

## New Challenges In Teaching Spoken English For Employment At The Undergraduate Level

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### Abstract

The employment sector in India is diversifying with the liberalization of the economy. Education at the undergraduate level is however at present, not in tune with the requirements of the job market. In order to provide employment related skills to the undergraduate students, more stress needs to be placed on linking education with work. This is applicable to the teaching of Spoken English also.

This paper addresses the need to give more importance to the development of the speaking skills in English, which is the most neglected skill among the language skills taught at the undergraduate level. The paper examines the following:

1. The notion of spoken English as it is taught in the undergraduate level.
  2. The nature of spoken English taught through the existing English courses at the undergraduate level.
  3. The scope of spoken English taught through the option vocation-oriented Functional English course
  4. The work-related skills that need to be linked with the teaching of spoken English at the undergraduate level
- Based on the observation: a three stage approach for co-ordinating the efforts to relate spoken English to employment needs is suggested.

### Introduction

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in recent years has opened up more employment opportunities in the form and non-formal sectors. Since it is not realistic to a that all undergraduates have an inclination for higher education, we need to utilize the current prospects for employment to

our advantage Education at the undergraduate level has however not been organised in consonance with the manpower requirement of the job market (Bhatnagar, 1957, Minocha, 1995) This has necessitated innovations in the planning and implementation of education at the undergraduate level. Though the educational policies of the last one and half decades, notably *The Challenge of Education A Policy Perspective* (1985) *The Reports of the Committee for Review on the National Policy of Education* (1990) and *The Report on the vocationalisation of First Degree Education* (1993) have stressed on the need to link education with work, there is still a dearth for graduates with the requisite skills for specific employment. On the one hand, we do not want a large number of educated unemployed and on the other, we have jobs for which suitable candidates are not available (Desai 1995) Therefore, the responsibility of retooling the undergraduate student with appropriate employment related skills ultimately falls on the curriculum developers and teachers. In the present context, we shall examine this issue in relation to the teaching of English at the undergraduate level.

This paper addresses the need to give more importance to the development of the speaking skill in students, which is generally ignored at the undergraduate level. It is observed that an undergraduate in India, gets some opportunity to listen, read and write in English, but hardly any, to speak in English in the classroom. Whether this gap is due to the structure of the syllabus, the teaching methodology used or the activities and tasks the students are engaged in during the class hours require careful investigation. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that this trend, where the students do not get much opportunity to improve their proficiency in the speaking skill is gradually maturing into a malady The symptoms are evident, when the average graduate attends job interviews or try to become self-employed in urban areas, where a minimum level of communicative ability in English is expected. Apparently, to make up for the deficiencies in the existing undergraduate English classroom, several Spoken English Institutes have mushroomed, who claim to provide quick remedies, with high fees, to the desperate job seeker.

The rapid pace of information explosion in all fields of knowledge has further reinforced the need to develop effective oral communication strategies to convey

information and to interact with people with varied interests and pursuits in life. Gunnarson (1997) states that with the emergence of sophisticated communication technology, the recent trends in professional work consists of an "intricate interaction between people and advanced technical equipment and systems"(p 285) Yet, the usefulness of effective speaking skills for a successful professional cannot be underestimated. While the regional/local language will suffice for professional contacts locally, it has become inevitable that one should have a good command of the English language, for interactions not only within one's own professional group, but also between different specialist groups and between experts and lay people.

Statistics show that the enrolment of students in the undergraduate level is mainly in the stream of Arts and Humanities (38%), followed by Commerce (22%) and Natural Sciences (21%) (Desai,1995 20). The crucial question therefore is how we can train this 81% of the undergraduate students to achieve a minimum level of communicative capability in English for diverse employment avenues.

The Notion of Spoken English Spoken English is usually associated with the teaching of Phonetics. Students are exposed to the correct pronunciation of the "sounds of English, first....in isolation then in short isolated words and finally in short isolated sentences" (Yule and Brown, 1983: 2) with appropriate stress and intonation. Practice is also given in listening and repeating the vowels and consonants of English. In addition, some importance is also given to accurate role play of short dialogues related to specific situations and in reading out passages from the classics of English literature. All these tasks help the students to get over their inhibition to speak in English. It however does not provide them with the conversational, interpersonal and presentation skills essential in employment.

