



Should Functional English be Taught as A Subject in Technical Programmes ?

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT English has long been considered an internationally accepted means of communication. Hence, to survive and succeed in global environment, it's imperative to have proficiency in English. Inadvertently, schooling worldwide inculcate English as a primary medium of instruction and also as a prime subject. The benevolence is carried forward, up to the undergraduate level. However, observing the current trend in graduates, it is realized that the university stipulate a mere 2 hours in a week in technical institutes for Functional English, in a semester spanning 3-4 months. The reduced teaching hours and the failure to consider English as a compulsory subject with respect to attendance and evaluation has been a major setback, especially for students hailing from a background, where native language is the major medium of instruction. This condition cannot be seen with complacency, since the students in 4 years undergraduate degree course appear for at least 64 subjects, where, their performance is judged by English writing skills. Also, the failure to implement Functional English successfully has reflected in various stressors during placement. The high rate of rejection at interviews has been much attributed to the lapses in communication and presentation skills alone. The outlook therefore necessitates an effective content based teaching methodology. The current study suggests certain remedial measures to improve the effectiveness of English as a subject in technical institute and also discusses them in brief.

Introduction

The selection criteria for students to any technical course across India is mostly confined by their knowledge level of basic sciences or aptitude, and not based on English language proficiency. Inadvertently the quality of English speaking and writing skills has deteriorated presently among graduates, but there has not been any fruitful action taken up by the university or colleges, to amend this.

Unfortunately, the demerits are realised only when students are exposed to interviews and recruitment process, with respect to employment opportunities and career growth. English being a global language, the odds have only become higher. As confirmed by a survey carried out by NASSCOM, only one third of the qualified graduates were employable, while the remaining severely lacked English speaking and writing skills (NASSCOM 2007 report). Bjorkman (2008), after reviewing several case studies, substantiated that English language is the most essential medium of instruction for technical education in the global arena, and thereby it becomes an imperative requisite towards employment. Rajasekaran, V. (2010), rightly commented that every Engineering graduate is required to possess a sizable amount of proficiency in English language to make him or her employable.

As a wakeup call, the Technical Universities have currently included Functional English as one of the basic subjects in the first year; but it doesn't have the same significance when compared to the other technical subjects. Dishearteningly, the standard of technical institutes, regarding the English proficiency cuts a sorry figure, for both teaching and non-teaching fraternity. This paper explores the lacuna of the prominence given to Functional English as a subject across technical institutes.

A comparison of the present syllabus (2010 scheme) was carried out with each of its revisions, since its inception. Further on, a detailed preliminary analysis was conducted for the syllabus under the current scheme. The pros and cons of the system were scrutinised, based on the qualitative factors involving both faculty and students, and finally, certain suggestions have been proposed.

A university generally revised its syllabus every four years. Interestingly, there was no provision of the subject in its first scheme. In 2002, the scheme was revised by the university, for first time, Functional English as a subject was introduced

amidst the first year technical subjects, under both the Physics and Chemistry group. Each technical subject was allotted 4-5 hours per week, while Functional English garnered only half of it. The university allocated a total of 50 hours per year, with 25 hours in each semester.

The syllabus underwent a major change with the second revision (2006), but only with regard to the time allocation to Functional English. As an unfortunate outcome of 'copy and paste' application, it had now been postulated for 50 hours in a single semester itself, with the syllabus containing the same topics. The subject also was bundled along with Chemistry Group. Consequently, students in Physics Group had a shot at the subject only in the following semester. The discrepancies which rose due to this misjudgment meant similar number of teaching hours supposedly available to the students. Practically, the faculty in-charge gets only about 23-25 odd teaching hours, due to several issues like public holidays, internal assessments and interference of other subject teachers to encroach the allotted slot to complete their respective syllabus. This meant that if the syllabus was judiciously followed, the faculty would be able to cover only half of the syllabus, or the faculty could decide to innovate upon the hour distribution, with certain topics ill covered or never at all.

The system of having Functional English for alternate semesters, revealed that while some students of the Chemistry group learnt the subject during the 1st semester and never further on, but those of Physics group waited 6 long months, until the second semester. Hence it is of no help to the students who do not have a good command over the language; thereby impairing their performance and confidence. The restructuring of Functional English subject into a single semester, to accommodate newer subjects has failed in the first place to satisfy the very purpose of incorporating it.

