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Problems Associated with Designing, Execution and Evaluation of English Curricula in Technical Institutes

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Abstract:

English or communication skills is incorporated as one of the compulsory subjects in the curricula of undergraduate technical institutes. Inclusion of English in technical courses aims at enhancing English communication of budding technocrats to face challenges of industry. It is observed that many of the technical graduates do not have required level of English proficiency. Researchers are trying to understand what can be done in this regard.

The present research article critically investigates problems associated with design, execution and evaluation of English curricula in technical institutes. The findings of this article would be of immense use to improve design and execution of English curricula in technical institutes with the objective of overall enhancing the level of proficiency among learners.

Keywords: Communication Skills, English Curricula, Industry, Proficiency Level Technical Institutes.

Introduction

Teaching of English in technical institutes has assumed immense significance. The sound knowledge of English communication helps the learners to acquire lucrative jobs in the cooperate world. Unfortunately, no serious thought has been given to the teaching of English in technical institutes in our country. Both teachers and students value technical subjects more than the subjects offered by the department of humanities in engineering colleges. The improvement in the design, execution and evaluation of the curricula of English would greatly help the students to acquire proficiency in oral and written communication that will pave the path for their future growth.

Aim

The present paper would critically look at the problems associated with design, execution and evaluation of the English curricula in Technical Institutes.

Design, Execution and Evaluation of English Curricula

1. Lack of participation of stakeholders:

A good syllabus seeks adequate participation from all its stakeholders. It should incorporate viewpoints, opinions and feedback from students, teachers, management, industry and psychologists. On examination of the process of framing present syllabi in the university, it easily comes to the notice that viewpoint, opinions and feedback of only teachers has been taken into consideration. In other words, the representation from other stakeholders such as students, management, industry and psychologists is absent. All the syllabi in general and that of English/communication skill in particular are put to practice with the objective of empowering the students with the necessary skills so that they can find gainful employment in industry. The present syllabi has not taken into consideration the expectations and aspirations of the students of Polytechnic and Engineering colleges. Before framing the syllabus of English through systematic exercises such as surveys or interviews, it is necessary to find out the areas of deficiency of knowledge of English among students. Such an exercise would enable the framers of syllabi to design the syllabus in a manner which fulfills the expectations of learners.

Majority of the students from Polytechnic and Engineering colleges are employed in the industry. It has been always complained by the HR department of the industry that

though the students of Engineering and technology faculty are good at technical knowhow, they lack effective communication and presentation skills. This is a serious reflection on inadequacy of the present syllabus of English/communication skills. It can be said that the present syllabi have failed to meet their objectives. This can be remedied by incorporating suggestions and opinions of industry people in the framing of syllabi. At present, both students and industry are not represented adequately in the process of syllabus framing.

Role of Psychology has increased a lot in the teaching-learning process recently. For the majority of Engineering and Polytechnic students, English is a foreign tongue. In recent times psychologists have come up with different procedures and methods of teaching foreign language to students. Critical examination of the present syllabi shows that the opinion of the psychologists does not seem to have found place either in determining the objectives of the syllabi or giving guidelines for the teaching-learning process.

2. Inadequacy of contents:

By going through the contents of present syllabi we may get an impression that they are properly drafted. It seems almost everything related to communication skills is incorporated in the syllabus. The important topics included in the above syllabi of diploma and degree colleges are related to process and types of communication, verbal and non-verbal communication, business correspondence, grammar, presentation such as GDPI etc. The critical and close examination of the syllabi would make it clear that there is no serious thought given to fulfill the expectations of students who differ widely in their orientation of English and level of proficiency.

The syllabus of Polytechnic seems to be more theoretical. It extensively deals with process, type and other technical details of communication. It leaves a little scope for the practical orientation of students in group discussions, interview techniques and presentation skills. It is true that this syllabus includes these topics but does not leave much space for the practice of these skills. This curriculum is taught in the first two semesters of the diploma programme. It is to be noted that diploma holders are not expected to teach English but they are expected to use effective communication through the medium of English in their profession. Moreover, the entire scheme of assignment which is part of the new curriculum is focused on written communication. Students are asked to submit written assignments on grammar, business writing, paragraph writing and so on. It must be remembered that the

students of first year diploma are just high school pass students and they are not expected to draft the professional correspondence immediately. Even when they join jobs after the diploma course it is very rare that they are expected to draft serious business correspondence. This is not to be misunderstood that the drafting skill is not important for them. What is required is to design the contents of the curriculum in such a way that it should create adequate opportunities for learners to practice the speaking skill to acquire command over spoken language. The question of acquiring proficiency in the English language is directly connected with the practice of language by learners. As this syllabus is for theory courses, it does not prescribe slots for English/Communication classes. As a result the students undergoing this course can write essays on the importance of communication, group discussions and presentation skills. But they may miserably fail in actual performance of these skills.

