Lacunae in Curriculum Design and Delivery

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Abstract

The ESL/EFL learners are from very diverse backgrounds and of course possess varying abilities and discordantly diverse requirements. The learning styles and aptitudes of one student are very different from another's. But most private universities and colleges are not designing their curriculum keeping in mind the job/market/industry needs or the diversity in the classroom. The employability of these students is seriously affected by these lacunae in the system. To add insult to injury, teachers in these universities and colleges are not helping the cause in most cases. Unless these universities and colleges devote their energies to preparing rounded, world-ready, market-ready individuals, they will be failing in their duty and will be squarely blamed for this disservice. Hence, some soul searching has to be done to remedy this malady before the malaise proves to be beyond cure. This paper attempts to throw light on some of these issues and suggests a few remedies.

Key Words:

Technical Communication Skills, ESL / EFL/ ESP / EST learners, Streamlining Students, Curriculum Delivery, Diversity in the Classroom

Preamble

Higher education today is a big business. This multi billion dollar industry has set the cash registers of the stake-holders ringing but what is jarring and grating is the apparent failure of most curricula, especially in designing and more so in delivery. It is disheartening to know that when it comes to Technical Communication Skills in English, (this course goes by many other nomenclatures as well), there is a common syllabus for all categories of students going through a programme like B.Tech or B.E. Neither the content nor the content delivery takes into consideration this wide variety in the composition of the students in the Indian classroom.

Odd assortment of students

 These days, anybody who is ready to pay the fees is given a seat in professional courses. The screening test is a farce and an eye wash, a mere formality as there are more seats than students in these

universities and colleges. We cannot ignore the fact that many colleges have not got enough seats filled to reach the *break even*. Consequently, the quality of input is far below the minimum required level. Sadly enough, lay off has entered the education set up as well.

However, brushing aside this number crunching, if we look at the makeup of students, we see that there are NRIs, foreign students like the ones from Bhutan, Nepal, African countries and so on. They consort with students from other states of India, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. But in some classes, the number of non-locals is very significant.

Local students also come from very diverse backgrounds and social segments. Some are from educated homes; some others are from very elite, rich homes; many are from middle and lower middle classes while a good number are from poor families. Naturally there is very great diversity in the class in terms of culture, upbringing and abilities. "Any definition of curriculum, if it is to be practically effective and productive, must offer much more than a statement about the knowledge-content or merely the subjects which schooling is to 'teach' or 'transmit' or 'deliver'. It must go far beyond this to an explanation, and indeed a justification, of the purposes of such transmission and an exploration of the effects that exposure to such knowledge and such subjects is likely to have, or is intended to have, on its recipients…" A.V.Kelly, 2009 .p.9

It is very sad that the syllabus, in the name of Technical Communication in English (TCE) or Communication and Soft Skills (CSS) etc., is an odd assortment of topics, violently yoked together. Designed with certain ill-digested theories of pedagogy, it is incapable of producing the spelt-out outcomes or even desirable effects. Curriculum designers do not take into consideration the two most important aspects : one is the raison d'être and the other is the modus operandi.

ESL learners from very diverse backgrounds

The ESL learners are from very diverse backgrounds and of course possess varying abilities and discordantly diverse requirements. The learning styles and aptitudes of one student are also very different from another's. "For many decades teaching English whether for beginners or for the advanced learners has been a challenging pursuit for the teachers of English especially the area that cover the acquisition of four skills of language – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. However, if we browse through the studies made on these four language skills, we find that listening has been the most neglected area of study, due to the misconception fostered by many of us that we imbibe this skill as we mentally mature. We take this language skill for granted under the assumption that without any conscious efforts, facility in listening can wholly be acquired. Proper training of teachers is of great importance in improving the quality

of English education". (Munch, 2008). The varieties of English these students speak leave a lot to be desired. We are not supposed to expect Oxbridge variety or Queen's English from any of these kids but an accent neutralized, correct English at least. They also don't write good English. Nobody expects an Engineer to write like Bacon or Emerson but any thing that will pass for correct language.

Mapping programme objectives with programme outcomes

"ESP advocates the designing of special courses instead of one multi-purpose course, to suit the needs of different courses of students. The concept of ESP is said to be particularly adequate for teaching English to students of science and technology (EST). Moreover, English at the undergraduate level of engineering studies differs from English in other undergraduate courses because it has a specific purpose unlike a general purpose in other colleges. It differs from other courses in the three aspects, such as relevance, register and style." (Devika Malini,2011)

The curriculum document spells out certain specific, measurable, achievable, time bound goals and objectives but the fact of the matter is that there is a gulf between the objectives and outcomes. Examine how the mapping of programme objectives with programme outcomes is done. This is further accentuated by course objectives with course outcomes which are in line with the programme objectives and outcomes. The histogram, plotted in this connection, specifies certain objectives and the outcomes mentioned there do match the objectives. But the reality is slightly different from the 'rosy' picture painted in the documents, barring a few very good, top notch institutions where due attention is paid to almost everything that contributes to the growth of the students, including the ambience and intellectual atmosphere. The sample outcomes of TCE include

1. Demonstrate the ability to comprehend/produce technical manuals, brochures, pamphlets and tests.
2. Communicate effectively with peers and higher ups
3. Write with clarity of purpose
4. Listen actively
5. Cope with job related stress and peer pressure
6. Possess inter and intra personnel skills to succeed in personal and professional life ...

