Exploring the English Language Education in Engineering Colleges of Odisha: Challenges and Strategies

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The paper is an empirical investigation by the researcher to explore the English language education scenario in the Engineering colleges of Odisha with a view to assessing the ground reality and suggest measures for development of communication skills of learners in English language. The researcher used questionnaire on 150 students to find out the problems faced by the learners of Engineering colleges of Odisha. The findings of the study revealed that the syllabus is heavily oriented towards developing writing skills and the teaching directed towards examination, which limited the scope to use English in real life contexts. The scholar also observed that the faculty members rarely used Computer Assisted Language Learning(CALL) for imparting language skills or communicative competence to the learners due to limitations in learners context. So, the learners fail to be recruited by private companies, on completion of their courses, because they lack the required communication skill in English. Hence, the present paper is an argument in favour of application of creative educational methodologies in the process of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP).Thus, the study by shedding light on the use of innovative methodologies, and the significance of trained teachers contributes to increase student motivation, which is one of the essential preconditions of successful practice of language skills in real life situations.

Keywords: Questionnaire, CALL, Competence, ESP, Motivation.

Introduction:

The new millennium has witnessed the chariot of globalisation riding high and mighty on the wheels of technological innovations, economic liberalization and rapid expansion of the word wide web phenomenon. Talented and ambitious young people, aspiring to board this chariot to become global citizens, are hatching themselves to the multinational corporate companies, ready to recruit any number of employees to bolster their fort with the help of a dedicated work force. Every year lakhs of engineering and management graduates are being integrated into global enterprises functioning on the principle of outsourcing. In this new set up, "communicative competence'' in English is being considered as a *sine- qua-non* for the success of an individual professional or a business entrepreneur.

Despite the fact that many Indian professionals and tech-savy engineers are being deployed worldwide by multi-national companies, employability skills of a large number of graduates from engineering and polytechnic colleges of India have been one of the major concerns for the academic. Lack of English

language proficiency has been cited as one of the major factors contributing to the unemployment of Indian learners, otherwise competent in technical skills. A report prepared by the British Council(2005) and several other surveys, carried out by employers in industries(The World Bank,2005;Mind Tree,2009;Merit Traace,2007etc.) found that a large number of the Engineering graduates were unemployable.

Statement of the Problem

There are116 colleges offering B.E. / B. Tech in Odisha. In Odisha these colleges are known as Degree Engineering colleges. Biju Pattanaik University of Technology, Rourkela, controls and manages these technical institutions. All India Council for Technical Education is the Apex regulatory body of the technical education In the recent years a lot of emphasis has been laid upon the communication skills for the engineers. So, achieving a particular standard of communicative competence (CC) in English is a necessity for the learners of technical institutions who aspire to be recruited by multi-national companies or corporate business houses. To help the learners acquire this required level CC in English, the degree engineering colleges have prescribed a Communicative English course for the first year learners.The syllabus is designed focusing on the development of language skills, required by the learners for their present and future needs.

But the scholar finds that the objective of the course as mentioned in the syllabus such as ''to effectively integrate English language learning with employability skills and training'' has not been fulfilled because the learners of the technical institutions are facing problems during recruitment owing to their lack of adequate competence in English.

So, the study raises some questions such as; "Why are the learners not achieving the required level of Communication Skills? What are the problems? Is the problem at the level of design or at implementation?"

Methodology

The study is undertaken as a case study to diagnose the problems in the English teaching context of the Degree institutions of Odisha, India,where English is being taught with an objective of acquiring proficiency both in spoken and written English. The purpose behind designing it as a case study was to bring in "an in depth understanding of a complex issue through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events" (Yin,317).The research was focused on the operating ELT curriculum of the Professional Degree Institutions of Odisha, as a sample case of a general situation prevailing in many other technical institutions.

The primary subjects were the learners of the Degree Engineering Institutions. A sample of 150 learners including both from Government and Private Sectors.

To gather the data the scholar analyzed the B.Tech syllabus adopted by BPUT and also distributed 150 questionnaires to the learners

The research wants to find out how far the English education in Engineering colleges is effective. Are the learners able to satisfy the required level of employability skills? If no, what are the problems to their achievement?

The research also wants to suggest certain strategies which can help the policy makers and educationists to frame the curriculum and agenda in order to improve the skills of the learners.

ELT in Degree Engineering Colleges of Odisha

The Degree Engineering is a four year technical course divided into eight semesters. Learners, only in the first semester, are required to read 'English for Technical Writing' having two credit points . They have Communicative English and Report Writing Practice Lab having 1-5 credit points. Though emphasis has given on spoken and written skills, the syllabus focuses primarily on writing skills of the learners.

