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English for Employment: A Study of Employers' Expectations

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Abstract

The rise of English as the global language has led to a greater demand for English in the job market. The last few years have witnessed the opening up of thousands of lucrative job opportunities for the graduates proficient in English. Taking into account the requirement for skilled workforce, many educational institutions in the country have started courses that will, hopefully, improve the students' communicative competence in English and make them employable. However, the syllabi revision for most of these courses in English is based on mere assumptions rather than actual English language needs of the employment sector.

The national committees, like Curriculum Development Committee in English (2001), have never asked employers about the English language skills they expect from Indian graduates. Even the syllabus compilers design the syllabi on the assumed future needs of the students. Though, the job opportunities for the graduates proficient in English are spread across such diverse areas as journalism and mass communication, management, tourism, law, entertainment industry, visual communication, library science, IT, shopping malls, advertising agencies, etc., the focus seems to be on providing workforce only to IT-enabled industries.

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The Yashpal Committee Report (2009) states that the problems of the students graduating from Indian universities, like the lack of communicative and analytical abilities, can be addressed by developing curricula appropriate to the needs of the students and by improving the syllabi of the courses offered in the conventional degree programmes.

In the light of globally changing English language needs of the twenty-first century, this paper attempts to find out the English language skills expected to the employers from their prospective employees. The outcome of this study may help in updating syllabi of courses in English offered at the undergraduate (UG) level in Indian universities.

Key words: English language needs, communication skills, employers, syllabus revision, Indian universities

Introduction

The Report of The Committee to Advise on Renovation and Rejuvenation of Higher Education (2009), also known as the Yashpal Committee Report, sums up the undergraduate (UG) education in India very well. The Report is an earnest attempt to reflect on some of the relevant issues pertaining to higher education. The report observes that more Indian youths, who are first generation university goers, consider UG education as a stepping-stone for securing a job. However, the courses offered in the conventional degree programmes, where majority of the enrollment takes place, are not tuned to meet the job market demands. Higher Education in India at a Glance (2012) published by the University Grants Commission (UGC) shows provisional faculty-wise students enrolment in Higher Education in 2010-11. According to this UGC brochure, 36.39% students are enrolled in Arts faculty, 18.42% in science, 17.11% in commerce and management, 16.86% in engineering / technology, 1.93% in law and 3.85% in medicine. The courses in the faculty of Arts particularly focus on providing only humanistic education to the first generation university goers, whereas employment-oriented education is provided in professional degree programmes to the youths from elite and middle classes.

The Yashpal Committee Report further states that the problems of the students graduating from Indian universities, like the lack of communicative and analytical abilities, can be addressed by developing curricula appropriate to the needs of the students and by improving the syllabi of the courses offered in the conventional degree programmes. The need of the hour is to cater to the glocal (global + local) needs of the students by designing application-oriented syllabi with exposure to work culture and on-site training. These observations of the Yashpal Committee are also applicable to the teaching of English at the UG level.

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It is generally found that while revising syllabi of the courses in English offered at the UG level the requirements of the job market are hardly taken into consideration. The national committees, like Curriculum Development Committee (CDC) in English (2001), have never asked employers about the English language skills they expect from Indian graduates. Even the syllabus compilers design the syllabi on the assumed future needs of the students.

In the light of globally changing English language needs of the twenty-first century, this paper attempts to find out the English language skills expected to the employers from their prospective employees. This study is a modest attempt to help to redesign syllabi of courses in English offered at the UG level in Indian universities.

Developments in Indian Education Scenario in the 21st Century

English introduced by the British to Indians is now nearly a 400 year old language in India. English language has played different roles like library language, link language, language of opportunities, etc. in the country. The rise of English as the global language has led to a greater demand for it in the twenty-first century. English language in India serves utilitarian purposes (Mohan and Banerjee, 2003). Owing to globalization, the last few years have witnessed the opening up of thousands of lucrative job opportunities for the graduates proficient in English. The rapid growth of Information Technology (IT) and the impact of globalization have resulted in the change in the situation in the first decade of twenty first century at a much greater speed than ever before. Hence, it is essential to take note of the increasing demand for English in the job market.