While these outcomes sound too good to be true, the reality is far from this ideal. How this fails to materialize is the moot point. We shall take into consideration two broad issues. The first one is the

'Methods and Materials'. In the design phase, people look at the 'teachability' of a certain content and do not pay enough attention to the outcomes. 'Covering the syllabus' is an expression very often heard. Some discover the syllabus, a few 'uncover' the syllabus while some others 'bury' the syllabus. Unlike in school texts where every lesson is followed by a number of items on glossary, pronunciation, exercises of all kinds, key words, usage, grammar points, comprehension questions and further reading, most TCE (Technical Communication in English) texts do not pay attention to these. Instead, they try to cover as many areas as possible.   They look more like treatises, travelogues and manuals. They don't look like text books. A proper text book is not available for the topics selected and put into the syllabus. Some universities and colleges do insist on text books by foreign authors. While this looks very unrealistic, affordability, availability etc. are attendant issues. The book on Business Communication by Mary Ellen Guffey, prescribed as textbook by some universities is one good example of this folly. Granted it is an excellent book but "Guffey" is neither affordable nor available. Ultimately students suffer without a proper substitute. When the objectives are diverse and straddling several spheres, it may not be possible to have one textbook. Finding a suitable textbook which covers all the objectives with matching lessons, information, texts, activities, model questions, case studies, templates and samples is the real task before the BOS / management. Enough attention is not paid to this crucial area called material production. The next important question is "why should there be a prescribed text book at all". Why can't the teachers in a department produce their own material in the days of team teaching and collaborative learning?

Streamlining the Students:

28 years ago, the author happened to work in a college where they had, perhaps they still have, three different streams of students at the 1st year level, all branches together. In the beginning of the academic year, they used to conduct diagnostic tests and interviews for all the freshers. Based on their performance, they divided the students into A stream, B stream and C stream. They had completely different content for these 3 streams. The author happened to take classes for all the three streams. While *A* stream had very good students mostly, B stream had rich, naughty, clever but unruly students, mostly from affluent families. Going to the C stream was an altogether different experience. One had to adopt three different strategies and styles for the 3 groups. Obviously 'C' required more personal attention. They behaved very well and they were mostly from middle class families. This kind of filtering and sorting helped in addressing the specific needs of the students. When *novel reading* was part of the curriculum for the A stream, it was not there for the 'C' Stream. In the novel reading activity, the teacher selects books from the library and asks

the students to pick up a book from this collection. A week's time is given. The student has to read the novel in his spare time. The following week in the same class hour, the teacher asks the student to talk about the experience ranging from plot, dénouement to other aspects. The teacher listens to the student's response and awards marks based on the performance. Activities like these are not part of structured instruction in many colleges.

Streamlining the students and prescribing 3 different texts, materials and altering the approach and delivery for their specifics needs and requirements is one measure which is practicable. That college is one place where the syllabus is fixed but not the material. Every teacher in the department is required to design the material at least once in a semester to be used by all the teachers through out the week or so.

In this system, not a single student feels either bored or uncatered to. Measurable outcomes are also there for all to see. No wonder this college could produce illustrious men like R.Venkataraman, former President of India, C. Rangarajan, former R B I Governor,   Daniel Lisulo, Former Prime Minister of Zambia, P. Chidambaram, P.J. Joseph, M. O. H. Farook, Vishwanathan Anand, Vijay Amritraj, Ramanathan Krishnan, Ramesh Krishnan, Leander Paes and thousands more.

Hence, universities and colleges can exercise their reason to sort students carefully into 2 or 3 streams in the first year. Instead of the conventional method of grouping them under major field of study chosen, for the English class they can be streamlined. While this might throw up a few technical or administrative challenges, it is possible if the authorities are determined and equally convinced.

Interpreters of Syllabus

The next stage is to see the instructors. Instruction is said to achieve its objectives only when the syllabus is properly interpreted. The instructor has to show uncommon wisdom, ingenuity and resourcefulness in interpreting the syllabus and executing it properly. While one prescribes minimum qualification for teachers, again memory is tested. If a candidate is able answer questions on Shakespeare's birthday or negative capability or Salman Rushdie, he or she is counted as a good enough to teach English

Physician, Cure Thyself!

