

Deciding What to Teach: Effective English Curriculum

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English Language, the language of news, business, information, opportunity, employment, power and prestige in India, has become the synonym of all progress in the recent years. Notwithstanding the fact that today it enjoys the status of a big business in the wake of globalization, teaching and learning of it in educational institutions in our country is rather inadequate and unproductive. The situation is worse in small towns and rural areas where most of the students observe English as a subject that thwarts acquisition of education as they register failure therein and thereof.

Today, a majority of students enter the college and receive education with the notion that they are learning, not for knowledge but for employment. And it is a known fact that the first requirement for any kind of job is to be well versed in English. While the urban students get conducive environment both at home and at college, the rural students remain bereft of the same. The result is that they lack in even the basic functional knowledge of English. The poor souls, who otherwise are considered quite intelligent in other subjects, develop inferiority complex in English classes due to their inadequate knowledge and poor command over the language. Unable to use and throw English as the students in big cities do, the students in rural areas develop an aversion and build an antagonistic attitude towards the language. This preconceived notion results into a mental block before the child ventures into learning English language. This fact brings countless problems for the child throughout his education.

Though English has got central place in Educational Institutions in India and it is learned for practical utility these days but the standard of English language in this country especially in the small towns and rural areas is deplorable. Of late, we the Indian teachers of English at the undergraduate level have become painfully aware that most students in the college easily manage to pass the examination without making much effort to either pick up the language or to learn the appreciation of literature. Most of the students attend classes because they have to complete the minimum requirement of lectures so that they can appear in the examination. The situation is worse in rural areas where most of the students are commuters and find it hazardous to carry books for they need both the hands for fighting their way into the crowded buses as well as for getting out of them through the jostling crowds. So, they attend classes without books which are supposed to be their unavoidable companions. Also, most of them have already developed the

habit of cramming everything because the effort, the attitude and the methods adopted in schools which are repository of only availability to rural students, do little to help a child who finds solution only in the rote method of learning. This habit of cramming doesn't help beyond several grades when the subject matter swells and the nature of questions require the child to express himself. Therefore 'creativity' is lost somewhere. Even the capable students who can express themselves in writing do so in their native language, not in English. This is their understanding of only the vernacular language well that the teacher is always expected to translate each and every phrase so that at least the literary texts are somehow driven home. But there remains the important task of importing the basic function of language i.e. to communicate properly. Though there are some students who can write fairly well in English, but when it comes to speaking, they find themselves in tight corners. Just consider the frustration of such a first generation learner who has all the expectations of his elders behind him and knows that no job is waiting for him till he has a good command over the English language. Hence the students are not eager but unwilling, angry and frustrated.

Now, when we the teachers of English address ourselves to the ever passing problem of how to meet the requirement of Indian students because of their deficiency in the said language, we confront this crude fact that more than the student, it is the teacher of English who is guilty of leaving the student in a quandary. This is so because we refuse to do anything for the student. Is it not true that majority of us/teachers are in this field today because we have no better alternative available to earn our livelihood? Thus, most of us have matter of fact attitude towards teaching which allows us to perform our duty only and do nothing else. In a way, we become the carriers of degeneration in teaching as well as life in general, for expediency rather than morals, is what informs all our activities of life including teaching.

But then, the teacher is less to blame, because the existing situation is mainly due to not having significant changes in the following pedagogical paradigms:

- English Syllabus
- Teaching Methodology/Training
- The Examination System/ Testing

And the teacher is not normally the decision maker for the above paradigms.

Etymologically syllabus means a 'label or 'table of contents'. Syllabus represents the expression of educational ideas in practice. Syllabus can also be seen as a "summary of the contents to which the learners will be exposed". In the context of non-native countries, where English is taught as a second language, the selection of English syllabus requires a deep understanding, a comprehensive knowledge of various syllabus designs and a mature insight into the issue that which type of syllabus is indispensable to design, so that syllabus could fulfill learners' requirements with all the paraphernalia of pedagogical objectives. Syllabus presents the

complete program of study to teach academic contents in a specific time period. To gain the maximum benefits of syllabus in a limited time, it is imperative that syllabus must be designed taking into account the learners 'needs and objectives, essential to require.

