

The Question of Relevance: ELT Syllabi in Indian Universities and Proficiency Requirements of Learners

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Abstract

Although having its root on a foreign soil, English is now as much an Indian language as any other. It occupies the position of an associate official language. It has been taught in our schools and colleges for many decades. As an ideal, a course in English language and literature is supposed to have concentrated on improving the language proficiency and literary competence of learners. But the present system trains the learners only in mastering the literary content of the syllabus. The teaching/learning of English remains in the country an activity, questionable in its relevance. This lacuna can be attributed to a number of factors like the lack of motivation on the part of the students due to various reasons such as lack of awareness regarding the importance and scope of English language, faculty teaching techniques and stereotype kind of syllabi which may not cater the needs of the students. This paper attempts to highlight what is wrong in the syllabic contents prescribed in most of the universities in India if we assess it on the parameters of its relevance vis-a-vis the proficiency requirements of the learners.

Key words: Language proficiency, Syllabic contents, Requirements of learners, question of relevance

Introduction:

In the Indian context, English continues, through sheer necessity, to be the *associate official language* at the centre. It remains the medium of instruction for undergraduate and postgraduate studies in most universities, all-India professional and technical institutions like IITs, IIMs and AIIMS etc., and the medium of communication at all-India seminars, conferences and workshops. Many more books, journals, newspapers and magazines in English are being published in India than ever before. In fact, there has been a much wider diffusion of English in India after independence. The number of Indian writers of fictions, poems and plays have been increased steadily, and some of them even have won international fame and recognition; Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri etc. are only a few among the best internationally renowned. They have successfully used English for the imaginative and effective expression of the various facets of their emotions and ideas, for the delineation of the Indian cultural background and the expression of Indian sensibility.

In one sense, but often valid one, English has become one of the languages of India, and its extensive use by the Indian intelligentsia has given it a distinct feature as American or Australian or Canadian English and so on. This distinct variety of Indian English is not a sub-standard or Pidgin English, but rather one, which is nationally as well as internationally intelligible. It is the product of a revolutionary creative process, and like all living organisms, it becomes self-generating entity. The retention of English or the need for its study requires no pleading now. Even the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1986) adopted by the Government of India

clearly specifies, “Special emphasis needs to be laid on the study of English and other international languages”. World knowledge is growing at a tremendous pace, especially in science and technology. India must not only keep pace with this growth, but also make her own significant contribution to it.

Statement of the Problem: ELT syllabi and Proficiency requirements of learners:

During the last few decades, there has been pressing and increasing need for speedy and effective measure to improve the standard of English teaching in the country. Apart from the emphasis on the learning of English and Foreign languages laid down in NPE, the UGC, the Human Resources Development Ministry and many others have voiced deep concern over the deteriorating standard of English. As an example, Calcutta University undergraduates’ performance in compulsory English could be cited here. The Part I undergraduate syllabus of the University of Calcutta included compulsory papers in English and Bengali of 50 marks each. These had to be studied and cleared by each student to qualify for the Part II exam. Those not too keen on Compulsory Bengali could opt Alternative English instead. Compulsory English, however, was a must do option for them. The performance of students in Compulsory English had been a cause of concern ever since the subject was introduced. An alarmingly large number of students failed the paper in 2004. The matter was reported in *The Statesman* on 21st October, 2004, which mentioned that some students, who qualified for Honours and even got a first class, were unable to achieve the mere qualifying 10 marks in their compulsory English paper. Incidentally, while one needs to score a minimum of 10 in each of the language papers, a combined score of 30 marks was required to clear the 100 marks units. With nearly 5,000 failures in these papers, mostly in Compulsory English, the Undergraduate Council and the Calcutta University Syndicate had to think of ways of dealing with the crisis. So far, candidates failing to clear the language papers had to lose a year and try again in the next (*The Statesman*, (India), Tuesday, 11 January, 2005). The disastrous result in compulsory English was indeed a reflection of the sorry state of undergraduate education in West Bengal. In fact, this anecdote is just a replica of the ELT situation in most parts of the country. It is an index of the language abilities of these students, which shows how urgent the need is for taking constructive and remedial steps. Considering situations like this, as a consequence, even those state governments, which in the past were somewhat indifferent and apathetic in their support to ELT programmes, now appear to be willing to lend their active support for the improvement of the standard of English in their states.

