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A Critical Perspective on the Business English Curriculum for Management Students in Professional Colleges of A.P

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Abstract:

In the age of information explosion, it has become essential to keep abreast of latest developments and trends in the field of science, engineering and technology for successful career. However, proficiency in English language to acquire effective communication skills on the international scenario has become immediate need for professional students in day-to-day life. The present paper is aimed at analyzing the situation of the current curriculum of MBA in A.P state universities, identifying the existing problems such as mismatch between objectives and outcomes, competence and performance, incoherence between theory and lab components and lack of synchronization between teaching and testing. . Further, it provides an outline of practical steps involved in designing a curriculum and suggestions for relevance to promote a critical and creative thinking among learners of higher technical education.

Keywords: communication skills, curriculum evaluation, competence and performance, teaching and testing

Introduction

The well known fact is that India is a multilingual country where the interchange of ideas and views are regularly taking place across the world, and it underscores the importance of communication skills. In this current commercial generation the need of communication skills has been increased, and more so particularly to professionals who are in the field of business. In the process of updating knowledge in desired field, professional course students must concentrate on effective communication skills. The responsibility to equip them with the required/desired skills is in the hands of English course designers. The syllabus prescribed for management courses have gained utmost significance today. Hence the course materials should grab the attentions of teachers, students, and researchers as it supposed to make the learners fluent and proficient in using language. The skills and techniques they learned/acquired from institutions are the only hope for their rest of working life. And it is strongly felt that the course materials provide some basic grounding in all aspects of communication. The same English language course materials in professional colleges play a vital role in improving one's communication skills and chances of getting success in the present job market.

Objectives of Prescribing Specific Curriculum

The below mentioned implicit and explicit objectives (both theory and lab components) of English for management courses from various universities are tentatively listed in descending order of importance.

- The objective of the course is to help the students to acquire the basics of interpersonal communication, corporate communication and soft skills, so as to improve their communication skills and ability to understand others along with the personality development, body language, social etiquette, as per the requirement of the corporate

world. Simultaneously to make them aware of written communication in letter writing and report writing”

- To develop in the students the critical ability to judge the texts prescribed dispassionately.
- To prepare the students for higher courses in their respective disciplines.
- To inculcate certain “moral” and “ethical” values in the students.
- To develop in the students the ability to communicate their ideas cogently and effectively.
- To develop in the students “Oral Communicative Skills and Soft Skills.”
- To stimulate in the students a “desire” to read even beyond the prescribed texts.
- To prepare the students for the needs of a job and building up a career.
- To develop in the students a taste for “Business English.”

(Source: syllabus copies of various universities in A.P)

The above stated objectives are operational only through the three major components of the course i.e. syllabus, methods and evaluation.

Syllabus:

The following are the précised list of contents regarding both the theory and the laboratory.

- General Communication Skills (paragraph writing, essay writing, etc...)
- Technical Communication Skills (report writing, technical words, etc...)
- Vocabulary and Basic Language Skills
- Listening skills
- Speaking skills
- Reading skills
- Writing skills

The gap between the objectives and syllabus: General Observations

The vital focus of the paper is on critiquing the gap between objectives of teaching/learning English at professional level and the syllabus/course materials prescribed. The incompatibility of different objectives is present both at root and organizational level. The curriculum design should invariably address the following concerns with a holistic approach.

1. English is a common subject for all disciplines in management courses. It is clearly evident that most of the students expect their English course materials to improve their communication, but directly or indirectly the course seems to do little. It indicates that the syllabus and the evaluation patterns in English, as offered by the different universities, does not consider even the primary objective of the professional students studying English at P.G level. It should be examined the aspect of the relevance of the syllabus in the wake of current and practical needs is worth examining.
2. Little compatibility can be observed between the objectives of the students and those of the teachers. Though most learners hope that the course would somehow improve their communicative skills and level of confidence in using language, but the routine and traditional teaching pattern by most of the language teachers in professional institutes which is centered on the teacher’ responsibility of covering the syllabus rather on the students’ desire of getting command in proficiency.

3. It seems there is no balance between teacher objectives and learner outcomes. While the main focus of the students is to improve their communicative skills in the course, but eventually they give importance to getting through the examination. The primary objective of learning language sidelines with the temporary objective of passing in end examination. So there is a huge gap between the proposed objectives and achieved outcomes.
4. Admissions to management courses are only through a common entrance examination irrespective of their medium of instruction in the previous courses. As a result, the diverse academic backgrounds of the students are not so particular by the course. So the entry level of the learners, which varies, is not paid any attention.
5. Students do not get an opportunity to learn from their mistakes as there is no continuous and formative evaluation. Throughout the two year programme, they take only one examination in the end of the first semester. The major purpose of this examination is only to promote them to next level. There is no chance of getting feedback about the programme. They are not given an opportunity to verify their errors in their presentation.