In the undergraduate engineering program of Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj Nagpur University, English subject is prescribed in Semester I and in Semester-VI. The course which is prescribed for semester-I is called communication skills and it is a practical subject. Even a cursory look at the contents of the syllabus of this course is enough to convince us that practically everything which can be taught in theory and lab class is made part of the syllabus. Given the fact that only two hours per week are allotted for the teaching of this course, makes it virtually impossible for the teachers to do justice with the topics prescribed.

It is a matter of common knowledge that engineering students need to improve their skills of group discussion and interviews as they have to appear for campus interviews to get jobs. Many of the industries prescribe GD as an integral part of the recruitment process.

As mentioned earlier another course by the name of Functional English has recently been introduced in semester VI. The exercise of streamlining the courses of English seems to have been neglected. Out of the four units of Functional English two are more or less repetition of the contents of communication skills, the course which is prescribed for Ist semester. The units of grammar and business correspondence are almost similar to that of the same topics of communication skills. The course of Functional English does not mention how the scope of these topics is different from that of the earlier course.

Shortcomings in evaluation pattern

Examination/Evaluation pattern is an essential element of any syllabus. How far the teaching of a particular course has been beneficial or to what extent the teaching of a particular syllabus has resulted in improving the skills of students can only be assessed by adapting a proper examination/evaluation scheme. Teaching of English/Communication skills is primarily concerned to enhance the proficiency of learners in spoken and written communication therefore; it is logical and rational that examination/evaluation must find out how far students have acquired mastery in these skills. It is to be understood that the evaluation pattern for English/Communication skills should not aim at finding out the depth of knowledge of learners but it should make an attempt to find out how effectively students can apply their knowledge of English in Spoken Communication. It is to be understood that instead of focusing on written examination, it is more desirable to conduct practical examinations to form a better idea of skills and competency of students. If the examination/evaluation scheme of present syllabi is considered, it does not fulfill these expectations. The communication skills course of polytechnic prescribes the examination of 150 marks. Out of these only 25 marks are assigned for oral examination. This means the burden is on theoretical understanding of English rather than development of proficiency in English. In case of Functional English all the 50 marks are on written examination the scheme says 40 marks for university examination and 10 marks for internal assessment without clarifying whether these 10 marks are for written or practical assessment. Even if we give the benefit of doubt, only 10 out of 50 marks are there to assess the student's proficiency of English with relation to actual acquisition of competency.

No research study can operate only on theoretical assumptions; those who hold a different opinion from what has been stated in above paragraphs may summarily reject all the shortcomings of the present syllabus of English/Communication skills that have been listed in this chapter. In order to substantiate what has been mentioned above the researcher of this study would like to support her claim by empirical data. A questionnaire containing 15 statements was given to 500 students of Polytechnic and Engineering courses drawn from 10 colleges situated in the city of Nagpur. These statements were designed to find out the degree to which the students have been benefited by the teaching of present syllabi with regard to different aspects of proficiency of English.

Other problems:

Apart from the problems mentioned in foregoing paragraphs, teachers often face some of the other obstacles that also adversely affect the development of proficiency of English language among Engineering students. Let us look at them briefly.

1) Differing levels:

The constant assessing, leveling, grouping and working within the academic skill levels of every learner are hazardous and challenging tasks. Instructing within an ESL classroom requires formative assessment to be administered, which allows teachers to find out each student's level of knowledge.

2) Inadequate number of Resources:

The large number of students requires a large number of resources. Ensuring that there are enough textbooks, computers, listening devices, hands-on tools, and the plethora of other necessary teaching and learning instruments is a very challenging assignment.

3) Teaching students with various first languages:

Teaching a large class for any subject is challenging. But when teaching ESL students in a large class who usually have differing first languages, there are many more challenges.

4) Emotional and Social Support:

English language learners need an environment which is non-threatening while allowing each student to feel relaxed, welcomed and calm as they come from differing cultural backgrounds, we have to ensure that each student feels a part of our class room while becoming accustomed to our ways. We need to ensure that students do not feel a loss of their own culture. ESL students need to also know that their values are appreciated.

5) Lack of adequate knowledge of Language

It is the most frequent challenge faced by the maximum number of students at

the undergraduate level. Even the basic knowledge of English grammar like Articles, Parts of Speech, Tenses, and their usage is lacking in them. More than 60% of students commit mistakes in the usage of Tenses.

Ex. a) I was going tomorrow instead of I will go tomorrow.

b) He gone yesterday. Instead of he went yesterday.

6) Negative Attitude about Learning English

It has been observed that almost all the Universities have English, Communication or Soft Skills as a compulsory subject for the First Year degree course but students do not pay serious attention to this subject, as the simple contents are prescribed for them to study, therefore they do not feel it challenging and it result in the development of wrong attitude among them that English is not important subject like others. They take it leisurely and lack the practical approach towards it. Hence it creates a barrier in the path of learning communication skills.

7) Fear

Though students have negative approach to learn this language, it does not mean all of them don't have any knowledge of it. They have but some students deliberately disinclined to converse in it. Therefore, when students were asked that why don't they communicate in the target language with their friends, teachers, relatives etc. most of them feel FEAR of committing mistakes while talking in English. Many a time, they suffer from an inferiority complex that if they do not speak correct English, they would become a laughing stock for others. Therefore students avoid communication in English though they desire to do so.