The Birla-Ambani report, 'A Policy Framework for Reforms in Education (2000)', expected India to pursue a path of education-centric development to create millions of knowledge based human resources. It also considered the need to evaluate the utility of the existing Arts and Science courses and link them to employment opportunities.

India has become the most sought after Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) country in the world. Many services are now outsourced to India. Many international companies have created their call centres and branches in India because of the easy availability of a large and relatively inexpensive, skilled (i.e. English speaking and computer-knowing) workforce here (Chaudhary, 2009: 532). India's emergence as a preferred outsourcing destination had created the need for about 2.3 million professionals by 2010 [National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) Press Information Note, 5/7/2007]. This underscores the fact that there is a phenomenal increase in career opportunities for the graduates proficient in English.

Taking into account the requirement for skilled workforce, many educational institutions in the country have started courses that will, hopefully, improve our students' communicative competence in English and make them employable. For instance, the University of Pune and Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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Swami Ramanand Teerth Marathwada University, Nanded have started add-on courses like Soft Skill Development Programme (SSDP) to enhance the employability potential of the graduates of these universities in relation to IT-enabled industry.

Though, the job opportunities for the graduates proficient in English are spread across such diverse areas as journalism and mass communication, management, tourism, law, entertainment industry, visual communication, library science, IT, shopping malls, advertising agencies, etc., the focus seems to be on providing workforce only to IT-enabled industries.

Studies on English Language Needs of the Employment Sector

Nowadays in most of the sectors English is a prime requirement for business communication. There are quite a few studies that explore the English language needs of the corporate world.

Praveen Kumar (1997) has tried to study the perspectives of teachers and employers on the Functional English syllabus.

Mohan and Banerji (2003) carried out a questionnaire-based survey of the needs for English in the professional world. In this study it was discovered that all the 32 language tasks listed in the questionnaire and the related sub-tasks identified by the researchers as relevant for professional purposes were actually performed with varying degrees of frequency. The study stresses the need to take into account the specific needs of the learners in India while planning the language courses. The researchers claim that their study suggests a practical path to have access to the learner's needs, formulate objectives and select content for a syllabus. They also suggest the term 'English for Professional Purposes' for the courses at UG level instead of 'General English'.

These studies by Praveen Kumar (1997) and Mohan and Banerji (2003) are related to Functional English syllabus and General English course respectively. In the present era of globalization the present study is a modest attempt to know the expectations of employers from Indian graduates vis-à-vis globally changing English language needs.

Profile of the Respondents

A questionnaire-based survey was conducted on a sample population of twenty representatives of various organizations located in different parts of the country and related to diverse fields as publishing, construction, law, investment, banking, auditing, tourism, human resource management, logistics, pharmaceutical sales, software, education and social welfare (NGO). Among these twenty respondents, one employer was from a Multinational Company (05%), two were of the organizations run by trusts (10%), eight were proprietors (40%) of their firms, while five represented public limited companies (25%) and four belonged to private limited companies (20%).

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Expectations of the Employers

The questionnaire, analyzed and appended to this paper, was divided into two sections: section A dealt with writing skills and presentation skills and section B with listening, speaking and reading skills. The major findings of this survey are given below.

Section A		Writing skills and presentation skills	Responses
Rank	Range	Name of the attribute	
I	Very Important	use appropriate words and phrases	13 (65%)
		compose business letters concisely	
		make a power point presentation in a meeting/ seminar/conference/workshop	
II	Important	review books, films, plays, concerts	13 (65%)
		use (mobile) dictionary / web dictionary	
III	Not Important	prepare news items, news bulletins	09 (45%)
Section B		Listening, speaking and reading Skills	
I	Very Important	follow oral instructions	16 (80%)
II	Important	compere during formal gatherings	12 (60%)
		teach effectively	
III	Not Important	use British as well as American English	09 (45%)

The present study is based on a relatively small sample, nevertheless, its observations are revealing.