Teaching Methodology

Imparting prescribed curriculum is also a challenging task before the teachers of management. It is observed that teachers confront the problems in dealing with business English communication subjects in A.P universities due to excess of private /aided colleges. In addition to teaching/learning there are quite a few problems as barriers to the growth of both an individual and institution.

Difficulties in dealing with English for specific purpose:

It is experienced that, teaching English for professional students of A.P is really a challenging task for teachers who would experience a hard time. Basically students are from various vernacular mediums and disciplines, though English was studied as a second language subject in their previous courses, business English is like an alien territory to them. At such stage of teaching/learning, though the objectives are suggesting implementation of learner-centered style of teaching, the circumstances in most of the institutions are not cooperative to give liberty to students in language classroom. Every teacher has his own set of constraints within the institution (i.e lack of faculty, payments, sources, infrastructure, etc). These problems are in fact decades old, according to the senior and retired English teachers. And another well known acceptable fact is the technical universities of both government/private of A.P are not only neglecting English language but English teachers too. So it makes the language teacher to feel great depression in all the time and sometimes guilty among all. It is also said that department of English is viewed as a service team who can help all the other departments in their academic and personal works.

The primary objective of a post-graduate business student is to acquire good groundings in the principles of business, finance, and marketing with sound knowledge in communication for better growth in business environment. With the above noted conditions there is no scope to satisfy the objectives of any course, especially English for business (MBA) purposes. Further methodology of teaching in delivering materials varies from teacher to teacher. The topics in the curriculum, especially for management studies, for instance technical communication skills, basic language skills, technical vocabulary etc, are not known to most of the teachers as they are not familiar with it. Abuse of a prescribed text is also a major disadvantage to a cross section of

teachers who lack the patience to consult different sources. Due to this unfamiliarity, lack of orientation and patience the teachers find it both boring and difficult to deal such topics. And the last major thing is, for management course, the title and contents deal more with management concepts than communication skills. The teachers from different departments are frequently dealing with these topics even though no teacher is trained / exposed to technical English. So, English teachers have fewer roles to play in such teaching process. The another problem from learners side is, most of the Indian English users, since beginning they are habituated to use formal bookish English which is more often obsolete and sounds unnatural. This is because they learn English through books rather than practicing it in real life situations.

To some extent, for young teachers, the intensive orientation is desperately needed to deal with such topics. Considering the above factors it is evident that teachers dealing with English for specific/business purposes in professional colleges should have knowledge in ICT (Information Communication Technology) techniques and must be up- to -date with the latest trends in teaching English.

Course materials:

In today's fast-based business-oriented world, communication is probably most crucial skill. "English Language and Communication Skills" and "Business English Communication Skills" the course titles majorly cover the four basic skills i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing which provide ample scope for both teachers and learners. And related to business English the material covers the topics like technical vocabulary, report writing, letter writing, face to face communication, business writing, inter and intra communication etc.,. The extensive list of reference books has been given to provide right sense of direction to the students with in the short period.

But the course materials fail in giving proper direction in certain crucial areas such as remedial grammar, Letter Writing, Essay Writing, Synonyms-Antonyms, One-Word Substitutions, Prefixes and Suffixes, Idioms and Phrases, words often confused, common errors in English. In the case of business English communication, time factor plays the major role as it has to cover in a semester. It is also observed that the time-constraint is heavy to cover all the topics. As a result the practice for language aspects gets neglected. Finally it is identified that the extensive topics prescribed and the time allocated does not match each other.

English Language and Communication Skills Laboratory

To meet the objectives prescribed in the syllabus, ELCS Lab has been introduced in some of the universities for P.G courses. The lab syllabus includes a large portion of phonetics, up to syllabic division leading to intonation. It also covers the concepts related to task-oriented activities such as role-play, telephone English, presentations, descriptions etc., to improve listening and speaking skills of the students in the lab. But, practically speaking, Listening, in this case has become one-way communication. It totally depends on the software used by those particular colleges. Speaking- the skill which should be imparted in three levels i.e. sound level, word level and discourse level. In this case the introduction to the sounds has more useful and proved to be good enough, but the next levels i.e. vocabulary and sentence construction do not drag the attention of learners.

Evaluation Patterns:

Evaluation plays a major role in deciding what the learners learn and what the teachers teach in colleges. But it is observed that the evaluation patterns in A.P universities are not comprehensive. There is no chance to the students to focus on learning English as a language. For instance, the language aspects such as Reading and Listening are prescribed in the syllabus but they are not in the position of being practicable. Speaking skill, though there are many activities on speaking but it does not find a place in evaluation either in the internal or in the external examination. So it makes the teachers to neglect a very important component for one's career. And finally the main focus is laid on writing skill where there is no need of using creativity, simply reproducing from the materials provided in the text. Writing skill is also being neglected in some universities as evaluation part denying the grammar part to be a compulsory item for testing. So students do not pay attention to learn grammar and leave it for choice in the end exam.