When the textbooks listed by the university for the subject was reviewed, it was found that these were generally prescribed by Education Boards for school level and only addressed basic grammar. Unfortunately, one of the textbooks mentioned in the syllabus is banned across all teaching fraternity for its inferior quality, but still found a place in the university syllabus. Irrespective of these developments, even a single copy of the prescribed textbooks are yet to find a place in the technical institute libraries, as neither the faculty nor student show any interest in referring them.

Since 2002, the university revised its syllabus twice, in 2006 and 2010. But the contents and features of this subject, as an 'Audit Course' continue to remain unaltered. Considering the cases of Diploma or lateral-entry students joining the Engineering course directly in 2nd year (3rd semester), they lost out on learning English. Since the subject was only a part of 1st year syllabus, and as most of these students hailed from a rural background, with mother-tongue language as the primary medium of instruction, the situation does not cater to them too.

Many colleges even overlooked the university stipulation and reduced the number of teaching hours to 1, while certain others indicated 2 hours in the time-table, but were yet to recruit a faculty. Apart from this, failure of apathy given to the subject depicted a lack of English department empowerment amidst other technical departments. Certain institutions had English staff but inadequate infrastructure and the methodology followed a conventional trend, disdaining the students from growing up and hence severely impacting his/her confidence levels.

Yet another aspect which is a major drawback was the failure of teaching fraternity to address their ward's communication and presentation skills. This was a major loophole, as the students had technical viva-voce at least twice each semester, apart from technical seminars and project presentation in the final and pre-final years. Recently, the university had addressed the issue of failures in interviews by introducing 'soft-skills' classes in the 2nd year, however, justice remains yet to be done while implementing it. The provisional short period of teaching course was only designed to polish the grammar usage, in the 'parts of speech', 'sentence construction' and 'vocabulary'.

In Engineering exams, the technical papers also hardly judged the student's English writing skills. The writing skills cannot be neglected, as technical writing is emerging as a lucrative field, demanding engineers who can write without mistakes. (Indira, C. & Meenakshi Sundaram, 2010). However, even this aspect faltered in the current teaching scenario with the application of a self-learning software suite. The software was primarily designed to enhance the student's capabilities of using English in day-to-day communication, and to improve his/her language skills & pronunciation skills.

However, its major drawback was its non-user friendly inbuilt features (such as bookmarks), and also that it had not been upgraded or updated for latest add-ons. Also as the software is a self learning kit, it had reduced the faculty's role to merely that of a facilitator. Yet another disheartening aspect, overshadowing the inadequacy of the syllabus is the lack of interest from English faculty in-charge, as he or she disdained the subject due to lack of motivation and professional growth. As Veena Kumar (n. d.) commented, 'rarely a faculty member viewed teaching English subject in an Engineering college as a really meaningful assignment.' To compound the matter, students also ignored the subject due to a variety of reasons, from fear of negative criticism to lack of interest, shyness, inhibition (Rajasekaran, V. 2010) and technological advances, etc.

Though English is the medium of instruction for professional education, its proficiency is never addressed as a criterion for admission into any Technical course. In many colleges, candidates were from vernacular medium, rural & north Indian background and international placements requiring more help in English. Those, who had the medium of instruction in the regional language, learnt English for at least for 6 years, while others spent 12 years. Despite this, the linguistic competence of even students from who came from English medium schools was far from satisfactory. Nevertheless, the others are in a state of compulsion to learn the subject, while the better ones don't even take any steps to improve their language attributing to the fact that in Technical Universities, students were not giving much importance to Functional English due to various factors such as stress involved in learning new subjects, the reduced teaching hours for English subject and also for lack of examinations for it etc.

Based on a study conducted for students, it was found that though some students write well, they were unable to express themselves orally. On the contrary, some students speak fluently; but can't avoid grammatical errors. Some were comfortable speaking among themselves in a small group, but had a stage fear and were not comfortable addressing a large audience. Few had problems with their body language and few others also found it difficult to maintain eye contact. The attributes, identified from the study included limited vocabulary and inaccurate grammar, lack of fluency and imperfect pronunciation, lack of active listening, fear of speaking in public, fear of expressing certain views and severe lack of confidence, lack of exposure and practice, lack of group skills, and fear of making mistakes. The following segment discusses the probable causes of these aforementioned flaws.