Particularly during the last few decades, the problems related to the study of English in India have been engaging the serious attention of most of those concerned with educational standards in the country. The aimless drift in academic programmes over a long period, caused by the absence of clearly defined objectives and well-conceived policies with regard to English studies, has resulted in a rapid and alarming deterioration of the standard of English. Some are inclined to lay the whole blame for this lapse on the current language controversies, regionalism or on the political prejudice and sentiment, which has often clouded the issues on this point. However, the major cause for such a situation to have grown, therefore, is the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of our teaching and learning programmes in this field to meet the needs and challenges of the changing time. The changed educational needs, consequent to a rapidly changing economic and sociological pattern in the country, need a radical overhaul of the organizational pattern, methods and programmes of the teaching syllabi, materials and the examination system that prevail in our educational institutions. They also demand dynamic, competent, well-trained teachers, committed to reform the present state of affairs. We are,

largely rooted, and still continue to be, in the traditional aims and objectives, which are no longer valid and therefore, they need to be revised.

Over the past few decades, a number of committees, study-groups and seminars have examined the problems of English teaching in India and made useful recommendations. However, unfortunately, most of these recommendations have remained only pious resolutions or mere academic exercises and have not been effective or timely implemented. No serious efforts were made to provide for efficient training in English language at the university stage to remedy the deficiency from which most university entrants suffered. There is lack of effort to develop the necessary expertise for this purpose in the departments of English, or to ensure that the universities had started turning out in large numbers to provide the learners with necessary skills. The rapid deterioration of the standard in English, affecting the study of other subjects also, thus, continued unchecked.

At the university level, although there is still much inertia, which has to be broken, many universities are anxious to undertake programmes for more effective teaching of English as a language and improve teaching of its literature. The UGC has sponsored a number of regional seminars and workshops for re-orientation of syllabi and methods of teaching, which are followed by national workshops and seminars to be held at this Institute. Their recommendations show that there is a broad consensus regarding the need for the improvement of the syllabi, methods of teaching and examination patterns and it is hoped that the universities will take active steps to implement these recommendations.

The government of India in 1958 established the Central Institute of English (now The English and Foreign Language University) to provide scope for study of English language and literature, to organize research in the teaching of English, and to undertake and facilitate advanced course, conferences and seminars in order to check the deteriorating situation of ELT programmes in Indian colleges and universities. Since then the Institute has trained teachers and teacher-trainers from all over the country in modern and effective methods of English language teaching and literary interpretation. It has produced teaching materials for schools, colleges and universities and has done some significant research work in contrastive linguistics and problems connected with the teaching of English. It has also undertaken the preparation of suitable syllabi and tests in English language and literature for different levels.

However, despite various efforts and recommendations by several working committees and syllabus re-orientation programmes, the study and teaching of literature, which has been our professed principal concern at the university level has withered and declined over the years. The number in our post-graduate English classes have gone on increasing but the fact that an increasing majority of those who hold a Master's degree in English from our universities are found deplorably deficient both in their command over the language and in their knowledge of literary sensibility. A large proportion is of those, who join English courses not because of any interest in the study of literature as a humanistic and cultural discipline, but because of greater job prospects as teacher of English, are somehow able to acquire this degree without possessing even a reasonable degree of proficiency in the prescribed literary texts. But they did it mainly through 'selective reading' by simply learning the so-called 'critical materials' readily available on prescribed authors (like Mr. Ramji Lall, Dr. Sen, Dr. Varshney, Mr. Banerjee, Mr. Mundra and so on) in the form of guides prepared by a flourishing community of note-makers. They made crude attempts by reproducing them in the examination. How much have such students gained from such a course of study in the development of their language proficiency, literary