Even in the laboratory (ELCS LAB) the evaluation pattern is not impressive. For example the marks allotted to the activities done by students in the end examinations for ELCS Lab, are hundred. But it is heard that the favoritism and recommendations are playing important role in getting good marks as there is no external evaluation (examiner) for end examinations. It is a student's response about his college. Hence the course designers should take initiation and assign equal distribution of questions for subjective and objective assessment. It would be better to mention about maximum marks, duration of the examination, importance of all exercises (skills), etc., in the model question paper itself. In order to make learning process sincere, some serious and immediate steps have to be taken by the concerned universities.

Basic principles involved in designing curriculum:

According to *Stenhouse: 1975*, A curriculum is “an attempt to communicate the essential features and principles of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice.”

In higher professional education, curriculum is a set of courses, course work and content offered at an educational establishment. It will also describe the teaching, learning, and assessment materials available for each particular course of study. It should develop systematically using classic principles of instructional design. It is a collective work ensuring communication among management, designers, editors, production coordinators etc. The following are a few key principles in designing an interest-centred curriculum to promote critical and creative thinking. So, the curriculum has to

1. **Be challenging and enjoyable:** at higher levels, learning should be challenging, engaging and motivating. Learners must be active in their learning process and find opportunities to improve their creativity. A curriculum should support to enable them to sustain their efforts.
2. **Promote critical thinking:** a curriculum should always be understandable and supporting to the learners thinking ability. Many frameworks are being failed to implement in every day classrooms due to its complicity in terminology and not understood by the teachers. Hence, it must be broad and make the learner to think in a variety of contexts within the both classroom and other aspects of college life.
3. **Maintain sequence:** a model curriculum should maintain learner's learning activities with coherence. It must build on learner's previous experiences and move to broader, deeper and more complex understanding and. The common ways to sequencing content

with in course is simple to complex, whole to parts or parts to whole, prerequisite abilities, and chronological.

4. **Give scope for patronization and choice:** major emphasis should be placed on the personalized and creative activities that teachers can adopt according to the learner's different learning styles. The curriculum must satisfy the individual aptitudes and interests. It should give increasing opportunities for exercising personal choice as they move through their college career. Proficiency growth is not expectable while learning through routine ways such as repetition, substitution, transformation and expansion.
5. **Provide authentic assessment items:** Assessment is basically important to assess what and how students learn. As Ramsden (1992) stresses: "*From our student's point of view, assessment always defines the actual curriculum... Assessment sends messages about the standard and amount of work required, and what aspects of the syllabus are most important.* (pp. 187–8)". Assessment always defines the actual curriculum. And a fruitful curriculum must give strong emphasis to the assessment. A variety of methods (multiple choice questions, performance test, case studies, projects etc...) should be included to assess the learners' abilities effectively. The authentic assessment items will give proper direction to the both learners and teachers in learning/teaching process.

Suggestions and Recommendations:

In view of the above analysis, it can be suggested that it is high time that the English language syllabus for professional courses in A.P has to be revised and restructured. From the learner's point of view, it is evident that they need to be made conscious of the Technical English as well as Global English. It means the Basic English Skills should impart even before attaining the professional courses. To some extent, this problem can be solved by including English language as one of the subjects in common entrance exams such as EAMCET/ICET/IEEE etc. And the problem of using bookish English by the Indian students can be solved by making the English courses more realistic and less literature-oriented. Such circumstances show the need of communication skills right from the primary level. From the above analysis, it is possible to give the following recommendations to the students/teachers at professional level in A.P. They are...

1. The students need to learn Basic English Skills along with Technical English.
2. They should learn Technical English according to Global Context.
3. Course developers must bring correlation between the learners' needs and the syllabus.
4. In view of the present circumstances, there is need to change the syllabus and teaching methodology.
5. Need to improve the standards of English language
6. It is need to reform the language acquisition approaches and testing methods.

Conclusion

In the light of the above critical observations, it can be concluded that it is necessary to understand the importance of curriculum by the decision makers, teachers and students. A model language curriculum must blend with the traditional and advanced /innovative concepts such as grammatical, skill-based, task-based, etc. Every learner should get a real benefit from the great amount of time he spends in and out of the classroom in pursuit of a course. Finally, like all other aspects of curriculum development, curriculum evaluation has a strong effect on the success of its implementation. And the success of a course lies in the successful implementation of the curriculum.

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