



TO ENGLISH OR NOT TO ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

It is disconcerting that despite having studied English as a subject for at least 8 years, students of undergraduate courses are often unequipped with even the basics of spelling, pronunciation, and grammar. Most universities make it compulsory to study English for at least the first year of graduation, and the curriculum is designed with the assumption that since the student has scored at least passing marks in the Higher Secondary School Examination, a certain level of proficiency in the language is a given. It is also worrying that a 'one size fits all' approach is taken towards the curriculum without deference to the variability in levels of proficiency of students at the undergraduate level. The content of the curriculum also tends to lean heavily towards literature, bypassing the essentials of conversational English, which would not only have been easier to grasp but also of more practical use in enhancing employability. Another redundancy is the pedagogy which largely consists of explaining the text in class and then doing a question-answer routine for evaluation. The result is that English gets to retain its 'killer' reputation well into graduation, spare for a handful privileged whose medium of instruction at school was English. The rest struggle to just pass the examination. Learning enough English for career advancement, the avowed aim of introducing English in courses ranging from Arts to Commerce to Engineering, sadly remains an underachieved goal. Clearly, an alternative curriculum and pedagogy are needed.

This paper attempts to examine the reasons why English still presents an insurmountable challenge for the majority of students. It attempts to discuss the current framework under which undergraduate students (with particular focus on the Arts and Commerce streams in rural and semi-urban areas under Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj Nagpur University) have to labour, the problems with the said framework, and the possible ways of remedying these problems with a view to helping students learn the kind of English that will assist in their career advancement.

KEY WORDS : curriculum design, pedagogy, conversational English, enhancing employability, career advancement .

INTRODUCTION

It is disconcerting that despite having studied English as a subject for at least 8 years, students of undergraduate courses are often unequipped with even the basics of spelling, pronunciation, and grammar. Most universities make it compulsory to study English for at least the first year of graduation, and the curriculum is designed with the assumption that since the student has scored at least passing marks in the Higher Secondary School Examination, a certain level of proficiency in the language is a given. It is also worrying that a 'one size fits all' approach is taken towards the curriculum without deference to the variability in levels of proficiency of students at the undergraduate level. The content of the curriculum also tends to lean heavily towards literature, bypassing the essentials of conversational English, which would not only have been easier to grasp but also of more practical use in enhancing

employability. Another redundancy is the pedagogy which largely consists of explaining the text in class and then doing a question-answer routine for evaluation. The result is that English gets to retain its 'killer' reputation well into graduation, spare for a handful privileged whose medium of instruction at school was English. The rest struggle to just pass the examination. Learning enough English for career advancement, the avowed aim of introducing English in courses ranging from Arts to Commerce to Engineering, sadly remains an underachieved goal. Clearly, an alternative curriculum and pedagogy are needed.

This paper attempts to examine the reasons why English still presents an insurmountable challenge for the majority of students. It attempts to discuss the current framework under which undergraduate students (with particular focus on the Arts and Commerce streams in rural and semi-urban areas under Rashtrasant Tukdoji Maharaj Nagpur University) have to labour, the problems with the said framework, and the possible ways of remedying these problems with a view to helping students learn the kind of English that will assist in their career advancement.

Students 'Background:

It is observed that a majority of students opting for Arts and Commerce streams have had their education in the vernacular, and that they have studied very basic English starting at Grade 5 for not more than one 30-45 minute segment a day on every day of school. Although it has been argued that a sustained effort, even if it is only for 30-45 minutes a day, is quite sufficient for students to obtain a passable proficiency in any language, the results of such a methodology have not been very encouraging. Immersion techniques, on the other hand, have been seen to work much better. It is also often argued that it is not the amount of time given to English, but the poor quality of teaching that really affected assimilation. However, the causes for the lack of English skills are not relevant to this paper. Just the fact that the problem exists needs to be taken into consideration.