sensibility, or critical judgments, which English studies at the universities seek to impart is only a historical question. Yet, with this university degree in English, which gives them a license to teach, most of them have drifted into the role of teachers of English in our schools and colleges. In such a situation, which has become a vicious circle, the teaching of English, unrelated to any social context or purpose, governed by no specific and realizable objectives in view, has increasingly tended to become an aimless, per-functionary activity in our classrooms. The agony and frustration of the really serious and conscientious students or teachers in such a situation is a tale of woe too familiar to us that it needs no repetition.

As far as the contents of undergraduate and post-graduate courses in English are concerned, there arises a question “Is it relevant to the current social scenario? Is it really learners’ need-oriented?” It is not an easy task to give a clear-cut explanation of these queries. However, deep down the answer is ‘No’, because the syllabic structure in most of the Indian universities followed the aged-old, outdated and conventional pattern, concentrating more on British literature. As a specimen example, the course contents prescribed for teaching English in the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Manipur University may be mentioned here for reference. The course contents of M.A. Semester I, II, III and IV of the said university includes:

Semester – I		Semester - II	
Course Code	Course Name	Course Code	Course Name
ENG - 101	British Poetry - I	ENG – 201	British Poetry - II
ENG – 102	British Drama - I	ENG – 202	British Drama - II
ENG – 103	British Novel - I	ENG – 203	Literary Criticism
ENG - 104	Introduction to Linguistics	ENG - 204	Culture and Literature

Semester - III		Semester – IV	
Course Code	Course Name	Course Code	Course Name
ENG – 301	British Novel - II	ENG – 401	American Literature - II
ENG – 302	American Literature - I	ENG – 402	Postcolonial Literature
ENG – 303	Indian English Literature	ENG – 403	Literature in Translation: New Horizons
ENG - 304	Culture, Literature and Epic Traditions	ENG - 404	Literary Theory
			Elective Courses: (Optional) 1. New Literatures

			in English, 2. Communicative English Skills
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(Manipur University M.A. Syllabus (Modified) 2016)

Times have changed, but English syllabi in Indian universities, largely, have not. And we find ourselves in a situation where the study of English literature in our universities, unrelated to any particular social context or purpose, and having no specified direction, has become, apart from some false prestige that is still attached to it, a haphazard, an aimless, undefined and malfunctioning expertise. Consequently, all students who offer English literature at the university level are required to read Elizabethans, Chaucer, the Augustans, the Romantics and the Victorians etc. Many of them have neither knowledge enough of the language to appreciate their stylistic merits, nor an understanding of their social and cultural background, nor the maturity of mind and taste to appreciate their ideas. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of them resort to ‘memorization’, and ‘selective study’ for passing pass their examinations. They memorize the Romantics or the Victorians; reproduce them on demand, not only passages from these writers, but also second-hand opinions, criticism and appreciation with all the authority of originality, and with varying degree of inaccuracy. They struggle through mythological and literary references and notes on English social history. They annotate with reference to the context, comment vaguely on the style, and attempt to make critical comparisons on masters in English literary history. This kind of study could hardly develop literary sensibility or stimulate critical thinking and writing. It has not helped in language learning. Thus, literary criticism, literary history and literary appreciation have all become largely manifestation of a pseudo-literary study in our universities.

