
ENGLISH FOR POLYTECHNICS : AN EXERCISE IN FUTILITY ?

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It is now forty years and a little over since the British left India; but we are still fighting the spectre of their language. The status of English language still persists to be one of the most controversial issues in Indian Education today. A positive and unequivocal consensus about the language is yet to emerge except on one count that English cannot be easily dispensed with; that it has a place to be given after all; and that it would be disastrous to discard it from our educational system altogether.

It is when we come to define our objective of teaching English, that opinions are differed. This lack of unanimity and the failure to evolve a meaningful and uniform policy has resulted in chaotic English Language Teaching (ELT) situation in India. Perhaps a case in point would be the curriculum of English currently being implemented in polytechnics of Maharashtra.

The Board of Technical Examinations, Bombay, has prescribed a course in "Communication Skill" for the first year diploma in engineering and technology. Let us begin with the title. The phrase "Communication Skill", by itself is too inclusive: It includes both verbal and non-verbal types; Even though it is assumed that the verbal type is implied, by no means it is clear that communications in English is to be studied. Finally, the word "Skill", on its singular form suggests that there exists certain single skill to be learnt; whereas scientifically speaking,

at least four different skills are involved in language communications. A corrected title "Communication skills in English" fails to mention what variety of English is expected to be mastered. The title "Technical English for Polytechnic" or "English for Technicians" or "communication skills in Technical English" and like would be far more acceptable.

The rationale behind the curriculum seems sound and valid: It is stated to be an important ability of technicians that as a link between engineer and craftsmen, they are required to communicate "orally and in writing" by translating thoughts and ideas on the one hand and reporting and expressing on the other; they are also expected to handle official correspondence. (Please refer the B.T.E. syllabus).

Thus the rationale suggests that all the four communication skills should be necessarily acquired by the technicians. However, the course objectives mentioned in the syllabus are only three, namely, comprehension, acquisition of functional vocabulary and the skill required for writing reports and letters. In other words, only reading and writing skills are included. The other two, viz. listening and speaking are ignored. Thus there is a clear lacuna between the rationale and the course objectives. It must also be noted that the objectives are not properly identified and are not stated in unambiguous terms.

There is an urgent need to redefine the objectives of teaching English to our technicians. Such modifications could be based on at least two considerations: The needs of the industry and what according to our educationist should be the needs of the students. The former envisage a somewhat pragmatic approach; whereas the latter normative or idealistic. One should not fail to realise that both the approaches are complementary to each other and one should not be sacrificed for the other. For example writing reports may be one of the job functions of technicians and consulting books may not be one, but from educational point of view, both are equally important.

The items mentioned in part A below are the employers' needs as established by a survey. (This survey was conducted by the T.T.T.I. Bhopal in 1974 and is somewhat out of date; besides, it was primarily supposed to identify engineering job functions and covered perfunctorily, the area of communication needs.)

(A) English for special purpose (ESP):

1. Writing technical specifications sheets ; report/
2. Using handbooks, service manuals and other reference work ;
3. Giving work instructions - oral and written ;
4. Writing letters ;
5. Drawing up tender notices and contract agreements ;
6. Assisting researches ;
7. Maintaining records .

(B) English for academic purpose (EAP):

1. Listening to lectures ;
2. Listening to recordings ;

3. Speaking : Asking and answering questions ;
4. Reading : Textbooks and reference books ;
5. Writing :
 - Taking notes from lectures/books ;
 - Reproduction of material learnt ;
 - writing answers in tests ;
 - writing laboratory reports ;
 - writing letters of general nature ;
6. Other skills :
 - Using dictionaries ;
 - Deciphering other reference works ;
 - Thinking critically ;
 - Watching/ observing A.V. aids.

The items mentioned in part B are such skills that it would be beneficial for the students to acquire them.

This brings us to the pertinent questions, how far the present curriculum of English for technicians is sensitive to the needs and demands of the industry? The curriculum does not cover some of the most important job functions like drawing up tender notices, interpretation of contract laws, maintaining records, assisting researches etc.

How far is the curriculum responsive to the academic needs? It has completely eliminated listening and speaking skill and only partially covered the other two. Two books compiled by the T.T.T.I., "A Course in Technical English" Book I and II, have been prescribed. Book I is a collection of scientific prose passages with an appended and irrelevant grammar section. "Irrelevant" because it employs Transformational Generative grammar terminology like "modifiers", "modal", "determiners" etc. Without using TG analysis. Moreover, sec

tion I and II of Books I are not integrated at all. The grammar of technical English is nowhere to be seen. The questions given below each prose passage only test comprehension and a certain mastery over the vocabulary; The problems of grammatical structures and patterns remain untouched.

Book II deals with reports and letters. Major part of the book is devoted to what can at best be described as theoretical. Comparatively practical and therefore more important part is dismissed in a cavalier manner. The examples presuppose a higher level of work experience than that technicians are ever likely to meet. The Textbooks are thus far from satisfactory as instruments for realising the course objectives.

Until recently, the curriculum of English was spread over three semesters. After the revision in course structure and adoption of the new yearly pattern, study of English is now restricted to the first year only. Though the new curriculum is made more relevant in the sense that it has incorporated content based on need of the industry and students, the overall weightage given to the subject is

a mere 2.5%. It is commonly experienced by many language teachers in polytechnics that the contact-hours are too meagre to do any justice to the subject. The fact that students acquisition of knowledge is primarily based on their language ability seems not to be sufficiently appreciated.

It is equally intriguing as to why exemption in the subject to directly admitted students is allowed at all. This policy is in total contradiction with the objectives of teaching English to technicians. For it would be disastrous to assume that after passing the Higher Secondary Examination, students acquire mastery over "technical" English.

It is now high time to review this policy towards the language curriculum. If we are serious enough about the objectives of teaching English, the course will have to be completely revamped. But before doing so, it must be settled once for all technicians should study the language at all, and if they must have a course in English, let it be given the status it really deserves.