Evaluation:

Certain exercises were conducted in order to evaluate the level of proficiency of students of BA and B.Com. Semester II for the purpose of this study. The findings are discussed below:

i) Rapid dictation of letters of alphabet: Random letters of the alphabet were dictated to students. A total of 50 letters were dictated, with no emphasis on which ones got repeated how many times. This was done fast enough for writing, but not slow enough to allow for any time to think. The same exercise was then repeated slowly. When the answer sheets were evaluated, it was found that there were about 16% errors on an average in the first case. The majority of errors concerned the letters 'b', 'd', 'g', 'j', 'u', 'v' and 'w'. This points to a substantial time lag between hearing a letter pronounced and associating the corresponding symbol with it.

ii) Gap Filling Exercises: Students were given sets of ten words of 3, 4, 5, and 6 letters each. In each of these words, one letter was missing and students were asked to fill out the correct letter. Most students fared quite well on the three letter words, but as the number of letters of the word went increasing, incorrect responses went up too. Of particular difficulty were words with consecutive double letters where one of those letters was missing, e.g. **beggar**, **bazaar**, **pepper**, **still**, **parrot**, **simmer**, etc. Words with diphthongs presented similar problems where the word left out was a vowel, e.g. **loud**, **round**, **spoil**, **line**, **clear**, etc. (The letters in bold are the ones that were left out. Also, since it was possible to have more than one correct answer in some cases, each word was pronounced for the students.) This exercise helped identify the problems with the understanding and formation of spellings that students struggle with.

iii) Gap filling exercise II: This gap fill exercise with multiple choice answers concerned articles, prepositions, and tenses. These are things that students of both Arts and Commerce streams study as part of their syllabus in the first year of graduation. Each of these things has also been taught to them in high school. However, this was one of the worst sections where there were over 60% errors.

Additionally, no discernible pattern in those errors was evident, possibly meaning that even some of the correct responses were a result of guess work. It is quite apparent that students face severe difficulties in formulating grammatically correct sentences.

iv) Free Writing Exercise: The fourth exercise given to students was to write a paragraph of about 100 words. Topics were random and students were allowed to choose any one of ten. These topics were deliberately kept simple like 'my pet', or 'my favourite dish', or 'my favourite film star'. The results, however, were eye opening. Of the 47 students who participated in this exercise, not one was able to write a single grammatically correct sentence, the exception in a few cases being the first sentence where they declared what they were writing about, e.g., 'My favourite film star is Salman Khan'. Even this sentence was written incorrectly in many cases.

FINDINGS:

The results of these four exercises make it fairly evident that students of BA and B.Com. are quite raw when it comes to English skills. They have issues with quick recognition of letters of the alphabet, with word formation, as well as with sentence formation. (It must be mentioned here that this is not a uniform phenomenon. Students opting for English medium at graduation in Arts or Commerce are usually those who have studied in English medium schools, and consequently have a better grasp of the language. These students are very high scorers in English; however, these are a small minority. The majority of the students who choose non technical courses at graduation come from economically backward classes, and have studied in the vernacular. Very few of them are actually capable of understanding even simple spoken English.)

The Problem with Commonly Prescribed Texts:

Given the level of proficiency apparent from the results of the exercises mentioned above, at least the textual portion of the English syllabus for Arts and Commerce courses needs a serious rethink. As it stands, it is a mix of essays, short stories, and poems by Indian and foreign authors. This, in itself, is not problematic. However, the level should have been chosen with more care. For example, one of the stories prescribed for B.Com. Sem I in recent years is John Galsworthy's *Quality*. Here's an extract from the piece that can serve as a sample of the kind of writing students have to study:

'...but if it were some new kind of foot-gear that he had not yet made me, then indeed he would observe ceremony - divesting me of my boot and holding it long in his hand, looking at it with eyes at once critical and loving, as if recalling the glow with which he had created it, and rebuking the way in which one had disorganised this masterpiece. Then, placing my foot on a piece of paper, he would two or three times tickle the outer edges with a pencil and pass his nervous fingers over my toes, feeling himself into the heart of my requirements.'

Another example is the visual poem by John Hollander:

*Dusk
Above the water hang the loud flies
Here O so grey then
What a pale signal will appear
When soon before its shadow fades
Where here in the pool of opened eye
In us, no upon us
As at the very edges
Of where we take shape in the dark air
This object bares its image
Awakening ripples of recognition*

That will brush darkness up into light

While the extract from the prose of John Galsworthy banks on flowery language to embellish the narrative, Hollander's poem uses obscurity as a poetic device to convey its abstract meaning. Our students are capable of understanding neither.

