M-learn lessons learnt: Bangladesh perspective

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ABSTRACT: M-learning is a form of distance learning in that it provides a communication tool(the mobile phone) to bridge the distance between the providing institution and the learners and facilitates 2-way (synchronous and asynchronous) interactivity between teacher and the learner (McWilliams et al, 2007). M-learning allows the remote teachers to stay in frequent contact with teacher educators, to ask questions and discuss issues as they adapt new teaching practices. This programme has been initiated by Ministry of Education upon requested by ADB, Manila to implement technology based training programme for reaching remote and disadvantaged areas. M - learning has been piloted by teacher educators of Government Teachers' Training College in one district (Barisal, located in the southern part of Bangladesh) and later extended to four districts to train teachers of remote schools of Patuakhali, Sandwip, Hatya and Thakurgaon districts. Regular 14 day and 5 day follow-up face-to-face in-service Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training was adapted as a two day face-to-face orientation, followed by a 6 week programme with regular conference calls to support classroom practices. Findings of the programme are very promising for adapting new practices. The CPD training by using mobile phone became very successful for increasing teachers and student's competence level. Government of Bangladesh and Development Partners are very keen to maximize the use of technology in CPD for teachers especially for addressing female teachers and reaching training facilities to remote areas.

Keywords: M-learn, Thakurgaon, Patuakhali, Rangamati, Sandwip, Hatya, Manila CPD, Piloting, in-service, Teacher Educators(TE), mobile technology.

In 2007, ADB, Manila approached to The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (GoB) and sought its cooperation in a Regional Education Technical Assistance(RETA) project to investigate the innovative ways of technology in Education. Bangladesh was one of the four (Bangladesh, Nepal, Mangalia and Samoa) countries, where these approaches were piloted, the main objectives of this pilot project were to determine:

- m-learning as an effective mode for teacher training and improvement in classroom practice
- m-learning as a suitable modality to reach rural and remote teachers

In fact, there was no effective way of reaching remote teachers for this purpose except to have them come to the Government Teachers Training Colleges (TTCs) for residential training. Three Outreach Centers located in Rangamati, Thakurgaon and Patuakhali, built to serve the remote and underserved teachers, but still the teachers require taking leave from their schools to attend training. Ministry of Education was seeking ways to use innovative strategies to serve these disadvantaged areas. The m-learning project has been designed to provide information about the feasibility, effectiveness and recurrent costs of connecting TTCs and schools through mobile connectivity for ongoing and recurrent training at a distance. In the m-learning project in Bangladesh, a blended approach to providing CPD was adapted where a combination of print-based distance learning materials, a face-to-face orientation and training workshop were used. In this way m-learning was integrated into the overall design of the training programme.

IMPLEMENTATION

Piloting the Programme

The pilot project was implemented for the period March – August 2007. The subjects were taken: Bangla and Mathematics subjects from the National Curriculum, which are compulsory for all students of grade IX and X. Patuakhali district located in southern part of Bangladesh, was taken as the pilot district. The reason of selecting this district is that every year natural calamity affects the area, the communication system is not developed at all, due to crossing a big river by country boat is not feasible for the female and aged teachers to come to central level training venue. Moreover, as the populations of this area are not properly educated, it's really very difficult for the female teachers to stay outside their family.

Ten schools from different upazila (smallest administrative unit within a district) of Patuakhali district were selected. Different categories of the schools like Government, Non-Government, Boys, Girls, Co-Ed, rural-urban were included in the sample. Twenty teachers from ten schools were selected including male and female teachers. Before starting the programme, workshops, stakeholder discussions, in-school discussions, orientation for the school teachers, teacher educators and head-teachers were conducted. The pilot project was monitored very closely by the project team, consultant teacher educators. The teachers of each school were provided Smart Mobile Phone, through which they made contact with the neighboring Teacher Educators of TTCs. They were also provided Laptop by the project. During the orientation programme, one day training on using Smart Mobile Phone conducted. For monitoring purpose, Head Masters and District Education officers were also given same type of mobile phone. Teacher Educators of the concerned TTCs were also given the same mobile phone and Laptop for conducting the Conference Sessions with the teachers as per the schedule. In fact, the teachers of remote areas were trained through Smart Mobile Phone, Laptop, printed training manual and sharing reflection face-to-face.

