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**From Theory to Praxis -
A Study of the Syllabus of *Communication Skills and
Technical Seminar I (GE 1202)* Anna University of Technology,
Tirunelveli)**

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Current Preference for Technical Majors

Education has entered new avenues in this century. Even though every discipline has its own merits, technical education has gained a little bit more importance than other branches of higher education. Throughout the world, students prefer technical branches to other courses. In growing countries such as India, both the students and the parents rush towards technical education believing that employment and career opportunities are bright for engineering graduates. Due to this reason even students who are selected for medical college enrollment prefer to matriculate themselves in engineering colleges.

Ever Increasing Number of Engineering Colleges in South India

The southern States of India have more number of engineering colleges and technical institutions when compared to other parts of India. According to All India Council for Technical Education, this distribution is uneven.

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Students do not find it difficult to secure admission to an engineering college. Abolition of entrance examination and introduction of supplementary examination have further eased the situation.

Tamil Nadu has more than four hundred institutions which offer technical courses at the under-graduate level. Apart from a few private/deemed Universities, all engineering colleges are regulated by Anna University. The University was re-structured in 2007 into separate institutions in-charge of Chennai, Coimbatore, Tiruchi, Madurai and Tirunelveli regions. This arrangement may not continue for long as the newly elected government in Tamilnadu has indicated that this arrangement will be changed soon.

Are Jobs Easy to Secure?

In spite of all the above factors, the question which haunts the mind of educationalists is whether technical education has been faithful in improving the living standards of our people? Unlike basic education, the mere award of a B.E. / B.Tech. Degree would not improve the situation. The discipline, being a part of professional education, should ensure availability of suitable jobs and thereby secure a justifiable income to the engineering graduates. This is where the problem comes in.

It is evident that the percentage of students who get employed is much lower than the percentage of students who pass out of engineering colleges every year. Even though in some urban institutions, the bright students are offered handsome salary in the process of campus interview by Multinational Companies, the fate of rural students is not that bright. Agencies such as NASSCOM and Human Resource Development Ministry have done extensive research on this and have come out with various reasons responsible for this huge gap.

Gap between Syllabus and Industry Needs

Two important reasons among them are the difference between the syllabus and industry and the lack of soft skills. Among the above mentioned problems, first one can be easily solved. Students can be introduced to new technical skills in accordance to the needs of the industry through summer internships or brief finishing school training. But soft skill is something different. The students cannot acquire this in very short span of time. Only sharpening of soft skills is possible through crash courses. Students from rural background and students who are first generation learners find it very difficult to cope up with the soft skills standards of their prospective employers.

Bridging the Gap by Providing English Communication Skills

In this situation, Anna University, Tirunelveli has introduced a new paper named, GE1202-Communication Skills and Technical Seminar I. At this point, we should remember that the engineering colleges in Anna University, Tirunelveli receive students mostly from rural

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areas. Hence there is no doubt that the introduction of this paper would surely be an essential step taken by the authorities to ensure employment to all the students from these colleges or at least to improve the employability level.

The Focus of This Research Paper

The objective of this research paper is to study and evaluate the syllabus of above mentioned GE1202-Communication Skills and Technical Seminar I. This study is not based on any field data collection. It is a critical analysis and evaluation of the syllabus as the syllabus is presented to all of us. A sincere attempt is made to study the syllabus, taking information from the syllabus itself.

Elements of a Well Organized Syllabus

Michael P. Breen defines syllabus “as a plan of what is to be achieved through teaching and learning” (151). Breen adds that the four important aspects of the syllabus are aims, content, methodology and evaluation. He points out:

The syllabus identifies what will be worked upon by the teacher and students in terms of content selected to be appropriate in overall aims. Methodology refers to how teachers and learners work upon the content while evaluation is a process of accessing outcomes from the learning and judging appropriateness of other elements of the curriculum (51).

This being an analytical paper, I try to analyze the aims, contents, teaching methodology and the evaluation system provided in the syllabus.

The Syllabus of General English GE1202-Communication Skills and Technical Seminar I

This course, Communication Skills and Technical Seminar I (GE 1202), is for all the third semester students irrespective of their branches. Totally 37 hours are allotted for this course. It is supposed to be conducted by the Department of English for 3 hours per week.

The syllabus states that its objectives are:

- To improve the learners’ oral fluency in English
- To help the learners acquire the readiness to speak in English
- To develop the sub-skills required for paper presentations and group discussions
- To help the learners improve their vocabulary related to specific fields of technology
- To facilitate the development of the learners’ proficiency in meaningful interaction
- To provide them linguistic support for managing vital sub-functions of communication (www.annauni.edu.in, further references to the syllabus are from the same source).

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Item A: Preoccupation with Transcription and Symbols

The first unit of the syllabus recommends the teaching of diphthongs and phonetics in general. While teaching phonetics, it is essential to teach phonetic symbols to the students. A problem arises here. The syllabus does not specify whether to teach IPA symbols or use a broad transcription method. For example, the word ‘hideout’ can be transcribed broadly as /haIdaVt/ or with the help of IPA symbols as /haidaut/. Teaching of IPA symbols would be an additional burden to both the teachers and students. In spite of the fact that the speech sounds can be effectively taught only with the IPA symbols, studying dozens of phonetic symbols would not be an easy task for the students. Considering the fact that they are not going to enter English language teaching, teaching of IPA symbols would be unnecessary. Further the students would try to polish their pronunciation only after getting familiar with the symbols. Hence there is little chance for them to seek the assistance of dictionary in near future.