The framing of such a syllabus, and the adoption of a pedagogy that relies heavily on literary content is problematic because at its base lies the assumption that, having cleared the Higher Secondary School Examination, students already stand at a level of proficiency that allows for the comprehension of prose and poetry like that given above. Such an assumption comes in the way of learning of English instead of facilitating it, and harms the future of students because it does not equip them with the requisite skills for verbal communication. What is needed is a different approach that factors in the level of proficiency, and the framing of a curriculum that helps students overcome their handicaps. The curriculum thus framed will necessarily mean changes in the pedagogy too.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The changes proposed here are simple really. The first requisite is to rid ourselves of the assumption that students reaching the UG level must be proficient enough to comprehend the texts prescribed as of now. An effort must be made to offer them a chance to start anew. This can be done in a phased manner over the three years of graduation. (It might be helpful to look into the English curriculum of the first 5-6 years of school in CBSE or similar patterns as it is seen that students studying in schools that implement these curricula are considerably more at ease with English than students coming from vernacular backgrounds.)

Year I: The main points of emphasis in the first year could be

- phonetics: studying sounds produced by letters and their combinations
- word formation: forming small words (3-5 letters) using phonetics. Choosing words that are part of students' daily vocabulary would be an added bonus.
- Sentence formation: This should be done using simple tense forms.
- Speaking: Group activities where students have a chance to articulate should be encouraged. Instructors may make use of the L1, but more as a scaffolding tool than as a medium of instruction. Text books should be so designed as to incorporate a lot of exercises that can be done in class or at home, both individually and as a group. It has been amply proven by now that the most effective pedagogy for teaching any language is not through lectures, but through actual practice by the learner.

Year II: Here, the focus could be:

- Word Formation: Using the same logic taught in the year before, students will be expected to form words with upto 5-7 letters.
- Simple Homonyms: These could be introduced to bring in more variety to students' vocabulary without having to learn new words.
- Simple phrases: Some phrases could be introduced using the homonyms taught. This will also serve to add variety.
- Sentence formation: This should be done with simple tense forms, as well as some advanced forms like interrogative sentences and negative sentences.
- Activities: In this year too, the most crucial part will be oral and written activities based on the contents of the syllabus.
- Articulation: Apart from activities based on the syllabus, it will also be necessary to introduce activities like Show and Tell, Group Discussions and Mock Conversations. This will give an impetus to articulation which is vital to improving employability.

Year III: In the final year, the focus should be more on articulation. Other areas of focus could be

- Grammar: While it is necessary to limit the teaching of grammar so as not to overwhelm students, some constructions that are part daily conversation (like conjugation, passive voice, articles, prepositions) should be taught. These will already have been introduced informally; this would be the time to explain how to correctly formulate them.
- Composition: Writing a paragraph or two on a unified theme.
- Creative Writing: These can be short stories, or even anecdotal writing.
- Activities: In the last year, there should be great emphasis on spoken English. After all, it is this aspect that will be put to the biggest test when trying to find employment. With these measures, it is expected that students passing their undergraduate examination in Arts or Commerce will be at least as proficient as students of Std. IV from English medium schools. This can then serve as a base on which to build, and it can be done by students on their own.

LIMITATIONS:

It may be argued that such a curriculum will be extremely easy for students with an English medium background. Not only will it be a walkover for them, it will also be boring. It will have the added drawback of not offering them anything new in English during these three years. This can be addressed by allowing only those students who have passed English within 10% of the passing percentage at HSSC level to opt for this proposed course. It should not be made available to students who passed with a higher percentage. It can also be argued that such a distinction will leave graduate students with different levels of proficiency. The playing field will not be level as students from English medium backgrounds will still be ahead. The counterpoint is that the present curriculum is not helping students attain any level of proficiency at all. It is better to at least create a base for them on which they can work in years to come even if they quit formal education. As things stand, they have no idea where to begin.

CONCLUSION:

With an increasing number of jobs requiring spoken English skills, it is vital that this need is addressed. Unfortunately, with a large number of students reaching the UG level without a sound grounding in the language, it becomes necessary to start with the very basics. As of now, a bookish approach in which the assumption that a certain number of schooling years must translate into a reasonable grasp over English is being taken. This mindset needs to be scrapped, and sweeping changes need to be made to the curriculum in order to improve conversational English skills and thus enhance employability. The present paper is an attempt to suggest one of the ways this could be done.

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