- 1) With regard to writing and presentation skills, thirteen employers (65%) stated that the abilities to use appropriate words and phrases, compose business letters concisely and make a power point presentation in a meeting/seminar/conference/workshop are very important. Thus employment specific vocabulary and writing and presentation skills are required from the prospective employees.
- 2) The abilities to review books, films, plays and concerts and to use a mobile dictionary or web dictionary are considered important by thirteen employers (65%). This means advanced composition skills and e-reference skills matter most for employers.
- 3) As for listening, speaking and reading skills, sixteen employers (80%) feel that it is very crucial for the candidates to follow oral instructions in English. This implies that listening skills should have a prominent place in the courses in English.

- 4) For twelve employers (60%), the candidates should be able to do compeering during formal gatherings and teach effectively. Along with fluency in spoken English, presentation skills are must to seek an employment.
- 5) According nine employers (45%), it is not important for the candidates to have the ability to prepare news items or news bulletins in English and use British as well as American English. It indicates that there is no need of overemphasis on activity like writing a news report.
- 6) In the open responses as well, focus of the employers is on ability of the employees to communicate effectively in spoken English.
- 7) In their suggestions the employers have underscored the ability of the candidates / prospective employees to speak English effectively. They expect that the employees should be able to use business jargons for effective communication. One of the suggestions is on giving 50% weighting to oral and written skills.

Discussion

Mohan and Banerji (2003:20) state: “The needs of the professions which university graduates enter are not determined by the kind of input but by the nature of expected output. The employer does not look at the past, to what the entrant to his organization has learnt, but to the future, to what the entrant can do.” The section on communication skills in the courses in English offered in Indian universities is generally divided into reading, writing and speaking skills. Some of the skills mentioned in this survey are included in the General / Compulsory English courses offered in the degree programmes in the universities in India. However, based on their significance to the employment sector their weighting needs to be changed. Even though some of the books include the units on vocabulary, in the syllabi of Compulsory English in Indian universities enough attention is not paid towards vocabulary development. The present survey indicates to incorporate employment specific vocabulary in the course books.

Most significant outcome of this survey may be the need to give enough training to our students to listen to English carefully and develop the skill of note-taking. Listening and speaking skills have less weighting in the General English courses offered in conventional degree programmes. The emphasis of the employers to develop spoken English of our graduates needs to be taken seriously. The marks in oral examination may be deceptive. With regard to writing skills, units on film review and book review are included in some of the Compulsory English course books, for instance, Reflections II and III (SYBA and TYBA, University of Pune). More emphasis needs to be given on developing presentation skills of our graduates as suggested by this survey (e.g. compeering). Similarly, along with the dictionaries in print the UG students need to be trained to use effectively mobile and web dictionaries. This survey also makes us aware to acquaint our students with the skills of teaching English.

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To sum up

In the context of globalization the course content of the General / Compulsory English courses needs to be revamped vis-a-vis employers' expectations of English language needs. The redesigned courses in English should aim at equipping the students with abilities necessary to communicate effectively. Listening, speaking and presentation skills need to receive more attention along with vocabulary development and writing skills. Syllabus designing is a continuous process. The findings of this survey may have direct bearings on the syllabi revision of the courses in English offered at the UG level in Indian universities. The present study can be used with increased sample size to check the consistency in the observations and to verify the truth.

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Appendix

Analysis of the Questionnaire for Employers

- Note:** i) This questionnaire has been designed to find out the **English language skills** required by the employers from the prospective employees.
 ii) The information would be strictly used for research purpose only.
 iii) **Please use tick mark (✓) for your response.**