There are two major types of syllabuses, product-oriented syllabus and process-oriented syllabus. A good and valid syllabus is that covers more or less all aspects of both these types, therefore, proper and appropriate implementation of syllabus in language teaching is undeniable. Without proper implementation of syllabus, on the one hand, desired objectives will be hard to obtain and on the other hand students will suffer from the lack of appropriate syllabus which could fulfill their immediate pedagogical requirements and sharpen their abilities in different areas of language.

Product-Oriented Syllabus: Product-oriented syllabus focuses on what the learners will know as a result at the end of instruction session. The grammatical, situational and notional-functional are the examples of product-oriented syllabus:

- *The grammatical part* includes teaching the systematic development of grammatical structures where the learners are exposed to these structures step by step. The internalization of grammar rules is considered a prerequisite to grasp the technicalities of a language.
- *The situational part* includes teaching the language through real-life situations emphasizing the learner to participate in different situations where L2 is being spoken. Examples of situations include, seeing the doctor, making an appointment, meeting people at the party, buying clothes and so on.
- *A notional-functional syllabus* is a practical way of organizing language-learning syllabus, rather than an approach or method to teach and instructions are organized in terms of notions and functions. In this design, a 'notion' is a particular context in which people communicate. A 'function' is a specific purpose in a given context. For example, the notion of shopping requires numerous language functions, such as asking about prices or features of a product and bargaining.

Process-Oriented Syllabus: Process-oriented syllabus focuses on the pedagogical processes leading to the language outcomes. The task-based, skill-based and content-based types of syllabus are included in it:

- In the *Task-Based Syllabus*, the purpose is to complete some complex and meaningful tasks which the learners perform together in a co-operative environment. Language competence is developed through the very process of performing of the tasks.
- In the *Skill-Based Syllabus* the learners are taught all the four specific skills (LSRW) that are considered necessary or useful in using a language. Gradual development of skills gives learners the confidence. But learners' cognitive levels must be kept in mind in designing the skills. Skill-based syllabus groups linguistic competencies (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and discourse) together into generalized types of behavior, such as listening to the spoken language for the main idea, writing-well formed paragraphs, specific purpose writing and so on.

- In the *Content-Based Syllabus*, the purpose is to teach some content or information in a language that students are also learning. Although the subject matter is of primary and vital importance, language learning occurs concurrently with content learning.

The main reason for the sad situation of English Language Teaching in our region is the present syllabus which is neither Product-oriented nor Process-oriented. Also, it neither takes care of the teachers' suggestions nor caters to the needs of the students. As far as methodology is concerned, even today, in most of the universities/colleges, the age-old texts are taught in the same style as was done a century back which makes the classroom monotonous. Listening to the teacher about Chaucer or Milton which his grandfather also must have done and that too in the same style makes the student yawn. The examination system has become too old. The present examination system does not leave a scope for the testing of a student on his/her listening and speaking skills.

Much less effort is done in changing the syllabus of English as we see most universities are continuing with the same literature focused syllabus where English is treated as a subject to be taught not as a language to be mastered. Also, the postcolonial ELT methods are in no way beneficial for the students in the changed scenario where the majority of students are desperate to learn English only to be communicatively competent.

It is not that no effort has been made in the recent past to improve the teaching of English. With the inception of CLT in the 1960s, English teaching has been affected positively showing some hopeful signs of modifications and modernization. These signs include introduction of CLT curriculum by CBSE in all its affiliated schools, introduction of ESP in some Indian schools, infusion of technology with the teaching of English in the form of Language Labs, availability of the native English Language to the Indian people with the widespread availability of cable TV in India, realization of English as the most preferred language of the global information highway by the new generation with the rise of computer expertise and internet and reframing of the curriculum by various universities on CLT pattern. But there still remain many problems for the rural students. Firstly, there are few schools which follow the CLT curriculum. Also the people lack the resources to follow the said latest patterns.

