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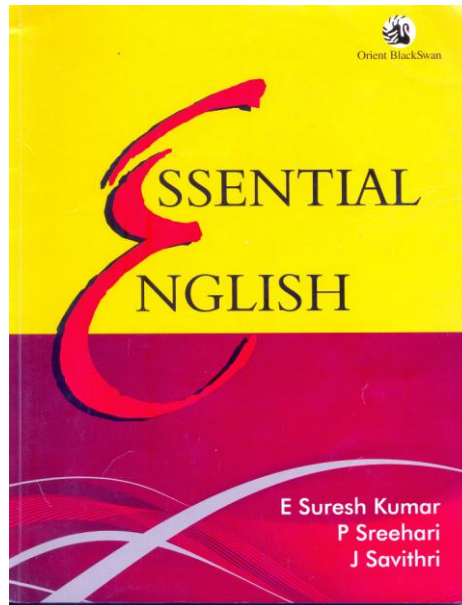
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Essential English by

E. Suresh Kumar, P. Sreehari and J. Savithri

(Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2011)

A Review by R. Anandam, M.A, M.Phil., B. Rajkumar, M.A, M.Phil., and
G. Baskaran, Ph.D.



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R. Anandam, M.A, M.Phil., B. Rajkumar, M.A, M.Phil., and G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

Review of *Essential English* by E. Suresh Kumar, et al.

The book *Essential English* is presented in two parts. The book offers a comprehensive body of knowledge and practice in English for students whose careers in various fields these days depend also on their level of competence in English. Jobs are available all around the world and in places far beyond their place of birth, upbringing and study. And English appears to be a good passport to such places facilitating easier communication both at work and outside the places of work.

The blurb of the book declares that it “has been prepared for use as a course book for undergraduate students, the book provides students with adequate and challenging material to practice and work on their English skills through a variety of exercises in listening, speaking, reading and writing.” The authors have taken the needs of the student community and prepared the materials with care and commitment as they have given the learners enough space and matter for improvement..

The Contents of the book include the following:

PART 1: COMMUNICATION SKILLS

1. Effective Communication
2. Listening Skills
3. Oral Communication
4. Reading Comprehension
5. Written Comprehension
6. Vocabulary Development
7. Fun with Grammar
8. Common Errors

PART 2: READING AND ENRICHMENT

1. Barack Obama: A Trendsetter
2. Rendezvous with Indra Nooyi
3. Muthyala Raju Revu: An Engineer Turned IAS officer
4. R. Madhavan: Engineering to Farming

Unit 1 of Part 1 focuses on teaching communication skills. It sets the tone for effective communication. An essential element of effective communication is its persuasive component. Taking opposing viewpoints into consideration to develop and deliver persuasive messages is an important goal. In general, this chapter could include more details on persuasion here.

Unit 2 focuses on the art of listening to understand the “stated and intended meaning”. Listening skill is needed also to understand the unintended meaning as well as cleverly hidden meaning in communication. Of all the language skills, listening skill is more heavily required in our classrooms as our educational strategy is largely lecture-based. However, our students are not adequately equipped in this skill. They focus more reading and writing. Among these two, they focus more on the writing skill, because it is ultimately through writing their performance is judged in the exams they write. Here lies the problem. Listening is very important to learn the concepts dealt with in discussions in the class. Writing is what really brings the final grade. Attentive listening has become a thing of the past. Only when jokes and episodes are narrated, listening flourished well in the classroom! Change of teaching strategy is called for here so that all four language skills are adequately mastered.

Unit 3 integrates the mechanics of speech with various forms of oral communication to gain practical insight for effective delivery. A good reader must read between the lines and beyond the lines. This is where the authors give enough room for practice to the budding readers. Fluency could have been emphasized with more exercises and tips. In Indian languages speech is often delivered with a fast pace. Because of this cultural tradition, perhaps, we also want our speech in English should be quick and fast paced. If someone halts and clearly searches for a suitable word or expression, the speaker is seen to be lacking in speaking skills in English. Actually, teachers and textbook writers should encourage student to think aloud, repeat phrases and sentence to arrive at the most appropriate expression for the occasion. Long hesitations may be due to lack of adequate speaking skill, but pauses and deliberate hesitations should be judged differently.

