

Miss Alexa and Tara are helping civic school kids bridge learning gap

Mannequins fitted with voice assistants are being used as a cheap, innovative and interactive teaching aid

Ketaki Desai & Abhishek Choudhary | TNN

The bell rings at Amravati Municipal Corporation (AMC)'s Warud school and everybody gets ready to pack up and go home, except the newest teacher. In fact, she hasn't even left the classroom since 'joining' in early 2018, and has become quite a favourite with students who love the fact that she answers all their questions, belts out nursery rhymes on demand and never scolds anyone.

Alexa, Amazon's voice assistant, isn't just a bot in a box in the small Marathi medium primary school, about 170 km from Nagpur.

Here, the device is neatly fitted inside a mannequin dressed in smart clothes and rimmed glasses. Her voice comes through speakers connected via Bluetooth, and has changed the way students in this Marathi medium school are learning. Giving the device shape and form was the idea of Amol Bhojar, one of the only two teachers at the school that has 36 students on the roll. The entire contraption — fashionable clothes, eyewear and speakers — set him back by Rs 16,000, with Amazon Echo Dot retailing at Rs 4,500. Cheap internet connectivity, via Jio, ensures she is always online during school hours.

AMC isn't the only school to bring a voice assistant into the classroom. Bengaluru-based edtech startup Learning Matters has developed its own take on Alexa — her name is Tara, and she is currently being used in two schools in Tamil Nadu. Gowri Mahesh, who co-founded the firm along with Saras Ramamoorthy and Ramamoorthy G, says, "We are focused on improving learning outcomes in Tier 2 and 3 cities. That means improving the quality of teaching as well. Since smartphones are often not allowed in schools, we went with voice-based technology."

One of the schools Tara has made her mark in is Sri Kanchi Sankara Vidhyalaya in Thiruvaidaimarudur near Thanjavur. Its headmistress Padma V says, "The difference between teachers and the machine is that she corrects them in a very soft tone. The kids are able to hear the correct pronunciation but without feeling judged for getting something wrong."

Back in Warud, Sushma Upase, the second 'human' teacher at the AMC school, says, "Kids loved her from day one. Even parents would line up outside the classroom to have a peek." Anchal Kawre, a Class IV student at the school, says, "I like asking her to sing nursery rhymes after which all of us in class fol-



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low along." Some students ask her for multiplication tables while some ask her for weather updates. A few naughty ones, like Sumeet Thakre, even proposed marriage but the 'lady' made it clear that there was no chance of that happening, as she was a robot.

Mumbai-based Ramakrishna Paramhans Marg Municipal Marathi School has utilised a voice assistant to help their students ace conversational English. The teacher behind the idea, Pooja

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Sankhe, came up with it when she started asking questions to her Echo Dot device at home. After considering a stuffed rabbit and a Shin Chan doll, it was a stroll through the mall when she saw a mannequin and it all clicked — it would be the perfect form to place the device inside.

"Most of our students are from nearby slum areas, and they have been so excited that a robot is in their classroom. They often bring accessories to spice up her look," says the teacher who has won a national innovation award for the idea. They started with simple questions like 'how are you' and 'what day is it today', and quickly ramped up

the level of questioning. Kids at the school also take the opportunity to ask Alexa all kinds of general knowledge questions, since many of them don't have access to the internet.

Encouraging the use of voice assistants in education, Amazon has learning-based Alexa Skills, like Amar Chitra Katha's quiz that tests knowledge of Indian mythology. "Teachers can also customise their experience using Alexa Blueprints. Using a set of easy-to-use templates, anyone can create customised experiences for Alexa by filling in the blanks," says Puneesh Kumar, Amazon's Country Manager for Alexa Experiences and Devices. These can be used to make unique quizzes and stories.

For Learning Matters, while the focus is currently on English, they want Tara to teach other subjects as well.

"The goal isn't to replace a teacher, but provide a resource to help teachers. We have seen a huge difference in schools being more open to incorporating technology in the last three or four years, and it's only a matter of time and exposure before voice-based technology becomes more common in education," says Mahesh.

With AMC teacher Bhojar's experiment drawing the attention of local authorities, the Alexa family may be set to expand. Gopal Dharmale, AMC's education committee chief, says, "We have 64 schools and I will now ensure that funds are available to put an Alexa in every classroom." And the fact that bot teachers do not ask for a salary and are not worried about their labour rights is just a bonus.

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