Topic wise Distribution of Class Hours in the Communicative English Syllabus of the Degree Engineering Colleges

01	Fundamentals of Technical Communication • Process of Communication, Types of Communication • Barriers to Communication • Bias Free language • Cross cultural communication	06 Hours
02	Communicative Grammar • Time and Tense • Passive and active voice • English Conditionals	06
03	Sounds of English • Consonant Sounds of English • Vowel Sounds of English • Stress Pattern: Syllable, Stress and Intonation • Problem Sounds for Indian Speakers	06
04	Professional Communication for Workplace • Paragraph Writing • Formal Letter writing • Memo and Notice writing • Agenda and Minute writing • Report writing	06
05	Professional Communication for Interview • CV Writing • Interview Skills	06

B.Tech Syllabus-2023-2024 "English for Technical Writing"(Source-BPUT)

The Objective of the Syllabus (Why)

The objective of the syllabus; as mentioned in the syllabus for 2023-24 academic session is; "To develop awareness about the complexity of the communication process. To provide learning environment to practice listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. To assist the students to carry on the tasks and activities through guided instructions and materials. To develop effective writing skills so as to enable students to write in a clear, concise, persuasive manner. To acquire students with a variety of forms of writing in professional world. To effectively integrate English language learning with employability skills and training."

 The objective highlights the necessity of interaction and communication in English both in speech and writing in varying contexts, with different kind of persons for conveying a wide variety of messages. This connotes the objective mentioned in the syllabus carries a huge burden of expectation on the learners' English language proficiency to be achieved in such a short period. Thus, the objective is overloaded and seem unachievable as it is confusingly mixed up by incorporating the traditional, structural and communicative objectives. Hence, it would not be helpful either to the teachers or the learners who may feel stressed to fulfil the expectations suggested in the objective.

The Content of the Syllabus (What)

The syllabus has only theory of 100 marks. It is divided into five modules. All the modules, except module 3,emphasise on writing skills. In the syllabus so many writing agenda have been clubbed together for the target group learners. The list of writing formats to be practised is long. It is also surprising that for practising so many writing skills only 24 hours has been allotted. It is really puzzling for both the educators and learners to cover so many topics within a time frame of less than 24 periods (each period 45 minutes).It is really difficult for learners who do not have the basic proficiency to acquire the rules and styles of various writing tasks within 19 to 20 working hours. So, it is unpragmatic to believe that Engineering students can cope with the syllabus with so many tasks within the allotted periods for practice.

Module 1 aims at making the learners aware of the importance, process and factors of communication as a foundation before proceeding to any form of communication. So,it is appropriate to the syllabus objective. However, the module 2 which deals with Communicative grammar is problematic. It contains only a few list. It is not at all possible to teach grammar by discussing only Tense, Voice change and conditionals. This is another area of problem in the syllabus. Again while analysing module 3 that is about ' Sounds of English' , the scholars finds that the allotted time is too short to comprehend the sounds to the learners. Here learners can better acquire the sounds in laboratory classes than the theory classes. The mere allotment of Phonetic classes do not fulfil the objective of the syllabus.

Module 4 aims at development of professional communication. The writing skills prescribed here are highly essential for professional development. As précis writing, paragraph writing, formal letter writing, notice writing, Memo, Minutes , Agenda and Report writing are high level writing formats that require thorough comprehension and brief factual expression ,these tasks could have been practised in practical classes devoting more than the allotted six hours. But the syllabus does not reflect it in the practical classes. This is the drawback of the syllabus. Module 5 that prepares learners to face the real life challenges emphasises on CV writing and Interview skills. Learners require to know how to face various types of interviews. So, more number of mock interviews classes are required to be conducted in practical classes in order to fulfil the objective of the syllabus.

The communicative and Report writing lab

The practical class is lopsided in allotment of periods. The six assignments could have been better utilized if some tasks like group discussion, interview, Soft skills would have been included. Due to this mismatch of time with tasks and topics, teachers may waste these periods or utilize them otherwise focusing on skill development.

Reference Books:

In the final section of the syllabus a list of three essential reading books and five supplementary reading books have been mentioned.

It is not clear which book should be used for which section or which one book could deal with all the skills and sub- skills. The syllabus makers should have clarified the utility of each book mentioned in reference to appraise the students of their use; for knowledge or for practice.

It would have been better if some workbooks and practice books would have been prescribed or referred with a genuine desire to help the students.

From the above discussion it is clear that the syllabus designers need to revise the syllabus. This betrays the syllabus designer's lack of knowledge on syllabus designing or sincerity in effort to prepare a truly pragmatic, practical syllabus to help the teachers and learners.

