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Nuances of Grammar : A Potential Reason for Aversion?

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Abstract

English for effective communication is the most sought after phrase often heard in Tier—III city Arts and Science colleges in order to enhance the employability of their output. The tumultuous three year under-graduation span passes for every learner with English as Part II subject of the University curriculum either for one or two years of study. The inputs of these institutions are the filtered lot who could not secure an admission either in Professional colleges or in other tier I and II city colleges. Most of these students have a mere pass in their 'Plus 2' examination and have difficulty in writing all the alphabet without mistakes and overwriting corrections. These English as a Second Language (ESL) learners need mostly spoken communicative English skills to secure an entry level position in the emerging industries. Our pattern of commencing the skill enhancing class with fundamentals of rigorous language grammar pushes them back to square one. The empirical evidence of a longitudinal study, carried out in an arts and science college of Erode town—a Tier III city from the purview of IT companies, revealed an interesting finding. ESL learners need more practicing ground to come out of the inhibiting 'grammar rule' observance syndrome. A few success episodes point towards the non-conventional learning route as a surefire means of achieving the goal in learner-centric way than the clangorous route of starting the class with 'grammar'.

Keywords : ESL Learners – Tier I, II and III Colleges– Plus 2 (Higher Secondary) – Demographic Dividend – Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) – Teaching-Learning Methods -- Grammar Translation Method (GTM)– Gross Enrolment Ratio.

Introduction

India, with the present population demography of more ‘young’ Indians than any other developed nations, has an enviable stance of attracting international jobs. This macro scenario, though a welcome trend, needs enough micro-level preparatory planning such as skilling the sizeable fertile age group population. The demographic dividend is a double-edged sword – if not utilized productively, it seizes to be a destructive chaotic means.

Therefore, it is imperative to equip the present 18 – 25 year old cohorts with enough employability opportunities when they graduate out of the portal of higher education institutions (HEIs). Apart from varied subject-related knowledge [domain-specific], it is essential to have communicative skills in English – the common business link language of the world. English has become an almost universally accepted lingua franca, and the language of choice for students to learn if they want to get ahead in life. English, despite not being the most-spoken language in the world by some margin, has attained the interlanguage status.

Present Scenario

In the state of Tamilnadu, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) of higher education is higher than the national average with active *edupreneurs* by opening up HEIs in ‘for-profit’ mode. This piquant situation has yielded a ‘pressure’ on the school education – the supply side of the higher education service sector. As we all know ‘Plus 2’ – the terminal stage of schooling with a public examination, plays havoc in the life of all the children. In the marks mayhem, our system of learning had made deep-roots into rote mode of memorized learning. This handicaps the scores of ‘young’ Indians at the later stages of their higher education by crippling the creative communicative ability and thus impacts their gainful employability.

The sun-rise sectors – information technology (IT), insurance, retail and IT enabled services which create sizeable employment potential categorize the HEIs according to the geographical location. Metros such as Chennai under Tier – I; Urban centers such as Coimbatore and Madurai under Tier – II; and other towns like Erode, Salem under Tier – III classification. The lower the rung in this classification, the higher will be the communicative crippler. If this hypothesis of IT recruiters is true, then we need to do an introspective journey back into our teaching-learning (TL) process adopted to develop skill-based issues in the class-room.

Communicative English as Crippler

The pressure on English language teaching in all these institutions is palpable. In order to successfully accomplish the task of making the ‘younger’ *netizens* with adequate communicative skills both in English and Tamil, we need to analyse the following elements such as input quality, the curricula, teaching-learning methods employed, evaluation strategies, teacher competency and institutional learning culture. This section of this article tries to shed deeper insights into the input quality – the prime variable affecting the output quality. The other variables are not so flexible to alter at the institutional level. The input quality has deteriorated over a period of time and the rest of the factors causing skill deficiency syndrome need to be realigned to suit the present subpar learners.

Input Quality Deterioration

In order to boost the Gross Enrolment Ratio under 'Education For All' (EFA) regime, the policy decision of the Government made it mandatory to promote the pupils to next higher class sans terminal test. Various other administrative complexities have also added and almost a novice learner is facing the terminal board examination at 12th class only. In order to bring down the dropouts 'liberal' attitudes were bestowed upon during tenth standard public examination. From the author's perspective of studying the input quality to the HEIs, higher secondary outputs were analyzed. The result at the end of class XII is all the more significant as this leads students to enter tertiary level of education, including academic and professional courses of the university level. Over the past decade, in the senior secondary scenario, the difference between the total number of students appeared and passed has declined steadily. In other words, pass percentage has climbed northwards. This welcome trend has its own unnoticed undercurrent – quite a few undeserving candidates are declared with 'pass' remark either due to the lowered pass mark or 'liberal' valuation by the examiners.

An analysis of the marks scored in English and Tamil by the State Board class 12 students during 2010 to 2015 revealed many interesting facts. The past six years of data as shown in the table No.1 elucidates the performance differences in the language papers viz. Tamil and English. The frequency distribution curves of the marks scored by the higher secondary students during the past six years in their language (Tamil & English) papers showed the pattern of skewed normal curves. The striking difference with regard English language examination is that it does not fit into any regular 'positive or negative' skewing models. Tamil marks are positively skewed (or left skew) with a clear meaning of lesser mean than modal value. Whereas, all the six frequency distribution charts of English paper do not convey any specific meaning and clearly indicated 'inflated' seventy were the maximum. This unduly advantaged section of students is gaining entry into HEIs, like the one under investigation.

