

## **DOWNSIZING SYLLABUS AND CONDUCT OF EXAMINATIONS: A FEW SUGGESTIONS**

**M. Balakumar<sup>1</sup>  
Biresh Kumar<sup>2</sup>**

Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore  
*<sup>1</sup>mbalakumar1955@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>biresh.1962@gmail.com*

Covid-19 pandemic has taught humanity a lot of lessons by forcing us to go for innovative measures in every walk of life. Education sector is one of the most adversely affected areas of our activities. Institutions have remained closed almost for the last seven months. The biggest challenge before us is to maintain the duration of the course by conducting classes and passing out tests on scheduled time and following the academic calendar. Now the classes are conducted online as conducting regular classes in the classroom is quite impossible. Another challenge is conducting the examinations. This paper tries to provide some suggestions and views to deal with the situations we are forced in.

In this connection, the suggestion of downsizing the syllabus has been an effective measure to compensate for the loss and make up for the delay. Therefore, the education board of state and centre are on a syllabi cutting spree. They are proposing an average downsizing of 30% in the courses of studies. There is no point in opposing this move as it is taken as an emergency measure keeping in view of the “extraordinary situation” prevailing now due to the COVID pandemic.

However methods can be suggested to undertake this exercise in a more sensitive and effective way so as to reduce the size of the syllabus by retaining the soul of its contents and concepts as the news reaching to our ears raise apprehensions about the skillfulness of this exercise.

For example, reports say that from the syllabus of some education boards, whole chapters of Economics and Political Science are being omitted. Such as Democratic Rights, Food security in India, Federalism, Secularism and Citizenship. Among other topics, They have also removed the chapter on ‘demonetization’. Likewise practical portions are being removed from science text books.

Keeping in view the above examples of ‘removal’ of topics, it can be assumed that amputation is being done in the name of operation, which may leave the body corpus limbless and disabled. On the other hand as researchers who have been engaged in designing, modifying and evaluating syllabus and text books for decade, suggesting the following ways and means of downsizing the syllabus and retain its core:-

Instead of omitting the whole chapters, each chapter should be analyzed to identify ‘important content areas’ to retain them and discard the remaining as the emphasis of teaching and testing should be based on the important concepts/content areas and not on each and every detail found in the teaching-learning material/chapters.

Now the question is what parameters should be followed to decide which content area is important and which one is not. There may be many such reference points to decide the importance of the parts of a content and level of education will be one among them.

Here it is worth mentioning that 'importance' is a relative term. That means that a particular piece of information can be important on a certain level of education such as primary, upper primary, secondary, higher secondary and so on and its opposite is also true.

In the light of this fact, re-designers must see the content of a chapter with reference to the level of education it is prescribed for, to decide its importance or insignificance. Retaining those and abandoning others accordingly may facilitate downsizing of a syllabus on justifiable grounds.

Now the next question arises on how to decide the significance or suitability of a part of content by ensuring maximum objectivity. We have to devise a very pragmatic and effective tool to facilitate this job. Concept Based Continuum of Graded Syllabi (CCGS) covering all the levels of education is the need of the hour.

In this regard it is very relevant to mention that NTS of CIIL devised CCGS for language and literature. It has clearly prescribed the content inputs to be included in any teaching-learning material at all the seven levels of general education (Primary to Research Level). Although this framework is exclusively designed and developed for Language and Literature disciplines, it can be certainly used as a guiding document for other disciplines also.

In order to render CCGS as a comprehensive venture, the syllabi of language and literature courses followed at various levels of education under different systems have been examined in an elaborate manner with a focus on the common concepts. Subsequently, these concepts have been demarcated and distributed across the seven levels of general education. In a nutshell, the Concept based Continuum of Graded Syllabi [CCGS] may assist a teacher to decide the importance of a content area based on the 'concept' it represents or reflects upon.

Taxonomical dimensions may be used as another objective criteria to decide the importance of a content portion and its suitability to a particular level of education. Their dimensions are nothing but the associated properties or problems of a text to be made known to the learners during the teaching, learning process. They are listed as below –

- a) Knowledge of specific facts and figures.
- b) Knowledge of traditions and conventions, trends and sequences, frameworks, methodologies and criteria, theories and principles of any subject.
- c) Understanding regarding the above dimensions i.e. ability to successfully relate one representation with other representations.
- d) Elements of a text, their mutual relationships and the organizational principles on which these relationships are based.

- e) Communicative uniqueness, plan of an action found in a text.
- f) Overall value of a text estimated by applying external criteria on internal evidence.

Any linguistic unit may have the following dimensions—Form, Structure, Meaning, Function, Boundary and Usage. Suitability of an exercise/chapter with reference to a particular level can be objectively determined by retaining or omitting the particular dimension while downsizing a syllabus.

The whole exercise of downsizing syllabus is meant for doing justice to the students who were not getting proper lessons due to prolonged closure of classes. At the same time we have to provide them certificates by conducting the examination and maintaining the stipulated duration of the batches. We know the designing of tests/examinations is central to guiding and assessing student learning. Preparing good test questions is not a simple task as it requires ingenuity and willingness to devote time, energy and thinking. However in this kind of situation we have to look for various options. One such remedy is called open book examination which can be suggested to deal with the situation in a more scientific and agreeable manner.