CLT is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. It can be understood as 'a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that best facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and learners in the classroom'.

Since its inception, CLT has served as a major source of influence on language teaching practice around the world due to its goal of teaching communicative competence. Communicative competence is different from grammatical competence in which the knowledge of a language is attained by producing sentences of that language and the knowledge attained is of the building

blocks of sentences (i.e., parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses and sentence patterns etc.) and formation of sentences.

But, while grammatical competence is an important dimension of language learning it is clearly not at all that is involved in learning a language. It is because one can master the rules of sentence formation in a language and still not be very successful in using the language for meaningful communication. CLT solves this purpose. CLT makes a learner communicatively competent by:

- Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes/functions
- Knowing how to change the language according to formal and informal atmosphere
- Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts i.e., narratives, reports, interviews and conversations etc.
- Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (through using different types of communication strategies)

For the above purpose, a variety of activities/tasks are carried out in a CLT classroom. Some of them are given below:

- Role Play
- Interviews
- Information gap
- Games
- Language exchange
- Surveys
- Pair work
- Learning by teaching

In spite of the above said developments in ELT, there are many states in India (especially the north Indian ones) where English language is still facing a very precarious situation. These include states like Haryana and Punjab where English is taught as a compulsory subject of study from Class I onwards. In spite of this fact the overall scenario in these states is dismal as the graduates passing out from the colleges and universities here are unemployable. No need to say that the sole reason for this unemployability is lack of communicative competency in the students.

So, it is the need of the hour to change the existing syllabus.

Case Study of BPSM Girls' College, BPSMV, Khanpur Kalan

The initiation has already been done in Haryana in this direction. BPSMV, a women University established in 2006, is the first university in Haryana which has introduced the CLT curriculum which is task based, skill based and learner centred. The other universities in the state are continuing with the old 'literature focused curriculum'.

The English syllabus of BPSMV underwent a complete change in 2007, soon after the establishment of the university. In contrast to the earlier syllabus which contained loads of literature pieces and much grammar portion for the undergraduate students, this was designed on CLT pattern. It has the following features:

Approach

- The broad approach adopted is Learner Centred and Task Based
- The syllabus is an amalgamation of aesthetics and language skills

Methodology Adopted

- Equal Weightage to both aesthetics and language skills is allocated
- Teaching hours allocated to various components are in tune with the content and tasks involved in the unit
- Conventional aesthetics are imparted through conventional teaching and language skills are developed through Language Labs
- The conventional teaching component contains less number of text/grammar portion because of the learner centred pedagogy
- Business English has been incorporated to make the curriculum industry friendly

The Texts

- The texts are smaller in length keeping in view the need for the undergraduate students
- Texts are contemporary and relevant to the socio-cultural needs of the students
- The texts having dramatic potential are selected

The Curriculum has been designed to add value to the life of the students by emphasizing the use of English creatively and transactionally. It deploys topics and skills relevant to the use of English in everyday life and prepares the learners to face the needs of the market environment by laying equal emphasis on the four skills- LSRW in the learning and testing of English. This syllabus can be called a good and valid syllabus as it covers more or less all aspects of both types of syllabuses discussed above - product-oriented and process-oriented.

Since I have taught and observed the development of students in both types of Curriculum, I must say that if given a choice, I would prefer the latest CLT curriculum. This is because of the following factors:

- Students stay engaged throughout the class because there are lots of activities which keep them busy

- The interest level of the students is much more than their interest level in the old syllabus because the topics chosen are related to their day to day problems
- The confidence of the learners automatically increases very fast because of each individual's participation
- Hesitation goes away
- Exam fear also goes away due to the lesser number of texts
- The rote learning goes backstage because of lots of exercises related to texts
- The learners develop their own sense of answering when many things are discussed with them beyond the text
- Inclusion of soft-skills in the curriculum prepares the learners for the job market