Unit 4 prescribes strategies to elicit graphical signals, author’s meaning and reader’s response in understanding the text. Reading is an essential part of several other components of language learning. It is through regular reading most Indians acquire new vocabulary items. At school, may memorize, but as we enter work, we begin to read. If our reading habits are regularly practiced right from our school days, we will acquire ability to compose sentences well choosing appropriate words.

Unit 5 features guidelines to make writing a pleasant experience. The unit also discusses a number of writing purposes, making the book *Essential English* a ready reckoner for beginners as well as practitioners. Writing is 90% perspiration and 1% inspiration. It requires more effort in terms of thought, correctness of grammar and appropriate expression. But at the same time, it is also important to be as simple as possible in our expressions. The authors could have given more help through this lesson on how to speak and write simple, plain English.

Unit 6 is on Vocabulary Development. Derivational aspects of words in English could have been dealt with more examples. Choice of words to meet our specific contexts requires some discernment. Often our students are guided by the teachers' vocabulary, words used in the textbooks, and expressions they read in the newspapers. The book under review does not cover important issues in this area, although some basic and useful guidelines are given. Teaching and mastering words in a bi- and multilingual context require many strategies. Frequent vocabulary contests may be encouraged. Teachers can always deal with a few new and essential words relevant to the subjects students learn in their classroom. Moreover, vocabulary teaching should be seen also as a responsibility of the teachers of other subjects as well.

Unit 7 is on grammar. Authors make an effort to make learning grammar a fun-filled activity, by giving an interesting title to this unit: Fun with Grammar. The word *fun* is not fully understood and appreciated in our Indian vocabulary. Whatever may be the word and phrase we use to refer to grammar, grammar will remain as grammar. The burden of grammar can be reduced through actual practice, which does not focus on conceptual terms to label the processes. Adding language games based on grammar is another good strategy we can adopt. Emphasis on free writing will help improve sentence construction. Let us insist on short sentences. Initially the influence of the first language is easily seen on the sentences in English constructed by our students. However, with regular practice based on regular reading, our students will be able to improve their sentences. Lexical choice, use of pronouns, tense, conditional clauses, etc. will improve. Let us not waste our time in describing and explaining grammatical terms. This Unit can be improved further. The strength of this unit lies in identifying where the students feel discomfort in producing appropriate sentences and how they can overcome this discomfort.

Unit 8 on common errors is a valuable addition. Actually, we would recommend that this unit be expanded further taking into account the future career and social needs of the students.

Part 2

If Part 1 is for practice, **Part 2** is planned for motivation. Hence, the authors aim at practical passages for self-learning. The Units 1 to 4, with coverage of success stories provide different kinds of reading, viz., reading for general information [**skimming**], reading for specific information [**scanning**], reading for global understanding, [**extensive reading**] and reading for extracting information [**intensive reading**]. However, we also feel that the selection could have included lives of ordinary folks in ordinary circumstances as well, making use of stories of ordinary people reported in daily newspapers in India.

To Conclude

English is projected in most textbooks as an aid for career choice and career improvement. In this process, authors look favorably at the stories of great leaders, innovators, etc. Such a choice is elitist and oriented toward glorifying certain preconceived values where interests and needs of the vast majority of our students in colleges, first generation learners, are ignored. We need a re-orientation of our approach here. Focus on skills are very important, focus on career choice and improvement are also important, but we also need to provide for pluralistic ideals in our English teaching textbooks, so that millions of first generation learners from all regions of the country, not merely those from families with generations of English education, embrace English as a helpful language.

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