

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT THE UG LEVEL - ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Dr. Jayappa. N., HOD of English, Govt. First Grade College, Nelamangala, Bengaluru Rural Dist., Karnataka

Abstract:

English has been taught as a language at the UG level ever since English became the language of instruction at the UG level after the pre-university levels or after the completion of class XI in the 11 + 1 + 3 system and it continued even after the change in the system towards 10 + 2 + 3 stages of learning. For long time, English continued to be the medium of instruction at the collegiate or University level of education i.e. first stage of Higher Education. However, this also became an optional medium in the early 1970s in some universities / colleges in some parts of the country. That change happened because of the new perception and slogan that Higher Education must be through Regional languages or the Mother Tongue.

All these witnessed a change in the objectives of teaching English at the UG level besides issues related to curriculum design, the teaching of English at the UG level in terms of changing methodology, objectives of teaching English at the said level, curriculum design, content development and related issues.

In this background, this paper titled 'English Language Teaching at the UG Level - Issues and Implications' attempts to highlight the issues and implications of teaching English at the Undergraduate level.

Keywords: *Curriculum, English language teaching, Objectives, Classroom issues, UG level.*

English has been taught as a second language in the three language formula in India at the primary, elementary, secondary and higher secondary levels as a subject and as a language for the objectives have been to develop what is called communicative competence that includes the ability to be fluent, accurate and appropriate in the use of English language which has been accorded the status of the second language in the multi-lingual context in India. This language gets introduced even in class I in some parts of the country. The objectives of teaching English differing at different levels and stages of education have had these implications in designing the curriculum and content development based on which classroom methodology and assessment techniques and this has further led to the changing of perceptions also in teaching English language at the UG level.

In the early 1960s English language was taught and the content was designed based on the theory of language learning and language teaching called the theory of conditioning based on Skinner's Stimulus - Response Construct. Hence the focus on teaching the structures of language using the technique of drill or practice gained importance. The reforms made by the council of Europe in the early 1980s advocating the teaching of English for inculcating the use of language for performing social functions using different and appropriate forms of language heralded a new beginning and approach to language teaching. The focus since then has been on teaching the functional aspect of language. The reforms did not however ignore the need to be grammatical and hence focused also on the teaching of what the council termed as 'minimum adequate grammar'. The council stressed on the teaching of both the functional categories and notional

categories of language and this was reflected in the designing of what later came to be known as 'Notional Syllabus'. Since then language learning that was thought of as a product changed the perception of language learning as a process with the goal of acquiring or learning the four skills exclusively, for effective communication. The objectives changing resulted in the change in the designing of language syllabuses; the focus also got shifted from learning the skills to becoming 'communicatively competent' or proficient users of language. The shift was from 'form' to 'function' and from 'structure' to 'meaning'. The Notional Syllabus was the first of its kind and as has been mentioned earlier, the language teaching meant the teaching of the functional, notional and 'semantic o-grammatical' categories. This paved the way for, later what was to be termed as English for Specific purposes based on the needs of learners and the purpose for which the target language is used.

The English language has been for a long time considered as an associate official language and a link-language in the intra-national context and as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level in the pan Indian context. The focus in the changing scenario, however has been need based. Yet, the curriculum for teaching English at the UG level or tertiary level has been more focused on teaching literature and less of language and its nuances in terms of skills and aspects such as vocabulary and grammar and communicative competence.

The language curriculum at the tertiary level has been criticized for its failure to produce competent and proficient language users. Even after ten years of language learning at the secondary and higher secondary levels, the learners at the first year degree have been found to be wanting in high or required levels of competence both in the skills of comprehension and expression. The learners at the UG level (1st year) have been found to be finding it difficult to understand or comprehend lectures or interactions and content transaction sessions in English and also being unable to express or share in simple plain English, their experiences or feelings or the content understood.

The curriculum and thereby the content have been found not to be catering to the language needs of the learner. The literary texts included however, as they claim, helped in developing literary competence and sensitivity to the language of literature. Yet teaching literary pieces or texts had not guaranteed language learning or acquiring the skills of the language. Instead, if the focus shifts from the explanation of literary texts or pieces to developing linguistic competence, then the objective of teaching English at the said level, could be said to have realized the objective of literature based curriculum and for many years at the UG level, the curriculum at the said level meant teaching literature for developing sensitivity to and the language of literature which is deviant in many aspects. Text books designed included a lot of literary pieces across different genres of language. Though the intention and goals or aims were appropriate. The net result was different. Students at the said level too were incompetent to understand and comprehend the language of literature, for they were found to be lacking in the four basic skills of language. This also resulted in their inability to use language for and in day to day communication, besides their inability to understand or comprehend the lectures delivered in English. There was no focus on the development of language skills, language structures or forms, grammaticality and appropriate use of language.