What is an Open Book Examination? “Open Book Examination (OBE) is one in which the examinees are permitted to consult text books, hand outs and other reference materials during the examination. The purpose of this type of examination is to reduce the practice (rather burden) of memorizing the answers. It also helps to assess one’s retrieval skills. The modification of this is known as ‘Restricted Book Examination’ wherein the examinees are permitted to refer to a few selected books.

Open Book Examination is popularly conducted overseas. The idea and practice of introducing Open Book Examination is not new to the Indian Education Systems also. It is followed by the IITs, Law Universities, Bengal Engineering and Science University and many other prestigious institutions including JNU, New Delhi. The main benefit and speciality of this system is that it facilitates the testing of understanding of the students rather than mere ability to memorise facts and figures. Following the toe-line, way back in 2014 CBSE also launched OBE as a pilot project for class IX and XI annual examination with some modifications and riders suitable to its objectives. It was dubbed as an ‘Education Revolution’ by the experts and observers.

In September 2019, a minister in Karnataka talked about how “the state government was deliberating on introducing the open book examination system at high school level to help students rid their fear of examination and also to bring in reforms to improve the quality of education and teaching methods”.

The outbreak and continuity of the pandemic further strengthen the idea that a committee of experts appointed by the state government has battled for the final assessment of 2020-21 academic year to be an open book examination from the comfort of their own homes.

Showing the way to this type of endeavors, the prestigious University of Delhi, in May 2020 decided to conduct the final year examination in open book examination mode.

These are some of the initiatives already taken by some examination boards and they are also giving encouragement to try OBE in this extraordinary situation.

However we have to take extra care to frame questions for this type. We have to think of preparing questions on the higher level of knowledge i.e. Application, Evaluation and Analysis level. These items can be based on familiar material studied in class. The item must go beyond what has been learned and memorized.

We have to know the Pros and Cons of Open Book Tests, which are given in the following table.

<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
Gives opportunity to the students to utilize their search skills.	Can't keep a check on students and they can obtain marks by using test wiseness rather than the skills.
Tests Comprehension level of the students rather than their memorization of facts and figures	Can demotivate students from learning as they know that books and other support materials will be provided in the examination hall.
Encourages high performers to go for more and more studies so that the support materials provided during the examination can be utilized properly.	Discourage low performers to go further low as they nurture the illusion that mere availability of support material can make their job easy.

The open book examinations/tests require a quality and type of items which differ from the traditional tests. There can be more detailed analysis of concepts. Therefore the questions prepared for this kind of tests/exams should set an interesting, challenging and rewarding task that is different from the classroom experience.

Bloom points out a student may be placed in an actual situation such as a laboratory in which he analyses realisms of materials or a classroom in which he must analyze to interaction of members of the group or as is well known in military training and testing – a field situation in which he must identify and relate a variety of factors. The ability to apply the principles and generalization to new problems and situations is one of the more complex and difficult objectives of education which enables a student to cope with conditions and problems with complex and rapidly changing society.

It is to be mentioned that, in some of the western countries like the USA, the examination system has unique features which are non-existent here. There the students are subjected to a host of tasks which include open book examinations, take home assignments etc. The students are asked to answer the questions critically and creatively in the open book examination within a stipulated duration of time.

In this method of examination, the tasks should be given to the examinee to discuss various viewpoints of different approaches about the given topics. The student should assess them with convincing facts and arguments with their conclusions. The students may be allowed to refer to the books and related materials on the topic.

Bernabei and Leles (1970) states that the application type of question items refer to mental operations that necessitate practical solutions in dealing with real or novel situations and problems.

Examples:

- a) What experimental procedures might be useful in analyzing this particular problem. Explain with appropriate evidence.
- b) Two passages of literary work (poetry or prose) of similar or different authors can be given and asked to write an essay to explain and resolve the seeming contradictions/similarities between the passages.

These are some of the possible approaches in this type of examination suggested here. Many more types of question items can be generated for testing application and other higher order cognitive skills, such as – analysis, synthesis/creativity and evaluation.

Open Book Examination is an integral and compulsory aspect of education in the western countries. They are proven as dependable and realistic. Therefore incorporating these aspects into our examination system, besides the methods we are using now, would further strengthen the examination and evaluation systems of our education. Trying this as one of the options is not only timely but also necessary, keeping in view of the situation the students and teachers are facing now.

## REFERENCE

Bernabei, Raymond and Leles, Sam. (1970). Behavioral objectives in curriculum and Evaluation, Dubuqu. Iowa: Kendall/Hint.

Bloom, Benjamin s. (Ed.) (1956). Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. London: Longman

Harper, Eduin, A. and Harber, Erika, S. (1972). Preparing Objective 'Examination A hand book for Teachers, Students and Examiners, New Delhi, Prentice Hall of India.

Pon Subbiah. (2008). An Introduction to Evaluation Terminology. Mysore: CIIL.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/cbse-to-introduce-open-book-examination-in-2014>.

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2019/sep/15/govt-mulling-open-book-exam-system-suresh-kumar-2033845.html>

<https://thehindu.com/news/cities/Bangalore/committee-recommends-open-book-examination>

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/educational/news/open-book-examination>