The aims and objectives of the study of English in India are now entirely different from those for which it was originally introduced. The departments of English in Indian universities now have to perform a three-fold function in the current context. They are: (i) to prepare and properly equip the potential teachers of English language, (ii) to provide for the study of English literature as a cultural and humanistic discipline, and (iii) to improve the basic language skills, particularly, the communication skills, since English became a *lingua franca* in the contemporary multilingual and multicultural India. For this purpose, the present syllabi available in the Indian colleges and universities have to be modified. What are essential at this hour are specific courses in English language and literature at the undergraduate and post-graduate level, and a greater variety of both languages and literary courses at the undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Recently, in the field of second language learning and teaching there has been an upsurge of interest in what is variously called the functional/ notional/ semantic/ communicative syllabus. As S. Pit Corder (1973) has rightly pointed out: “The learning of something must surely involve the ability to use it acceptably i.e., discover its functions i.e., for sending and receiving messages with the help of that language”. In fact, this is what really matters. Many, in India, learn English to be able to undertake their college and university level studies through English, particularly in the field of science and technology. For a second language learner, language is not an end in itself; it is only a means to an end. He/she learns it to use to communicate. So learning a second language involves learning its structure and its communicative functions.

In general, it seems that the communicative approach to syllabus design may prove to be extremely fruitful for alternative language learning. However, at the beginner’s level, as far as the teaching of English is concerned, the communicative syllabus in its strong form will be both inappropriate and impracticable. It can, however, be profitably exploited for teaching English at the college/university level or in many remedial

courses. The sprinkling of the language component in an otherwise heavily literature-oriented courses hardly serves the purpose of those who go for language teaching, and is an inconvenient and undesirable compromise. This does not imply that the language course should have no literature component, or the literature course should be devoid of the necessary language component. However, the different objectives of both the courses should be kept in mind while framing the syllabi. Research in English in Indian universities will also be more fruitful if it seeks other avenues, such as in the field of Indian English or Commonwealth English writing, in Stylistics, in problems of teaching English in India, or in translation of standard literary works into English from other languages.

Although some universities have introduced a small component of language courses both at the Undergraduate and Post-Graduate level (one compulsory or optional paper in the use of English, structure of English or in Applied Linguistics), these are only tinkering reforms. The basic pattern and the system at these levels in most universities continue to remain rigid, impervious to any new ideas, which might have made our literature and language teaching programmes more relevant, fruitful and meaningful. Professor Mohan (1996) added that a mere change in syllabi would work no magic. Much will depend on the quality of teaching and teaching materials. Examination requirements will have to keep in view the objectives of the study in each case. Teachers of English will have to be given additional training in modern methods and techniques. Adequate resources and much more research in the field of methodology, production of texts and evaluation techniques will be needed to bring about any effective reform in the current situation.

Conclusion and Implications:

The English language is bound to remain important for certain well-defined purposes, and will have to be used widely for a variety of needs. English continues to be language of opportunity in India, offering better prospects in life to those who acquire a good proficiency in it. In order to avoid the continuance of a small and privileged English-knowing elite in the country, a situation that is fraught with dangerous social consequences, urgent steps have to be taken to devise effective methods of teaching for a large majority of handicapped students. Our system should be able to provide equality of opportunity to all for learning English adequately for their specific needs and purposes, to avoid the social imbalance, which the knowledge of English by only a privileged few has brought about. Indeed, it is encouraging to note that university departments of English in India are fast realizing that they cannot any longer afford the luxury of an idle pursuit of pseudo-literary studies.

However, the most unfortunate part is that the universities, in spite this realization, (except a few) are reluctant to change their aged-old norms and still continuing on the path, which were laid many decades in the past. In fact, the absence of any kind of language planning and lack of political will in implementation and lack of co-ordination among various agencies - Central Government, State Governments, and Universities, etc. resulted in an aimless drift. Most of the Boards of Education and Universities in the country do not have a clearly defined set of aims. In fact, the aims and objectives are decided only by the “examination system”. The ideal of ‘*delinking of degrees from jobs*’ made by the government of India in 1985-86 (Challenge of Education - A policy perspective, also known as NPE) reflects the quality of education imparted in the schools and colleges. However, so far in actual practice, it seems to have failed to meet the ideal as per suggestion. Therefore, what is needed at the moment is that the stalwarts form the field of education need to specify in clear terms the

objectives of teaching and learning English in India and realize that there is a necessity to revolutionize the present syllabi, which creates book-worms and not efficient communicators.

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