

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 8 : 4 April 2008

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.
K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.
Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

English for Engineering Colleges
What Do the Students Want?
And What Would the Teachers Like to Change?

V. Subbulakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.

ENGLISH FOR ENGINEERING COLLEGES

What Do the Students Want, and What Would the Teachers Like to Change?

V. Subbulakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.

Introduction

Until 1990, all students in Tamilnadu pursuing undergraduate courses, irrespective of the disciplines of their choice, took a course called Compulsory General English. This course was very similar to general ELT courses. In order to help students pursuing science courses, universities designed a distinct course modeled after the courses relating to English for Special Purposes. This course was a required course. Universities assumed that this ESP-type course would be more useful for the students pursuing science subjects.

A separate need-based syllabus in English was designed to meet the specific needs of students pursuing Engineering. In this syllabus, emphasis was laid on science vocabulary and sentence structures more useful to technical students. Such syllabuses have now been followed for more than a decade in various Engineering colleges in Tamilnadu.

Analysis of the Content of English Language Textbooks

I examined the actual working of this new effort in detail in my M.Phil. Dissertation. I analyzed the content of several textbooks prescribed under this programme in several Universities in Tamilnadu. I also elicited the views of the textbook writers with regard to achieving the objectives set before the students. I also gathered feedback from the teachers and the engineering students. I administered several questionnaires to the engineering students. The findings of this inquiry provided valuable inputs in identifying areas that needed more attention. The findings also provided information that would help revise the English textbooks meant for engineering students.

Widespread and Welcome Research

Similar efforts elsewhere have resulted in developing new textbooks. For example, the CIEFL, Hyderabad had prepared a package of materials under the general title ***Enrich your English*** to be used in 150 hours. This package aims at developing a take-off proficiency in reading and writing skills. The focus of this package was on the reading skills, though speaking and listening skills are also given due importance (Inthira and Saraswathi, 1995). But all these efforts, research and subsequent production of textbooks, etc., seem to have resulted in perceptive impact on the nature of the English courses followed in engineering colleges.

The Present Paper

The present paper undertakes to present the summary of my findings and the relevance of the recommendations in the present context of globalization and outsourcing.

In my study, I made an analysis of needs from the students' point of view. According to Nunan, "Needs analysis asks learners to identify their own priorities. This throws up their wants" (Nunan 88).

The Questionnaire

My questionnaire focused on the following:

1. Do the students consider English an essential subject?
2. Do they learn English because it is a compulsory subject or because they like it, or it (English) adds to their employment prospects?
3. What sort of topics do they like best?
4. Do they like to work in pairs or in small/large groups or individually?
5. How would the students like to be assessed? By tests, projects and so on?
6. Do they think that their teachers are aware of their students' needs?

I administered the questionnaire to 500 First Year Engineering students from different Colleges and Universities in Tamilnadu.

The samples constituted two groups, those who did their schooling in the regional language medium and those who did their schooling in the English medium.

Details of Questions Asked and the Responses Received

The first question involved the ranking of choices and the last question involved personal comments or suggestions. The questionnaire aimed at bringing out the learners' views on their purpose of studying English.

The students were asked to rank 6 general ideas of learning English as a compulsory subject with regard to its importance. The following is the formulation that I followed for this:

I want to learn English under the English Programme because it will help me to:

1. Speak and write in English more fluently and correctly.
2. Face Competitive examinations and get a good job.
3. Participate in seminars and give lectures confidently.
4. Get a good knowledge of English and read a lot of books.
5. Improve my inter-personal relationships at my work place through effective communication.
6. Go abroad for jobs where English is the official language.

400 of the 500 students gave the highest priority to "Speak and write in English more fluently and correctly". Students gave the second highest priority (100 of 500 students) to "improving inter-personal relationships in workplaces through effective communication". Only a few prioritized "English to face competitive exams and get a good job".

The responses suggested that groups of samples have similar needs. The learners had a specific need and were able to identify them.

Another question was presented to learn how students evaluated the teaching

of them were satisfied with the existing programme as a programme that they enjoyed, or found it relevant or useful. A majority of the students considered the subject content dull, unfamiliar and irrelevant. The students showed disinclination in doing grammar activities.

The responses suggested that the students preferred to have variety in classroom activities. This confirms Nunan's plea for a paradigm shift in pedagogy. To quote him, "The learner-centered or learner-based curriculum differs notably from the traditional curriculum in that it is based primarily on collaborative progress between teachers and learners rather than on a number of rules and norms imposed from outside" (Nunan88).

The question, "How could the Technical English programme be made more enjoyable and useful?" aimed at making the students reflect critically about the programme.

More than 80% of the learners favoured the inclusion of lessons based on technical communication skills. The suggestions given by the students clearly remind us that the English Curriculum could be varied and rich.

Apart from the above, there were three other questions: "What do you think should be removed, if any, from the present syllabus of Technical English?" It seemed that learners didn't like to have texts mainly concerned with grammar. They expected something innovative in their Technical English programme.

In the second question students were asked to select one item "which do they think should be included in the present syllabus" i.e., traditional materials like poems/stories, spoken English to improve pronunciation or communication skills to participate in group discussions and interviews, etc. The instant responses were for the last item (group discussions and interviews).