 A course like B.Ed or PGCTE / DTE should be made mandatory for all English teachers. It is hard to find teachers using expressions like 'run of the mill' or 'can I take a rain check' or even 'I couldn't agree with you

more'. Their vocabulary range also is abysmally low. Teachers are not comfortable with words like equine, adroit or even nimble. Most of them mispronounce words like circuit, dais, component etc. In fact, the list of mispronounced words is so long that it requires to be treated separately. For want of space, suffice it to say that many teachers do not watch BBC, CNN, Russia Today, NGC, Animal Planet, Discovery etc. regularly. Nor do they watch English movies on Z, Star, Movies Now, HBO, Sony etc. Their daily interaction on campus also is not confined to English only. They find every opportunity to stray into Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, Malayalam and other vernaculars.

The reading habits are also not very heartening. If teachers don't read, write, listen and speak, will they have the input or afflatus needed to inspire students in turn? Don't be surprised if an English teacher says **I have seen that yesterday** or **could not be able to** or if he/she is not familiar with difference between **also** and **either**. Many English teachers use **as well as** after **both** as in "both Raphael as well as Rachel" instead of 'both Raphael and Raphael'.

One day, I happened to hear a lady with Ph.D in English tell the class "the story was shrinked". We were in the CALL Lab handling an activity called *Shrinking Story*. Such bloopers are not uncommon among teachers with Ph.D in English.

Teachers need to possess the desirable level of mastery over the LSRW skills to be able to handle classes at professional level. Unfortunately, the selection process in many cases is ridden with so many complications that it has become difficult to recruit good teachers. The policies of affirmative action, equal opportunity, nepotism, favoritism, casteism etc. have made the system worse. In this context, merit is sacrificed in the altar of learning. To make matters worse, colleges and private universities are offering teaching positions to the *lowest bidders*.

Good Practices

Team teaching is another important step that colleges and private universities can take to improve the quality of their teachers. Reverse mentoring is also an equally powerful way out to iron out all the pot holes in pedagogy. In addition, *in service candidates* need to attend more seminars, workshops, conferences etc. to acquaint themselves with the latest trends and issues. In many private institutions, financial rewards are given as incentives to members of faculty who publish research papers.   This is a 'good practice' worthy of emulation. Promotion and increment also should be based on some of these. Performance appraisal of

teachers should give due weightage to publications as these keep the intellectual in the teacher going in the right direction.

Curriculum Delivery is in the hands of Teachers

As long as the curriculum delivery is in the hands of the team of teachers, they need to innovate and need to also have room for incidental learning. Variety in all that a teacher does will ensure student participation to the fullest level possible. PPTs, pictures, annotations, stories, clippings, live models, anecdotes, current affairs, group activities, exercises and games will make language learning not only meaningful and interesting but also useful. "Curriculum Delivery in this context is meant as shorthand to embrace the many ways in which learners are enabled to achieve the outcomes offered to them by a curriculum. Teaching, learning support, advice and guidance, coaching, mentorship, peer and collaborative learning, feedback and assessment, personal development planning and tutoring, skills development and practice, and enabling access to curriculum resources are all processes that might be involved." (Andy 2011)

Teachers are Not Farm Hands or Factory Workers:

Loading the teachers with too much of work, and not giving breathing space will invariably result in poor quality instruction. Teachers are not farm hands or factory workers. They need to have enough leisure during college hours to brood on what is to be done in the class, how to do what they want to do, garner and glean materials and tools, visit the library for digital information, e books, e journals and e content, read the relevant texts several times and rehearse if necessary. Unless they are given time to incubate, quality output can't be a reality.

Teacher Student Ratio:

A very healthy teacher student ratio and if necessary more than what is actually required will result in buffer to fall back on during of contingencies like teachers going out to attend conferences, seminars, workshops, invited talks and lectures to other places, going to other institutions to officiate as moderators, mentors, chairs, co-chairs and allied academic activities which should be to ungrudgingly entertained by managements. Providing the cushioning necessary to absorb these contingencies can be done only when there are enough extra teachers in the department. "The whole academic process is so unwieldy that it fails to respond to learner needs; learner response is too often ignored. The ELT cone of India is broadening at the base today because of factors that have little to do with the ELT classroom in academic institutions. The

irony of the situation is that while academicians label these learning centres 'shops' or 'commercial institutes' it is these establishments that are a major influence behind the changing face of the ELT paradigm in India." (Deepti Gupta, 2005)

Conclusion

Most universities do not think about measuring what the teachers are delivering and what the students are gaining in their 4 years of study. They are happy with what they are doing and if they are able to place all the eligible students, they are more than satisfied with their performance. What this has resulted in is very disheartening. They are churning out half baked, unemployable youngsters. The job market needs highly skilled, knowledgeable and talented young workers who can contribute to the organization. Unless the universities and colleges devote all their energies to preparing rounded, world-ready, market-ready individuals with the help of a carefully designed syllabus and deftly delivered content, they will be failing in their duty and will be squarely blamed for their disservice.

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