Further only seven hours are allotted to teach phonemes and stress patterns. Hence it can be concluded that broad transcription is more than enough while teaching the speech sounds.

Item B: Speech Practice

The next part of the syllabus is speech practice. Twenty topics, ranging from Cloning to Gas Turbines, are listed in the syllabus. Eight hours are allotted for this part. As for the procedure for teaching, the syllabus says that, “Every student should be allowed to choose one theme to specialize in” (www.annauni.edu.in). Time allotted for each student is five minutes. Assuming that a class contains sixty students which is less than the maximum strength, one student would get only eight minutes for this topic as the total allotted time is only 480 minutes (8 hrs). Within eight minutes, a student should present the paper (for 5 minutes), his classmates should ask him or her questions and the students should note down new words. This does not seem to be possible. Furthermore, in the above mentioned, eight minutes, the time utilized by the teacher for introducing the concept and explaining it, giving feedback, etc., is not included. Hence there is little chance that all the students would get time to speak.

Item C

Item (C) in the syllabus is ‘group quiz on technical aspects related to the themes’. The time allotted is four hours. There are twenty themes. Logically there should be twenty groups. Each group will get only twelve minutes as the total allotted time is only 240 minutes (4 hours). Hence this part of the syllabus has time constraints.

Item D

Item (D) of the syllabus is ‘Language functions’ which is supposed to teach the skills required for seminar presentation. It includes activities such as “comparing and contrast”, reporting the conversation, defending the point of view, etc. No doubt this part would help the

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students to perform well in the Seminar presentation. But once again the time constraint mars the attempt. Only eight hours are assigned to teach the thirteen language functions. As a result of this the teacher would be unable to reinforce the skills.

Item E

Item (E) is a seminar presentation where each student should present a paper for ten minutes. The topics should be selected from the list provided earlier. After the presentation there should be an open house discussion, according to the syllabus. Totally eighteen hours (1080 minutes) are allotted for this important activity. In a class of sixty students, a student would get only eighteen minutes. Within these eighteen minutes, ten minutes would go for the presentation. The open house discussion and the teacher's feedback or remark should be finished within the remaining eight minutes. This will be possible only if the entire exercise is done in a mechanical way. Further asking the students to prepare a record would lead only to another mundane function. Few students would make use of library or other resources in the expected manner as their primary objective will be to finish the record work.

Problems with the Evaluation System

The mode of evaluation puzzles any teacher. The evaluation is shared by internal and external examiners. The internal examiner can award twenty marks altogether (ten marks for the record and ten marks for the presentation). The job of awarding the remaining eighty marks is entrusted in the hands of the external examiner. The external practical consists of four segments.

- 1) Pronouncing sentences containing target words.
- 2) Deploying linguistic elements for language function.
- 3) Speaking on the hints
- 4) A conversation with examiner on the special theme as worked out in the Record.

Till this point the researcher has been calculating time allotted for a student in each exercise. However in the mode of evaluation the syllabus itself says that the time taken for evaluating a student should be approximately seven minutes. An individual is forced to test all the above mentioned skills within seven or eight minutes. He/She has to award marks against eighty within eight minutes. In such a case evaluation would be difficult to get done. If the external examiners are either blessed with extraordinary powers or assisted by some sort of super computer, some real evaluation may become a possibility. Otherwise the entire evaluation would be a mockery. It would lack the standards such as reliability, consistency, etc.

Factors to Consider while Designing TESOL Syllabus

Nageswara Rao says that the following six factors should be taken into consideration while designing a TESOL syllabus. They are:

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- i) The level of proficiency of the student at entry point
- ii) The purpose for which they need English.
- iii) The skills which they wish to learn or improve
- iv) The level of proficiency expected or desired at the end of the course.
- v) The available materials, administrative and man power resources and
- vi) the duration of the course (53)

The designers of GE 1202 have ignored certain factors such as purpose, level of proficiency and availability of materials mentioned in Rao's list. This negligence has led to the shortcomings discussed earlier in the paper.

Soft Skills Acquisition or Acquisition of English Skills – What is the Role of Majors?

The attempt to construct a syllabus to enhance soft skills should be lauded. However one cannot be restrained from concluding that it carries serious defects. To begin with the sole purpose of the syllabus seems to convert English classes into a panacea for improving soft skills. It is not a desirable goal. A bulk of the responsibility should be shared with the parent departments. For example, the parent departments or major departments could conduct the seminars and technical quizzes. Thus the time constraint would be broken. Similarly encouraging the students to take part in co-curricular and extracurricular activities would improve their leadership skills and communicative competence. This move would save lecture hours too. Let not language skills be treated an island, especially an island with no contact with or usefulness for the major subjects. Success with language skills should be seen as helping steps to succeed in mastering the major subjects.

No texts are prescribed in the syllabus. Unit D of the syllabus directs the lecturers to build 'micro-activities'. But no micro activity manual is prescribed. As a result there would be variation in the class room activities from one institution to another.

Some Suggestions

Finally, the evaluation system should be revamped. Only then the course would be effective. The evaluation system should be remodeled in the light of International English Language Tests such as IELTS. Otherwise the gap between theory and praxis cannot be bridged

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