Base grades on performance, without applying an inappropriate theoretical model of "fairness." The better you organize your courses, the better you teach, the more effectively you intervene in student learning, the LESS the grade distribution in your courses will fit a Normal Curve. It will form a curve with high grades clustered to the right and a long tail stretching to the left – technically called a "negative skew".

Based on these evidences, there was not a shadow of doubt that the TN HSC board valuation of English language scripts was not genuine and willful mark tampering is prevalent. With this subpar learning community as the input for the arts and science colleges in tier III centers, the moot question to be answered is: 'Can we afford to waste our time and efforts with present curricula that had been designed and suited for a different type of learners?'. No more acceptances to 'one-size-fit-all' strategy due to their inherent weakness in the basic linguistic knowledge and skill owing to the 'liberal' valuation to enhance pass percentage.

Unabated Continuing Trend

Had the dip in the quality been accidental, then there could be forces to arrest them in the bud. Owing to the 'purposeful' inflation of marks of the candidates who had secured somewhere between 50 and 69, the quality deterioration journey southwards continuously. The figure No1 depicts the 'on-the-

dot' pass percentage for the period under analysis. "On-the-dot' pass is used to denote those who have secured just the minimum required marks of seventy and along with it we have taken 71 to 75 marks also. As observed in the diagram, for English paper it started from 3.31% of the students had passed by securing marks between 70 and 75 during 2010 and the it did not have the symptom of coming down. For 2015, it stood at 5.17%. Whereas, the same trend line over the period for Tamil valuation marks steadily declined from 2.32% during 2010 to 1.14% during the last year under review [2015]. Therefore, the 'purposeful' inflation of English language marks at Plus 2 terminal board examinations leave no choice for the ELT community at HEIs to think in terms of alternative teaching-learning strategies to makeup the learning deficiencies.

The best guess acceptable was that a pattern of moderation exists in all the years. To reduce the number of students scoring below 70, the marks of several such students were inflated to 70 and 70+, leading to the large spike at 70 and 70+. These were also corroborated with a recent study by Rojstaczer & Healy (2010), which concluded with clear evidence of nationwide grade inflation over time.

Responsibility Issues

The employer – an important stakeholder of higher education sector, astoundingly reiterated the lack of communicative skills among the outputs from HEIs, who have even secured distinction in the domain knowledge. Therefore, it is time to ponder over our system and revamp the curriculum with requisite emphasis on the skill components apart from knowledge issues. Skill development, in general, is a comprehensive responsibility to be shared by all concerned; and spoken/written communicative skill development cannot be and should not be shared by the concerned language department staff alone. The 'whole' is made up of the core and allied departments staff members along with the language and support services department personnel. At present, in the aided arts and science colleges of this region, the communicative skill development arena is an orphan-like child and mostly attached to English department. The core-departments seemingly do not share the responsibility along with language department. This kind of apathy shall quite naturally reflect in the output – the graduates, in the form of lack of communicative skills for employability.

Reorient Teaching-Learning Strategies

Crossing all inter-departmental hurdles as stated above, when we look the language department in isolation, we have a pertinent issue need to be debated: What teaching-learning (TL) approach will immensely be productive – Conventional such as Grammar Translation Method (GTM) or Non-conventional such as Communicative Teaching Approach Strategies, hybridizing many learner-centric practices? Considering the knowledge level in terms of their vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension of the HEIs input students who had put in seven years [from 6th to 12th standard] of English language TL experience in the graded class-room setting, it will be certainly shocking to observe the reality.

Instead of teaching the students at HEIs the nuances of English language and grammar, it is worth giving them enough opportunity in the form of listening and speaking activities to come out of their inhibitions and to express in non-native language. The traditional or conventional route of teaching

the 'rigid' rules of grammar and bombarding with exceptional situation is giving them an aversion to learn the language even after a decade of schooling. The courage-boosting mode alone found to be suited to make them 'swim' in the language lake. Many students who are ELLs are put into English-speaking classrooms where they understand nothing of what they are hearing. In this "sink or swim" situation, many flounder. It is no wonder that many ELLs flounder – not because they have language-learning disabilities, but because they are put into such difficult learning situations in our schools.

Instead of reinventing the wheel, it would be better if we 'really' recognize the learners' levels and reorient our TL strategies to address the neo-learners who could secure admission into HEIs with their 'inflated' gift of marks mostly in English. This reorientation of ELT community shall enhance the employability of the outputs of HEIs.

Conclusion

The complexity of grammar greatly affects the speed of learning and accuracy of the recognizer. Creating a high-quality, error-free grammar requires somewhat different skills than programming in a language like Java or C++. Grammars are inherently non-procedural and thus software programming and grammar writing cannot be approached in the same way. A clarion call to the English language teaching community is thus clear. The information overloaded present youth needs a changed approach to inherently like the niceties of the sophisticated English. Therefore, it is better to customize the teaching tools on a need-based approach and to use a small or tiny group of learners with similar basic knowledge. Though it is a catch-22 situation, ELT community shall not shrink the responsibility by passing the buck to lower levels. A proactive approach by integrating skill building mode into the knowledge testing system is the need of the moment.

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