8) Learning English as a 'Subject' and not a 'Skill'

No doubt that English is the only language which is internationally known for its utility. No other language is as extensively accepted as English for social, economic, political level and what not. In the current era of globalization having a proper command over English communication is prime need of the world since it has proven important steps to climb the staircase of success. Students or personnel with excellent communication in English are considered as unique assets for any organization.

Considering the growing importance of English in every field, almost all major universities have prescribed English/communication skills as one of the subjects in their curriculum for entry level students. But it is found that students hardly develop their interest in learning language practically where as they are just learn it as one of the subjects to pass the examination. Consequently, most of them fail to learn the practical command in language. This makes learning mechanical, students preferred to memorise what they supposed to use as a means of communication.

9) Dearth of Practice:-

Jean F. Forrester in 'Teaching without Lecturing' has rightly commented that-

'Learning a language is learning a skill i.e. through practice. The more doing the more better one learns' Practice really makes one perfect on learning language skills. In fact language learning is practice oriented process. The more one exposed to this one can be more proficient in the use of target and desired language. But students are always hold themselves back when they are asked to speak or practice the language. Most of them loose their confidence and consequently, they avoid practicing it.

10) Poor Vocabulary

Vocabulary is the body of words that make up a language, and the importance of vocabulary in communication cannot be overstated. Without a good working knowledge of words and their meanings, both written and verbal communication will be muddled or poorly understood. Students with poor reading comprehension skills either lack the vocabulary or the word recognition skills to make sense of the material. Students with poor reading comprehension don't tend to read very often, which causes them to miss out on learning new words. Communication is enhanced by knowing more words. They don't have to be big words, but the meanings should convey what the person is trying to say. When people cannot communicate clearly and accurately, giving instructions or understanding them may be difficult. Mistakes can be made, costing time, effort, in the workplace.

Therefore, Mastery over Vocabulary is an essential tool to communicate effectively in any language. When English is learnt as a foreign /second language it becomes obligatory to ones to have the knowledge of maximum number of words in

order to be proficient in this means of communication. In this connection Robert Lado

'There are about Five Lakh words in English, of them three thousands are needed for Speaking and Seven thousands for Reading'(last name, year)

In spite of this fact, the vocabulary of the students is very limited at the initial stage. Similarly, even though they know its importance still no extra efforts they take to improve their vocabulary except reading prescribe text or newspaper etc. Therefore, it affects their fluency, comprehension of teacher's communication, reading material etc

11) Insufficient Knowledge of Grammar

The Word Grammar means different things to different people. To the ordinary citizen, it connotes to correctness or incorrectness of the language that he or she speaks. To a school student, it means an analytical and terminological study of sentences. Knowledge of grammar helps the student in the correction of mistakes and improvement of written work. A person can't learn a foreign language accurately only through a process of unconscious assimilation. Moreover, there are singular and plural forms that the students have to distinguish and still many forms that have to be learned. Most students easily get confused with English grammar, while grammar is needed to form a right sentence. If the students do not have correct knowledge of grammar, of course, they will not be able to produce sentences that are grammatically right. As students realize that their grammar is weak, they feel hesitant to communicate in English.

12) Lack of Proper Environment to Communicate in English

Mother tongue is learnt rapidly as we are exposed to it regularly and all the time around us. Therefore, even without much serious efforts we acquaint with it naturally and converse with less efforts in any situation. When observed, it is found that same is not the case with English. It lacks the learning environment for the students. That is also one of the most effective reasons why students of Engineering don't build their confidence in English Communication. Even though all the subjects are taught in English, for the comprehension purpose some teachers are forced to talk in mother tongue. Sometimes people may think that the students just want to show off when they speak in English for daily conversation. Since the students do not want to be rejected by the people around them, they use their native language in daily conversation. That makes

the students unable to communicate in English fluently outside the class.

Conclusion:

Teaching ESL to students in a large number is a challenging responsibility. There are differing academic levels, there are difficulties in maintaining adequate number of resources, there may be students from different parts of the country who speak different languages; and it is challenging to meet the emotional and social needs of each ESL student. Even though it is challenging to work as an English teacher it is an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Above all the process of teaching and learning ESL/EFL can be effective when both the teacher and learner are involved in the process and derive fun out of it. This is the only way to keep the motivation and interest levels high. When this is achieved all the problems of teaching and learning ESL/ EFL get resolved and better results are attained. This chapter has made an attempt to present various problems including lack of participation from stack holders in the process of curriculum development, inadequate contents of English curriculum, faulty and ineffective evaluation/examination system and many other obstacles which adversely affect the proficiency of English/Communication skills among Polytechnic and Engineering students. The results obtained from the sample of 500 students from Nagpur District has confirmed the hypothesis of this study that the students of polytechnic and Engineering courses failed to achieve the expected level of proficiency in different areas of English communication. The next chapter of this study would be devoted to elaborately present various improvisations that can be initiated at different levels to improve the level of proficiency of English among students.

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