Due to the integrated skills approach of a CLT syllabus, all the four skills essential for a language have been covered and equal weightage has been given to listening/speaking skills and reading/writing skills. Whereas reading/writing skills are covered in the usual classes, a Learning Resource Centre has been established for the listening/speaking skills, which caters to the needs of all the undergraduate students. There are both kinds of language labs in the LRC – Video and Audio labs. This has been done to make the students communicatively competent. It goes without saying that learners are greatly benefited from the learning resource centre. The difference between the two stages i.e. pre and post learning resource centre is quite obvious. It clearly indicates that the centre gives a tremendous ignition to the desire of a learner to speak English. The learner's accent, pronunciation, stress, tone etc are controlled and modified according to the standard pattern. However there are certain grey areas which still require immediate intervention:

- Mother Tongue Interference in English Utterances
- Lack of Grammatical Knowledge
- Lack of Sufficient Vocabulary
- Non - conducive atmosphere at home
- Passive Attitude of the Peers

This list of hindrances obstructing the communication competency of the students is not exhaustive. We are trying to overcome these by giving much time to the learners for practice, involve them more in drilling exercises and creating imaginary situations for their role plays.

Now, though the knowledge of using modern communication devices such as mobile phones, computers and internet is an integral part of communication skills, it's not that communication skills cannot be taught without the modern technological equipment. Technology only makes the task easy and time-saving. Here I would like to suggest a few common techniques which can help a learner in building up good communication.

- Speaking gets improved only by indulging in speaking.
- A learner must always be encouraged to speak.
- Fluency must precede correctness.

- Do not discourage a learner in committing errors.
- Motivate a learner towards the importance of communication skills.
- Create enough opportunities for him/her to use English.
- Adopt Inductive method of teaching Grammar.

The need for good communication skills has always been there, but Good communication skills have become crucial in the information age we live in. For this, the teachers must make the learners realize the importance of communication skills (in English) in today's world. With the number of foreign investors flocking to India and the growth of outsourcing, English has come to play a key role in professional relationships between foreign and Indian companies. With the onslaught of IT and ITES companies, English has become the language of employability and good command over it is considered a unique qualification. It becomes the moral duty of the teachers of English to create and sustain motivation levels of the college students, especially the marginalized ones.

Much is usually said about the duties of the teachers and students, but the authorities/central bodies that control the institutions cannot run away from their responsibilities. If the authorities want that the products of their institution have a bright future in a competitive world today, they must take care of the following factors:

- Appoint trained/expert teachers
- Support the young innovative teachers who have new CLT based approaches and strategies
- Make the class-sizes shorter by increasing the number of teachers
- Giving importance to English language subject as to the other elective subjects
- Not neglect the requirements of the language teachers

Even after so many innovations in the field of ELT, there are many universities in India which are still continuing with the old syllabus. It might be because of the following reasons:

- No one in the concerned institution is aware of the fact that the new approaches (like CLT) of learning English language are there
- If at all, some teachers are aware, they are not ready to take the bold initiative
- If there are a few teachers who come forward with such proposals, they are ignored completely by the much senior members (like BOS members) who would like to stick with the old syllabus
- The authorities do not listen to the demands (which concern finance) of the language teachers because they still think that language learning comes almost free as it doesn't require any costly teaching tools like the science subjects
- The call of making a uniform syllabus now and then changes the minds of the authorities

There can be other reasons also, but the need for good communication should be realized by one and all because every person on Earth has a desire to understand and be understood which is fulfilled only by communication. Since syllabus is of great significance keeping in mind the

learners' needs, contexts and situations, a subtle and pragmatic approach is required in the implementation of language teaching syllabus. In short, a language teaching syllabus involves a combination of two practical questions 'what to teach' (regarding subject matter) and 'how to teach' (linguistic matter). These two crucial questions can be answered satisfactorily by applying a viable syllabus design which promotes effective communication skills - written and oral, and the best way of inculcating it is devising CLT curriculum in schools and colleges.

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