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English 'Anna' enthralled corporation schoolkids

CHENNAI: The class with 100 students was as silent as it is on a Sunday. After Craig Jenkins brought alive tale after tale, it was entertainment that no television could provide.

Language had little role on Friday when Jenkins, a UK national doing a masters in Southasian studies, enthralled students of Classes 4 and 5. He used mostly gestures, facial expressions, some English and a smattering of Tamil to tell stories that brought a world of fantasy into the classroom at the Chennai Corporation Primary School.

And Jenkins used Kollywood in good measure. When he sang "Singam singam he's Doraisingam," the children didn't need another word to identify the 'rabbit and lion' story. Not only did they sing and act along, some of them went ahead of the storyteller to finish the tale. Sridevi, a student, began guiding her friends to answer along. "The first few words I learned in Tamil were animal names because those are storytelling essentials and children can relate to them," said Jenkins, who was drawn to storytelling because of his interest in Indian epics.

Most of his stories are based on Indian fables and epics such as the Panchatantra, Ramayana and Mahabharata, but he weaves popular lines from trending movies and songs into the

tales he spins. "The story is the same but the method of storytelling is different. It's interesting to narrate folktales in India with the masala as people can connect to them. A rendition of the same in the UK could get me credits but people may not understand."

Jenkins is not new to the country. He has been visiting India, Kancheepuram in particular, since 2007 for storytelling and also to learn Therukoothu. "I am a student of Kattaikkuttu Sangam in Kancheepuram through which I've visited and performed in nearby villages," said Jenkins. He said performing for children from villages is a challenge but it is close to his heart as they may have never had an opportunity to be entertained. "They call me the Anna (brother) of storytelling," he said.

The storytelling event was organised by Spring and Zoom, an after-school reading and language development centre in K K Nagar. The organisation has conducted events for school students as well as teachers. "The participation has been limited as the teachers are not able to bring their children to our centre. So we wanted to go to them instead. This is our first programme in a corporation school and we hope for many more," said Gargi Advaiti of Spring and Zoom.