Further classroom processes do need a change. From the teacher centered teaching, the shift has to be towards learner and learning centred teaching. Language development and thus learner empowerment can take place provided the curriculum is learner need based and teaching is learner centered and learning centered also. Teaching should help in the acquisition of all language skills and what is called literary competence that includes the ability to use of the language of literature, express oneself clearly, coherently and cohesively, both in speaking and writing. English, has to be looked at then as a language for communication. The tasks that are designed for the promotion of language learning must be more learning centered.

There is always a gap between receptive and productive competence. Fluency may have progressed at the expense of complexity. At the entry level, i.e. the first year of the UG or tertiary level, there will be fossilized language errors. So, there is a need to address this issue of fossilized errors. Errors of both grammar and pronunciation are features of learners' speech at this level.

Fossilization refers to the persistence of errors in learners' speech despite progress in other areas of language development (Spala, 2006). Examples: He never ask me for help. Just I was talking to him.

Reasons for fossilization of errors may be many. But one reason needs a mention and that is, that learners are under the impression, such errors are not going to affect the meaning of what is being communicated and they are less concerned about the aesthetic impact of their English on the listener. How can learners become aware of the fossilized errors in their own speech?

What kinds of instructional techniques can change this attitude and help learner correct the fossilized errors?

These issues can be addressed by making learners become active monitors of their language use and production. Classroom activities that ensure active participation in the learning process have to be in place. Lecturing must give way to participatory learning.

Incorporating a more explicit treatment of grammar within the curriculum focusing on 'form' by having consciousness raising 'intent' in-built with activities have to be designed besides using activities that require stretched output. In other words, activities which expand learners' grammatical systems through increased communicative demands and attention to linguistic form must find a place in the classroom transaction.

Above all providing learners with a rich source of language learning experience that allows for the gradual development of language skills across the different modalities such as speaking and listening, reading and writing language abilities that must be task centred.

Problem solving using language puzzle problems, brain teasers can stimulate meaningful communication through collaborative and cooperative learning which are potent in pair and group activities.

The activities must be student centred and that has to be whole - person centric. The learners need to be provided with those strategies that they can use to monitor their own learning and assess their development by self or peer evaluation.

Learning environments must be acquisition rich environments. In order to make acquisition rich environments, prevail, the use of blended learning technique gains importance. Blended learning technique involves the use of ICT materials and internet based activities where it is perceived, that there will be a rich qualitatively high language input. More than focusing on teaching, the need of the hour is to focus on how to make the learner learn how to learn or learning to learn using certain cognitive, affective and socio-affective strategies. Indigenous, methodological designs will help more than mere reforms in the curriculum or content development. Though methodological and pedagogical issues are entirely dependent on the content developed for transaction in the class, call it any name, the classroom pedagogy decides the outcome level. Even when the learners are given a textbook, the need of the hour is also converting a prescribed text into a reading / learning material or as field of linguistic / literary exploration and discovery. Designing tasks that help the learner to interact and negotiate with text for meaning, can alone bring out the desired change in the learning of language by the learners at the tertiary level across different disciplines.

To conclude, in the light of the above discussion, it is felt that the need of the hour, is the need to orient teachers of English at the UG level to the trends in language teaching, learning and assessment system, content transaction, designing tasks to suit the heterogeneous group of learners that are motivating and those that facilitate learning. Even literary texts can be exploited for teaching the language, and thus

the teachers of English at this level it is felt, need to get oriented to 'task designing' abilities and skills. Refresher programmes or Orientation programmes must be addressing these issues so as to have a reach to the learners in the classroom.

References:

1. Kumana, Vadivelu: Beyond Methods, Macmillan, 2001.
2. Nunan, David: Designing Communicative Task, London, CUP.1991.
3. Little, Wood: Communicative Methodology, London, CUP. 1989.
4. Richards, Jack. C etal: Methods of Teaching English, London, CUP. 1991.