Name (Optional): _____

Designation: _____

Company/Firm/Organization/Institute: _____

Organization Type: MNC Pub Ltd Pvt. Ltd Trust

Partner/Proprietor

• **Section A: Writing Skills and Presentation Skills**

Sr. No.	A candidate should be able to	Very Important	Important	Not Important
1	use appropriate words and phrases	13 (65%)	07(35%)	00
2	use (mobile) dictionary / web dictionary	05 (25%)	13 (65%)	02 (10%)
3	fill-in various forms	11 (55%)	08 (40%)	01 (05%)
4	write captions, subtitles and short notices	09 (45%)	09 (45%)	02 (10%)
5	prepare slogans, advertisements, etc.	06 (30%)	08 (40%)	06 (30%)
6	prepare user manuals, brochures, etc.	06 (30%)	08 (40%)	06 (30%)
7	compose business letters concisely	13 (65%)	05 (25%)	02 (05%)
8	make an abstract / a summary	06 (30%)	10 (50%)	04 (20%)
9	draft notices, agendas and write minutes	08 (40%)	10 (50%)	02 (10%)
10	prepare news items, news bulletins	02 (10%)	09 (45%)	09 (45%)
11	draft proposals accurately	12 (60%)	06 (30%)	02 (10%)
12	prepare questionnaires for market surveys	08 (40%)	09 (45%)	03 (15%)
13	write research reports / papers	04 (20%)	09 (45%)	07 (35%)
14	edit and carry out proof reading	05(25%)	09 (45%)	06 (30%)
15	translate the matter	05(25%)	09 (45%)	06 (30%)
16	develop content for the programme / web pages (technical writing)	07 (35%)	08 (40%)	05 (25%)
17	review books, films, plays, concerts	02 (10%)	13 (65%)	05 (25%)
18	make a power point presentation in a meeting/seminar/conference/workshop	13 (65%)	05(25%)	00

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- **Section B: Listening, Speaking and Reading Skills**

Sr. No.	A candidate should be able to	Very Important	Important	Not Important
1	follow oral instructions	16 (80%)	03 (15%)	01 (05%)
2	receive and make telephonic calls	15 (75%)	05 (25%)	00
3	take down notes/imp points at discussions, meetings, etc.	13 (65%)	07 (35%)	00
4	communicate effectively with colleagues and guests	13 (65%)	07 (35%)	00
5	speak fluently in discussions and meetings	11(55%)	09 (45%)	00
6	compere during formal gatherings	04 (20%)	12 (60%)	04 (20%)
7	use British as well as American English	01 (05%)	10 (50%)	09 (45%)
8	read aloud effectively a prepared speech (e.g. a vote of thanks)	06 (30%)	11 (55%)	03 (15%)
9	read and understand information from graphs, maps, diagrams, charts, etc.	12 (60%)	07 (35%)	01 (05%)
10	understand information from web sites and handle e-mails	12 (60%)	08 (40%)	00
11	teach effectively	08 (40%)	12 (60%)	00

- **Any other (please specify)**

Sr. No.	A candidate should be able to	Very Important	Important	Not Important
1	listen properly	01	--	--
2	express in English	01	--	--
3	converse in English with colleagues, clients and superiors	01	--	--
4	oral communication	01	--	--
5	oral translation	01	--	--
6	express thoughts	02	--	--
7	sharing experiences	01	--	--
8	discuss difficulties	01	--	--
9	apology	01	--	--
10	aggressiveness	01	--	--
11	reading comprehension	01	--	--
12	understand and interpret legal language	01	--	--
13	prepare notes to accounts	01	--	--
14	sentence construction	01	--	--

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15	e-mail etiquettes	01	--	--
16	voluntary participation	01	--	--
17	interpersonal communication	--	01	--
18	reading habit	--	01	--
19	use of mind map	--	01	--

- The suggestions you would like to make in relation to the **English language skills** expected from the prospective employees.

- Classification of the suggestions made by the employers in relation to the **English language skills** expected from the prospective employees:

12 respondents (60%) have given following suggestions.

a	Listening comprehension and speaking
b	Candidates should be able to converse in English even if not correct English but the communication should happen with objective achieved Oral Communication most important What we speak is important Employees are able to speak few words and phrases in English
c	Speaking and writing skills 50% weighting to oral and written skills Express effectively
d	Use powerfully communication skills with customers English must in management Use of business jargons for effective communication Normal courtesies in English

In the suggestions employers have focused on the ability of the candidates / prospective employees on speaking English effectively. They expect that there employees should be able to use of business jargons for effective communication. One of the suggestions is on giving 50% weighting to oral and written skills.

Date:

Place:

Signature of the authority

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