

The Effect of Culture-Specific Syllabus on English Language Learners in Engineering Colleges

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Abstract

Developing English language skills is one of the major challenges of the engineering students in the state of Telangana. The state produces lakhs of engineers every year but not even 10% of them are found to be employable, especially due to lack of effective communication skills, according to leading industrialists. This speaks a lot about the sad and tragic situation. One of the major targets of the engineering English syllabus is to make the students well-equipped with all the four skills of language - listening, speaking, reading and writing. But the big question is: are the students really getting equipped with all the four language skills? This paper attempts to study the effect of culture-specific syllabus in improving the English language skills of the engineering students in the state of Telangana. This study is based on the responses of the sample of engineering students to a structured questionnaire on the culture-specific syllabus.

Keywords: culture-specific syllabus, language skills, structured questionnaire, engineering students

Introduction

The key component of culture is language. It is the prime source for the transmission of culture. Children who learn their mother tongue or native language will be learning their own culture also simultaneously. Hence, it can be said that there is a direct connection between learning a language and its culture. (Guest, M. 2002). Culture acts as a catalyst in learning a language. But, how can a learner who wants to learn a different language other than his/her own mother tongue develop an understanding about the culture of that language? Is it not possible to learn the English language without the knowledge of the English culture? Is it possible to create

awareness of the English culture in the non-native-English countries? (Richards, J.C. 2001). In the state of Telangana there are many regions where people are not aware of the English culture. Is there no possibility of learning English for those people who come from the remote regions of Telangana? These are some of the critical questions the present paper tries to examine in the context of learning English as a second language through local culture.

Cultural Influences on Learning and Teaching

Linda Harklau in her article “Representing culture in the ESL writing classroom” states that teaching of cultural values in second language teaching is unavoidable as “Language is inextricably bound up with culture. Cultural values are both reflected by and carried through language. It is perhaps inevitable then, that representation of culture implicitly and explicitly enters into second language teaching.”

The lack of knowledge of English contributes to the low scholastic achievement of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. It becomes all the tougher for a learner if he/she has to entirely study through the medium of English.

The social conditions, as well as economic deprivation do interfere with the second language learning. There are other aspects like education of parents, lack of books at home, cultural factors which influence the second language learning.

Pennycook, A. (1994) points out that the attitudes and motivation of learners to a different culture affect the teaching-learning process. Generally, the attitudes and expectations of one cultural group differ from another cultural group. This is one of the major concerns in developing the English language skills among the engineering students of the state of Telangana.

Aim of the Study

The present study aims at finding out whether culturally relevant materials facilitate better performance in English among the engineering students of the state of Telangana.

Methodology

This is an empirical study where opinions of 300 first year engineering students, randomly selected from different Engineering colleges affiliated to JNTU in the state of Telangana are elicited through a structured questionnaire. The questions in the questionnaire are aimed at finding out the attitudes of the students towards a culture-specific English syllabus.

Data Analyses

The following are the analyses of the data obtained through the structured questionnaire:

1. Do you use English outside the classroom? Yes / no

This question was asked to find out the information from the sample learners whether they really use the English language outside the classroom. Of the 300 sample learners 61.3% said that they use English outside the classroom and 38.7% said that they do not use English outside the classroom. These responses show that the English language is necessarily not part of their regular conversations outside the classroom.

2. Why do you need English? You can check off more than one option.
 - a. For pursuing higher studies
 - b. To secure a job
 - c. To have a good social status
 - d. To be internationally intelligible
 - e. Any other, please mention:

The sample learners were asked this question to understand the kind of motivation they have in learning the English language. The responses of the sample learners clearly indicate that they are driven by instrumental motivation. 47.6% of the sample learners wanted to learn English to pursue higher studies, 44% wanted to learn English to secure a good job, 55% of the learners required English to have a good social status. Only 17% stated that they need the language to expand their knowledge. Since English is the international language, vast amount of information is available in print and electronic media. Students can make use of their knowledge in English to expand their knowledge in different areas. This kind of integrated motivation is lacking among the student community. Most of the time, they are driven by instrumental motivation.

3. Do your parents encourage you to learn English?
 - a. Yes, they do encourage
 - b. To some extent
 - c. Neither encourage nor discourage
 - d. No, they don't encourage

This question was asked to know whether the sample learners' parents really encourage them to learn English or they have any apprehensions about this language. Out of the 300 learners who participated in data collection, 91.3% said that they have the support and encouragement from their parents, whereas 4.6% said that they get support only to some extent. 5% of the sample learners were neither encouraged nor discouraged by their parents to learn English. These responses gave us the understanding that the illiterate or semi-literate parents also want their children to develop the English language skills for better placements. Though English education is available at prohibitive costs, most of the parents are willing to spend for the better prospects for their children.

4. Do you watch any native English channels on TV? Yes/no

This question was asked to know whether they follow the English culture when they watch any native English channels on TV. A majority of the sample learners stated that they watch only Telugu channels since they cannot follow the language of the English programmes in the native English channels. This clearly shows that the sample learners are not interested in knowing about the language or its culture.

5. How much are you aware of the English culture?
 - a. Very much
 - b. To some extent
 - c. Not much

A majority of the students expressed that they are not aware of the English culture. It can be noted from the previous question that a majority of the sample learners did not show any

interest in watching native English channels. This clearly shows that the sample learners are not interested in knowing about the English culture. Other than watching movies or TV, no non-native speaker of English can develop an understanding of English culture and traditions, provided they have any native English speakers as close friends or neighbours. There is very less possibility of having native English speakers as neighbours in the state of Telangana, especially in the remote regions. Hence, there is no scope of knowing about the English culture. Another possibility might be developing understanding through the English literature. But most of the students who come from rural regions do not go deep into the cultural aspects as they find it alien to them.