Factors Influencing Learning Abilities

As the learners are teenagers, their learning and living styles must be understood to identify the parameters influencing their English speaking and writing skills. In this age of technological advancements, most of them generally do not write, but use readymade templates available in MS Office and other similar softwares. The current generation is also loosing out on their vocabulary, due to inbuilt auto correct option in MS Office. Their word power is also weaker, since reading newspapers, referring dictionaries, or even playing scrabbles is out of fashion. The popular habit of using mobiles for sending SMS further weakens their language in terms of spellings, sentence construction and vocabulary. Certain other factors like their inherent psychological characteristics such as inhibitions, inferiority complex, shyness, probable lack of interest, fear of criticism, lack of awareness etc add to the problem.

As Veena Kumar (n. d.) rightly points out, sometimes, it was also wrong timing. English Language course is offered in the first year, often in the very first semester. At this stage, the student after joining the technical institute with great difficulty prefers technical subjects than to seemingly irrelevant English writing and grammar. Also during this stage, he/she is too young to realise the eventual need of these skills. It is only in the third year or so that the students become aware of its necessity and starts looking for help desperately which due to time constraint, becomes not only difficult but almost impossible.

Remedial Measures

Language learning is a skill-oriented activity, which needs an entirely different pedagogic approach compared to the regular technical subjects. Therefore, changes & innovation in framing an appropriate syllabus for English in the Engineering courses has to be suggested. As the detailed syllabus is beyond the purview of this paper; it only envisages a brief overview. The subject can be covered in first 4 semesters, each engaging 25 hours i.e., about 2 hours or so in a week. The department must take sufficient measures to create awareness and make the student realise the importance of English in the domain beyond education or degree, like in areas of employment opportunities, foreign studies, career growth, business marketing etc. Hence, the department can also combine the soft skills along with the communication skills classes, from 3rd semester onwards.

In the initial semesters, the faculty must review the teaching methodologies and the incorporated syllabus must also take measures to reintroduce students to the basics of English grammar. This helps the student's to understand their real strength and also it ensures that the diploma candidates who join the college in third semester do not stand to loose out much on the language. The evaluation methodologies must be application or practice oriented and not concept based.

In the 3rd semester, the students can be drawn into team building and group activities, thereby increasing the comfort level of diploma students and also helping the regular students in affirming their confidence. The syllabus could also include reading and vocabulary building activities along with

Phonetics for achieving peer evaluation. The faculty can reassign herself/himself with the role of a facilitator. In the following semester, (4th semester), the individual traits need to be extracted (from futuristic interviews and career point of view). Hence, the syllabus may be appropriately framed on presentations skills which could include exercises on comprehension to infuse listening skills.

The textbooks prescribed for the course must be apt for the syllabus requirements and quality for each semester. Interesting and inspiring 'English' literary works, autobiographies, biographies, reputed newspapers and short stories can also be maintained by the library along with prescribed Text books. Hence, the University/Institution (affiliated or autonomous) can also empower the subject by making it compulsory with respect to both attendance and assessment. The English faculty can also rejuvenate themselves by conducting events and competitions like debate, elocution, pick and speak, skit, jam, just a minute, one act play etc. This might also promote involvement and enthusiasm amidst students, and be a learning platform too. The mode of teaching therefore must oscillate between active and passive, based on the outlook of the content being delved.

Implementing all the above measures would not only help the student fraternity, but also the in-charge English faculty

in achieving better feelings of job satisfaction and belongingness to the institution. Hence, English both as a subject and language, must be sensitized across student right from the first semester, as an ancillary paper.

Conclusion

With globalization, the application of English language has become much more diverse than before. Engineering graduates are expected to possess sufficient proficiency in English language, to improve upon their chances of employment. Unfortunately in the present context, they stand to lose out and this is directly & indirectly related to the discrimination in teaching methodologies for Functional English in the technical institutes. With respect to the above concerns, the current study explored the irregularities in Functional English and the loopholes in the curriculum. The situation, hence demands an approach that offers students in Engineering Institutions to acquire proficient English 'speaking' and 'writing' skills, so as to enhance their professional excellence and employability. The paper finally suggests revising teaching methodologies, revamping syllabus and giving more prominence to English as a subject in the technical institute thereby empowering the English Department.

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