A syllabus may be just a written document but it has a significant role in acting as a bridge between the three levels of teaching; *planning, implementation and evaluation.* It can help learners, teachers, question setters and paper evaluators. But the syllabus can not be implemented effectively until teachers try their best. On this count Widdowson emphasized the role of the teacher over the limited role of a syllabus on the learner achievement. He observed:

> The syllabus is an abstract object. The task of the teacher is to realize the
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> syllabus of a course by whatever methodological means may
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> seen appropriate for successful learning.(1991:129)

Learner Response to Questionnaire about ELT in the Degree Engineering Colleges of Odisha

The scholar distributed questionnaires to 150 learners of both Government and private institutions to express their opinion on the different aspects of English Language teaching in their institutions. Many students abstained from responding to certain questions. So, only 120 learners responded on 10 statements of null category which were used as variables of the teaching learning context. It included some variables that affect the teaching learning English such as: the syllabus, the teaching materials, the teaching techniques, opportunities to use English for communication in speech and writing and problems faced by them in learning English.

Table-1

Sl.No.	Descriptors of the ELT Context	Frequency of Response	
		T	F
1.	The English Course prescribed for you is not suitable to develop your communicative competence in English	40	80
2.	The text books prescribed are not helpful to provide practice in language skills, which you need.	60	60
3.	The class room teaching techniques used by the teachers are not interesting, interactive, skill oriented	90	30
4.	There are no attempts to practice listening comprehension, pronunciation practice or communicative activities like role plays/discussion/debate/group work/pair work etc.	85	35
5.	The practical classes conducted in the language laboratories do not provide ample opportunity for learners to practice speaking.	85	35
6.	No actual practical examinations or tests are conducted sincerely	66	54
7.	The one semester English course does not help to acquire the required language skills for getting recruited by companies.	100	20
8.	For Degree learners speaking in English is not as important as writing	20	100
9.	Teachers are more interested to finish the course and take the assigned classes than helping the learners to improve their communication skills.	56	64
10.	The main problem in improving your communication skills is:		
	i)Lack of guidance from teachers and parents	108	12
	ii)Lack of scope to use the language in different situations	100	20
	iii)Any other	Nil	Nil

Analysis of the Data

About 53% learners gave favourable opinion on the syllabus. They felt that the syllabus had specified all the skills to be cultivated. Similarly 50% learners are in favour of the prescribed books. The scholar while in conversation with the learners came to know that most of the students either borrowed or issued the books from their seniors or from the library.60% learners are not satisfied with the teaching strategies adopted by the teachers. Learners are also not satisfied by the activities carried out by the teachers in the classroom. This suggests that in some institutions some teachers followed the traditional chalk and talk methods while in some other institutions learners used communicative methods of study. 56% Students do not get ample opportunity in the laboratory class. This shows the variation of practical classes in different institutions. So, the purpose of practical class is not fulfilled .It was surprising that 54 students out of 150, disagreed regarding the sincerity of conducting Practical examinations. Most of the students agreed to the fact that learning English in only one semester does not prepare them with the required level of employability skills. The most interesting fact that majority of students understood the importance of speaking English. The study also revealed that 42% learners are aware that teachers are more interested in completing the assigned courses in the stipulated time than in developing the communication skills of the learner. This suggests that some students trust the sincerity of the teachers while others do not.

Regarding the problem in learning and developing the communication skills, maximum learners agreed to the fact that they lacked proper guidance and sufficient scope to use the language.

Strategies

To improve the communication skills of the Degree learners, the researcher offers the following suggestions:

i) The present syllabus 'English for Technical Writing' needs to be revised .The listening and speaking skills and their sub skills need to get more attention..

ii) The syllabus also should be more clear and specific on the objectives of the course.

iii) The assignments in the laboratory classes need to be clearly specified. Due to lack of clear pronouncement of the tasks, the teachers and the learners were found to be floundered and wasted the periods meant for this.

iv) The syllabus designers should prescribe such books in the Reference section which contain language practice activities, language games and books with Cassettes. Even a list of task based work books meant for learner practice should be included in each section differently so that learners know that which books to purchase for practice of each skill or sub skill.

v) Most of the teachers teaching in Degree Engineering institutions need to be trained and exposed to the ELT methodology to use the Communicative Language Teaching techniques and technology for practice of language skills to enhance the employability skills of the learners

Conclusion

With the changing times, technology and computers have certainly gained in popularity and access. Mindset is changing along with the growing globalised culture. It is hoped that teachers and institutions will recognize the utility of CALL soon. Dilip Barada's article "Experimenting ICT in English Language and Literature" already records this fact. He demonstrates that technology can be can be successfully used for teaching both language and literature. However, Phillip Hubbard's observation on CALL research, "it is exciting, complex, dynamic and frustrating" holds a mirror to the complexity of the situation because CALL is a quickly changing context of learning with software experts regularly testing, and adding to the tools to make them both teacher friendly and learner- friendly.

Finally, the researcher would like to state that exploring language teaching curriculum in any context is a complex matter because many currents and sub currents affect the flow and speed of the implementing channels. Consequently the study tries to throw light on the problems of the Degree learners so that the curriculum designers and academia will rethink and revise their materials to help the learners. But the enlightening part has to be carried out by the teachers. Unless, the teachers take up the leaders' role and create new paths to lead their learners to their destination, no one else can.

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