Up-scaling the Programme

Based on the recommendations and lessons learnt of the pilot project, MOE implemented M-learning project through TQI Project throughout the project period. The new districts covered were: Noakhali , Thakurgaon and Chittagong. In Noakhali and Chitagong districts, schools from 2 islands namely : Hatya and Sandwip were selected. These islands were not covered due to the communication problem with the mainland and as a result the teachers and the schools became out-of-reach of National development programme. Through this M-learn programme the teachers of these two islands came closer to the neighboring Government Teacher's Training Colleges which helped them in enriching themselves by sharing with the Teacher Educators. Thakurgaon (located in the upper most northern part of Bangladesh), though is a mainland but remote district and it was also dropt from different Government Programme due to communication problem. The new subject Social Science from the National Curriculum, which is also compulsory for all the students of grade IX and X was included. The pilot district, Barishal , was also included in the final stage.

Evaluation of the Programme

The following evaluation strategies were followed:

-monitoring by the training coordinators of the respective Teacher's Training College on overall operations. In each of the four Government Teacher's Training College, one Teacher Educator was in charge of Training Coordinator, who coordinated all training programme held in the TTC. The Four TTCs namely, TTC, Rangpur, TTC Barshal , TTC Feni and TTC Chittagong were linked with Thakurgaon, Patuakhali , Hatya and Sandwip respectively. The training coordinator always coordinated the programme with the head masters, practicing teachers, teacher educators and central level project consultants.

-monitoring of teaching-learning process by TTC teacher trainers during conferencing sessions, responding to questions from trainees, facilitating and mentoring: The Teacher Educators played a vital rule in evaluating the effectiveness of the programme. They conducted the regular conferencing session with the practicing teachers in a pre-scheduled time. They also provided feedback to the project authority for the additional support to remove the identified barriers.

-Central level monitoring: The project authority and concerned National and International Consultants monitored the programme regular basis, provided their feedback to the teachers, head masters, teacher educators and Principals of the TTCs.

-An evaluation and wrap-up workshop provided an opportunity for sharing of experiences from the target group.: After completing the training programme, the practicing teachers, head masters , District Education Officer expressed their experiences regarding the programme. The teachers' mentioned that the students were so attentive and sincere in the classes that, even after classes, during their study at home if they feel any problem they talked with the teacher through their cell phone.

OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNT

Anecdotal evidence gained through discussions with various stakeholder groups and the more formal evaluation strategies incorporated in the project indicated that the m-learning pilot was successful. Overall, it met the objectives as stated :

> A new thing has happened. The old system has changed. The routine and monotonous way has gone. There is real classroom teaching. Students' participation is there. Earlier mode of delivery was not effective. As the system has changed now students are more interested. There has been a change of sitting arrangement. Students are very excited. Teachers are enthusiastic and eager to learn more. A stir has been created not only in the school but in the whole society.(McWilliams et al, 2007)

From the perspectives of teacher trainees and head teachers, it has been observed that they were positive and enthusiastic about the m-learning experience citing the main advantage being the participation in the training programme without disruption to their students, their school and their family life. This was of particular importance to the female teachers trainees. Teachers in neighboring schools were also interested in this new mode of training and visited participating schools to observe the training. (McWilliams et al, 2007). The majority of participants indicated that they would be willing to participate in future technology supported training opportunities(McWilliams et al, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The M-learn Project became very successful in bringing positive changes in the classrooms of the selected schools. The project was found cost-effective and time-saving. Family problems, school and class problems were completely absent due to this technology based training. Through this programme, it was possible to ensure the training facilities for female teachers and teacher from remote and disadvantaged areas. Based on these findings Government of Bangladesh and Development Partners agreed to replicate this model to other remote areas(Ministry of Educatrion,2012). Key stakeholders in the m-learning project have strongly recommended to MOE to provide more m-learning programmes for teacher training and professional development for the teachers especially from the remote and underserved areas.

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