This highlights the fact that the students were not quite satisfied with the existing syllabus and they expected some modifications to make it more relevant to meet their present day needs.

Suggestions by Students

The final section of the questionnaire was an open-ended question inviting suggestions for making the Technical English Programme more interesting, relevant and useful. I list below some of the suggestions made by the students.

The course should have:

1. Aural-oral tests conducted and evaluation norms specified.
2. Selective trips (outdoor) to meet famous personalities.
3. Interactive topics.
4. Students should be trained in interview skills and body language.
5. Develop communication skills.
6. Speaking practice - both interpersonal and presentation.
7. Coursework spread out through all the semesters.
8. More orientation towards oral skills.
9. Less theory and more practical work.

Almost all the students chose to opt for all the nine items.

A Questionnaire for the Teachers of English in Engineering Colleges

I administered also another questionnaire to the teachers of English in engineering colleges. This questionnaire aimed at eliciting their opinion on the existing syllabuses. This questionnaire thus helped the researcher to identify the problems of learning and teaching. Richterich and Chancerel have rightly identified their utility. As they say, "Questionnaires are structural instruments for the collection of data which translate research hypothesis into questions" (Richterich and Chancerel 80).

One significant question was, "What should be included in the present syllabus to make the learning more interesting and enjoyable?"

The suggestions offered by the teachers were varied:

1. More of activities, language learning games, interactions and project work and group-discussions as the need of the hour.
2. Adoption of multi-media module to make the course more attractive.

Summary of the Findings

Although this survey was limited in scope, it did represent the views of a cross-section of the students who were undergoing their first year Technical English programme. The survey aimed at gaining direct access to the learners' views on their needs. Similar suggestions emerged from practicing teachers.

The main findings of the survey are the following. Students want:

1. To study English mainly to develop their communication skills.
2. More interaction in the classroom.
3. Use of audio-video materials in teaching.
4. Tasks based on realistic situations to promote interpersonal relations.
5. Oral and written skills to be given equal weight.

Analysis of the English Syllabus

I analyzed the English syllabus prescribed for the Engineering students' by various Universities in Tamilnadu. I made a study of the syllabus and the questions asked in the exams.

The syllabus of the state's nodal Technical University, namely, Anna University' was analyzed. In addition, I analyzed the syllabus followed in the Pondicherry Engineering College that comes under the jurisdiction of Pondicherry University as well.

The University offers English for 2 semesters for the first year B.E./B.Tech. students. The focus is on basic grammar elements, basics of technical communication, speaking, reading and writing. The syllabus also includes listening process and audience analysis. In writing, the focus is on paragraph writing.

The second semester syllabus also contains some grammatical components, basics of group discussion, business letters, job application letters, memos and e-mail message writing. It also focuses on the various types of reports, editing

From the question papers it is clear that much importance is given to direct questions, which elicit and require one-word answers. In Part-B of the exam paper, questions that elicit long answers were asked. But these questions also elicit direct answers on the content. There seems to be no scope for creativity or intellectual challenge.

Pondicherry Engineering College, which comes under the control of Pondicherry University, offers Technical English just for the first semester. The focus is on basics of communication, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The syllabus deals with the four modes of writing, bibliographical entries, using dictionaries, formal and informal reports, memos, business letters, job applications, basic phonetics, group discussions and presentations. As the paper is only for a semester, the syllabus appears to be very crowded.

The Findings of the Analysis of the Syllabuses followed in Various Universities

Thus, the study of the existing syllabuses and testing items reveals that they lack the following items:

1. Conduct of aural-oral tests.
2. Lack of practical orientation.
3. Speaking practice- both interpersonal and presentation.
4. Interactions and project work.
5. Adoption of multi-media modules.
6. Equal weight for oral and written skills.

The syllabuses may re-done to make the courses more interesting and useful to the learners.

In the light of recent developments in applying discourse patterns to language studies, the syllabuses may be oriented towards speaking and writing beyond the sentence level and rigorous application of coherence and cohesion to make effective oral and written presentations. More than grammar, logic and rhetoric should be focused on at the collegiate level. As Prabhu observes, "An innovation has relevance beyond the specific situations; it is associated with and to examine, for any given situation, at what level of generality such relevance can be established" (Prabhu 91).

The classroom work should be more of practical application than theoretical explication. Question papers should be totally application-oriented. Instead of asking the students to concentrate on their gathering of information, they may be furnished with all details and asked to reframe and rewrite to exercise their presentation skills. So the syllabus, course material, classroom methods and evaluation procedures require a fresh look to make the students willing learners.

References

1. Inthira, S.R., and V.Saraswathi, **Enrich Your English**, Book-I: Communication skills, CIEFL: Hyderabad; Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Chennai: Sci-Tech Publication, 2001.

3. Nunan, D. ***The Learner-Centered Curriculum***, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
 4. Prabhu, N.S. ***Second Language Pedagogy***, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991.
 5. Richterich, R., and J.L. Chancerel, ***Identifying the Needs of Adults Learning a Foreign Language***. Strasbourg: Council of Europe: Oxford: Pergamon, 1980.
-

V. Subbulakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.
Department of English
Sastra University
Thanjavur
TamilNadu, INDIA
subs_77@yahoo.co.in