6. Do you think awareness of the English culture is necessary to learn the English language? Yes / no / to some extent

This question was asked to elicit the responses of the students with regard to the English culture. A majority of the students felt that it is not necessary to know about the English culture in order to learn the English language. Language can be learnt in a different social context too.

7. Do you like the English culture?
- a. Very much
 - b. To some extent
 - c. Not very much
 - d. Don't like

This question was asked to analyse the sample learners' attitude towards the English culture. The responses show that not many sample learners are enthusiastic about the English culture. Only 28.3% of the sample learners expressed that they have a high regard for the English culture, 47.6% of the sample learners said that they like the English culture only to some extent. 16.6% of the sample learners said they don't like the English culture very much. 4.6% of the sample learners said that they don't like the English culture at all.

These responses indicate that positive attitude towards a particular culture is also very important in learning the language. If the learners do not have a good impression of the culture of that language, it acts like a mental block in developing that language.

8. Do you participate actively in speaking activities like, JAM (Just A Minute), Group Discussion, Debate etc., in your English classroom?
 - a. Very often
 - b. Some times
 - c. Rarely

This question was asked to know whether the sample learners are fluent speakers of English or they have any inhibitions toward speaking in English. JAM, Group Discussion, Debate etc., are activities prescribed as part of the English language communication skills lab syllabus of JNTU. Of the 300 sample learners 57.6% expressed that they participate in these activities ‘very often’, 44% said that they participate ‘sometimes’, even that when they are forced by their teacher to speak or because it was part of the lab syllabus, and 12.3% said that they never participated in any activities like JAM, Debate or Group Discussion.

It can be analysed from these responses that more than 50% of the students are not in a position to speak because of fear or lack of English knowledge. May be culture-related topics would increase the participation levels of these students.

9. Do you like your culture?
 - a. Very much
 - b. To some extent
 - c. Not very much
 - d. Don't like

This question was asked to know how much the sample learners like their own culture. The question was asked because the topic of the research was to include culture-specific syllabus at the engineering level.

The responses showed that a majority of the sample learners, that is, 79.6% like their own culture, which means that they have a positive attitude towards their own culture, 19.6% of the sample learners like their culture only to some extent, 0.6% of the learners are not keen about culture and surprisingly 0.3% said that they do not like their culture at all. Since a majority of the sample learners have a great regard for their own culture, speaking activities related to their culture might help them in improving their English language skills. It can be viewed from these responses that culture-specific syllabus will help students in improving their English language skills.

10. Which of the following topics, related to your culture, would you like to be included in your English textbook?
- a. Folk literature of your state
 - b. Famous personalities from your state
 - c. Festivals which are unique to your state
 - d. Any other, please mention:

This question was asked to know the choice of topics that the learners would like to be included in their English textbook. 25.6% of the sample learners expressed folk literature of the state to be included in the English syllabus, 56.6% of the learners wanted the famous personalities of the state to be part of the English syllabus, while 39.6% of the learners opted for the festivals which are unique to the state, whereas 15% of the sample learners wanted ethics, values, spirituality aspects to be included in the English syllabus.

These responses clearly indicate that the sample learners are more inclined towards including the topics related to their culture in the English textbook since they can relate the contents of their culture and they can express freely during speaking activities as the known content would be the topic of the discussion.

Findings

The following are the findings of the study:

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- ➔ A majority of the sample learners do not use English outside the classroom. It is more or less artificial learning process.
- ➔ A majority of the sample learners are driven by instrumental motivation. They want to study the English language mainly for seeking a good job or for pursuing higher studies but not for expanding their knowledge.
- ➔ A majority of the sample learners stated that they have their parents support and encouragement towards learning English. With the growing importance of the English language many parents are coming forward and supporting their children to study in English medium, though it is difficult for them to bear the fee burden.
- ➔ A majority of the sample learners stated that they do not watch native English channels on TV since they do not follow the language. This shows the reluctance of the sample learners towards making an attempt to learn English.
- ➔ A majority of the sample learners expressed that they are not aware of the English culture.
- ➔ The sample learners were of the opinion that it is not necessary to know about the English culture in order to learn the English language. They felt that the language can be learnt in different social settings also.
- ➔ A majority of the sample learners expressed that they have no liking towards the English culture. This can be viewed as a mental block in developing the English language.
- ➔ Most of the sample learners have not shown active participation levels in speaking activities. Poor confidence levels or lack of English language skills might be the reason for low participation levels.
- ➔ A majority of the sample learners expressed liking towards their culture. Teachers can develop culture-specific activities to improve the English language skills of the students.
- ➔ A majority of the sample learners expressed that famous personalities of the state, or the major festivals of the state, or the folk literature of the state can be included in the English syllabus. This gives them a chance to make an attempt in improving the English language skills since they can relate the content of the text.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the study that culture-specific syllabus in English would be helpful for students to improve their English language skills. Since many students confessed that they do not watch native English channels or follow the English culture, it is time to think about the culture-specific syllabus. It is debatable which kind of festivals, or folk literature should be included in the syllabus, given the multicultural context of the state of Telangana. But contents related to one's own culture would definitely have a positive impact on the learning of English.

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