

General English Syllabus: A Context Based Literature Course
(Needs Reforms for Learners' Present and Future Pursuits)

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Abstract

Syllabus is a document which directs teachers and guides the students. It gives a specification of the aims and objectives of the instructional programmes, the content, language skills and functions to be covered, the classroom procedures and processes, the theory underlying these procedures, and mode of assessment. The data for the present paper collected through students' and teachers' questionnaires which are designed to understand the needs of the students and expectations of teachers for teaching and learning of the English language and also to find out the perceptions of the undergraduate students and English teachers towards the General English syllabus prescribed by the University of Jammu. Majority of the students and English teachers are in favour of a complete change in the existing General English syllabus as it does not fulfill the aims and objectives of teaching English as a second or foreign language. Students have shown their dissatisfaction in improving the language skills. Therefore, there is an urgent need to look into the existing General English syllabus and make a shift from the traditional and outdated pattern of teaching of English into a newer and updated one.

This paper addresses the need to reform General English syllabus at undergraduate level in the University of Jammu with special reference to the importance of the English language teaching. A brief forecast of problems and issues in the teaching of the English language at undergraduate level and recommendations will conclude this paper.

Key Words: Functional Syllabus Design, Language Skills, Problems in Teaching of English, Reforms, Modification and expected Outcome

Introduction

Today, English Language Teaching has been considered a tool of profit making industry in the world. With the information technology revolution and most software and operating systems being developed in the English language, a new utility for written and oral communication in the English language has emerged. The English language has been regarded a world language. A very important reason for regarding English as a world language is that the world's knowledge is enshrined in it. It is a progressive language. It is dynamic and flexible. Over and above English is universally renowned for its power of expression and its rich literature. We are living in a world which is well inter-linked. English being the most popular language, is the best medium to communicate. We have to be aware of all the world events.

English language teaching is a hot topic in India these days. It has a status of associate language, but in fact it is the most important language of India. After Hindi it is the most commonly spoken language in India and probably the most read and written language in India. English in India used not only for communicating with the outside world, but also for inter state and intra state communication. As Pattanyak states:

“India has retained English as a window to wider knowledge, a tool of international understanding and has the language of internal status, commerce and diplomacy”. (Pattanyak 160)

Therefore, the English language has become the primary requirement for inter connectedness of people and a boarder free exchange of ideas, cultures and economies, and lingua franca for communication, business and education. In India, the English language functions as a subject, as a second language, and as a medium of instruction in educational institutions.

English Language Teaching in Jammu and Kashmir

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018

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Jammu And Kashmir State is situated in the north of India and geographically in the high ranges of Himalayas, inhabited by numerous communities having diverse languages and culture. The people of Jammu and Kashmir use different languages for different purposes like Dogri, Pahari, Gojri, Kashmiri, Ladakhai, Balti, etc. both in oral and written form. Majority of the languages in the State remain undeveloped. Every language stands as a mark of separate identity for an individual. Therefore, English which is considered as a language for literary programme in India, comes to play a major role and functions as a link language. With the passage of time, the demand for the teaching of English is increasing and English is regarded as a prestigious language.

General English courses at undergraduate level in the affiliate colleges of the University of Jammu

The Higher Education Department, Government of Jammu and Kashmir had made it compulsory that the medium of instruction at undergraduate level in the State shall be English and prescribed a compulsory course of General English in all the undergraduate classes viz BA/BSc/BCA/BCom. The purpose of introducing General English course at undergraduate level was to equip student of his/her present and future academic pursuits. The aim of teaching English is to make the learner an effective user of the language in other subjects also.

Problems and issues in the teaching and learning of English at undergraduate level in the affiliate colleges of the University of Jammu

The approach adopted towards the teaching of English is more as a subject for study rather than a language to be learned for the purpose of communication. It has to be taught for its functional aspects but it becomes more a context based literature course. Majority of the students in the colleges have a rural background and they fail to gain language proficiency. They seem to lack confidence and developed fear and anxiety towards the language. This fear and anxiety is further intensified by the evaluation process which tests the memorization powers of the learner rather than his/her skill.

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A syllabus is an expression of opinion on the nature of language and learning; it acts as a guide for both teacher and learner by providing some goals to be attained. Hutchinson and Waters define syllabus as ‘At its simplest level a syllabus can be described as a statement of what is to be learned. It reflects the language and linguistic performance’. (Hutchinson and Waters)

But clarifying the concept of syllabus is extremely problematic. There seem to be as many definitions as definers, each apparently covering similar ground, whilst containing various differences in emphasis. But Candlin’s summary of syllabus gives an idea of a working understanding:

Syllabuses are concerned with the specification and planning of what is to be learned frequently set down in some written form as prescriptions for actions by teachers and learners. They have, traditionally, the mark of authority. They are concerned with the achievement of ends, often, though not always, associated with pursuance of particular means. (Candlin 30)

Most of the academic and social implications of syllabuses may recognize the summary presented by Candlin.

The General English syllabus at undergraduate level in the University of Jammu was introduced for the first time in 1970 in order to arouse and sharpen students’ aesthetic sensibility and also creating awareness among the students of the relevance of humanistic values in the modern world. But the analysis of the General English syllabus currently operative at the undergraduate level in the University of Jammu shows that no attention was given to the functional aspect of the language learning. It is not associated with the functional type of syllabus as it does not emphasize on communicative language teaching and learning. The syllabus does not lead to a specification and organization of language teaching content and also does not reflect how English is used in everyday life with specifications on the notions, concepts and topics learned to enable students to communicate effectively. With the advent of globalization, students will need to be proficient in English as a medium for communicating with people from around

the globe. It is essential that students be able to listen to, read and present information orally and in writing.

Conclusion

Need to reform General English syllabus at undergraduate level

Keeping in view the present needs of the students at undergraduate level in the affiliated colleges of the University of Jammu and the expectations of the teachers the syllabus designers should frame a multi-skill course which will aim at developing students' proficiency in language and communication skills. But the existing syllabus in General English course adopts the approach of teaching English language through literature. This is a mere appreciation of literary texts. The textbook which has been designed according to the current General English syllabus do not motivate students in organizing activities pertaining to learning of the language skills. Literature is a source of joy for everybody and the motivation for reading and studying it is almost inbuilt but there is an urgent need to explore the possibilities in designing a syllabus and textbooks which have infinite number of exercises for day to day use of English language and in this way the joy of reading English literature can be fruitfully utilized for the learning of communicative skills needed in real life situations.

There is an urgent need to minimize the use of literature in a language course. Units dealing with language skills as well as grammar, vocabulary, etc. are to be carefully graded and implemented. The minimum use of literature may allow teachers of English to use maximum time in applying techniques like question-answer sessions, group discussions, role playing, oral presentations, etc. The teacher should have enough time to adopt activities and exercises in the classroom to suit the needs and competence level of the students. A General English course should be flexible enough to allow experimentation on the part of individual teachers to make students active participants in the teaching learning process. This is possible only if the syllabus designers frame a syllabus document according to the needs of the learners because the ultimate aim of teaching English as a foreign or second language is to equip the students with language skills so that they become better and more confident learners of the language.

The aims and objectives of the existing General English course are to be modified keeping in mind the practical nature of the course and future challenges. The syllabus should be learner centered, learning focused and activity oriented.

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