a critical aspect of the same.

Numerous research findings show that learners benefit most from using their home language in education. Most learners in rural India enter school with only their home language. For these learners, using the mother tongue in education leads to a better understanding of the curriculum content. It leads to a more positive attitude towards school.

By using the learners' home language, learners are more likely to engage in the learning process. The interactive learner-centred approach – recommended by all educationalists – thrives in an environment where learners are sufficiently proficient in the language of instruction. It allows learners to make suggestions, ask questions, answer questions and create and communicate new knowledge with enthusiasm. It gives learners confidence and helps to affirm their cultural identity. This in turn has a positive impact on the way learners see the relevance of school and that of learning to their lives.

What happens when learners aren't familiar with the language?

But What happens when learners are exposed to content in language unfamiliar to them? It leads to a teacher-centred approach and reinforces passiveness and silence in classrooms. This in turn

suppresses young learners' potential and liberty to express themselves freely. It dulls the enthusiasm of young minds, inhibits their creativity, and makes the learning experience unpleasant. All of which is bound to have a negative effect on the learning outcomes. Unfortunately, that was the approach, which most of early digital learning solutions had adopted.

What does the research say?

Research shows that when learners speak or understand the language used to instruct them, they develop reading and writing skills faster and in a more meaningful way. It has also been shown that skills and concepts taught in the learners' home language do not have to be re-taught when they transfer to a second language. A learner who knows how to read and write in one language will develop reading and writing skills in a new language faster. Therefore, facilitating access to enjoyable and skill oriented learning content in local languages is a corner stone to our country's march ahead.

Use of the regional language to deliver digital content also lessens the burden on teachers, especially where the teacher speaks the local language well (which is the case in the majority of the rural schools in India).

It is this insight, which we have brought into our TABLAB solution as well. Imagine a classroom where you handover the tablets to children but the entire content and delivery instructions are in language unfamiliar to them. Would we still call it a digital classroom in true sense? When the child is unable to connect with the content, which is there on the tablets, we will never be able to build comfort and drive regular usage. Across categories, TABLAB has been designed to deliver content in local language and we believe it is a strong reason why we are seeing such high usage of tablets by the students on a daily basis.

Let's summarise

To summarise, use of local language for learning enables learners to get more involved in learning process. It speeds up the development of their basic literacy skills. Using learners' home language is also more likely to get the support of the general community in the teaching/learning process and creates an emotional stability which translates to cognitive stability. In short, it leads to a better educational outcome.

PS: If you are an NGO looking for local language content to introduce digital learning for your students, please write to us at share@idreameducation.org.

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