We therefore need to redefine the teaching of Spoken English, so that the undergraduate students learn how to perform basic interactional and transaction functions in English effectively. The Undergraduate English Courses and Spoken English.

Let us here examine the English courses offered at the undergraduate level and explore the scope of teaching the skill of Speaking There are mainly four courses: (1) English Major, (2) General English for BA/BSc/B.Com

students (compulsory), (3) Special English (elective) and (4) Communicative/ Functional English (elective vocational course).

As we are aware, the English Major courses predominantly focus on the teaching of English Literature ( i.e History of Literature and Literary Criticism, Poetry, Drama and Prose) Teaching is mainly in the lecture mode and in the final written examination, the students are expected to write short essays, short answers and explanations with reference to the context (as done in Kerala University and Dibrugarh University). Some English Major syllabuses, (eg. Dibrugarh University) have components on the "Sounds of English", but the examination is again restricted to writing short notes" (Singh, 1999: 60). There is no emphasis given on the focussed, integrated development of language skills (eg. listening, speaking, reading and writing) based on the prescribed textbooks or other supplementary teaching materials, for the potential employee/ employer/ freelancer among the students.

General English courses for B.A/B.Sc./B.Com, students usually have sections on prose, poetry, drama, non-detailed texts and grammar. As in the English Major courses, the first four (i.e. prose, poetry, drama and non-detailed texts are taught through lecture mode and tested through written examination, on the content of the prescribed textbooks. Grammar is restricted to the use of prepositions, passive and active voices and direct and indirect speech - again in the written mode. The students are given exposure to general essay and precis writing. While reading and writing skill are minimally focussed on, the syllabuses do not give any importance to the listening and speaking skills. According to the CDC Report (1939: 17), the General English syllabuses, in general, do not take into account the learner's needs and interests.

The Special English course in most universities consists mainly of a list of literary texts (CDC Report, 1987:17) with the examination based on essays, short answers, definitions and seen and unseen passages for critical appreciation. In some universities (e.g. Kerala University), a communications skills component is included. Though the objectives include the development of "skills and abilities that may be necessary for their future academic and professional needs and interests" (CDC

Report, 1989-91) there is no visible improvement in the communication skills of the students.

The Functional English course offered as an optional subject focuses specifically on the use of language for effective communication - written and oral. Among the twelve papers to be done in six semesters students are introduced to Phonetics (two papers) and Conversational English (three papers). Speaking skill has rightly been given a prominent place in the course, for it has been identified as the most important skill which fulfils the demands of the job market by potential employers and Functional English teachers (Kumar, 1997). In addition to these, there are also provisions for on-the-job training, project work and entrepreneurial development. Each paper focuses on a specific content area, having both theoretical and practical components. The functional English package thus, apparently attempts to bridge the gap created by the literature oriented English studies offered at the undergraduate level and the growing need for more function-oriented English courses.

The Functional English Course: A Case Study on Teaching Spoken English:

The Functional English course being vocation-oriented, students are to be given training in the use of the English language for effective conversational, interpersonal and presentation skills. Irrespective of the syllabuses consulted, the FE students are expected to be able to speak English with a "high degree of confidence, accuracy and fluency in a wide range of life situations" (Prototype syllabus) by the end of the course. Practical training includes facing the camera and visits to the TV and radio stations to understand the various aspects of broadcasting. On-the-job training related to Spoken English is offered in announcing, news reading, giving commentary, teaching conversational skills and journalism.

A recent study (Singh, 1999) on the implementation of the Spoken English component of the Functional English course in five colleges in India shows that the teaching methodology offers scope for interaction among the students in the classroom. Students are given some opportunity to interact with each other and with the teacher during the class. As there are no compulsory prescribed textbooks, the teacher has the freedom to adapt

teaching materials to suit the requirements of the students. Audio/radio programmes, reference materials, dictionary, newspaper clippings, maps, charts, diagrams, subject textbooks, teachers' notes and TV/ video programmes are the main teaching materials used. Ongoing internal assessment and final written and oral examination for theoretical and practical component of the speaking skill are also attempted in the colleges.

The teaching of Spoken English in the Functional English course has however been restricted to three aspects Phonetics, practice of English-in- situations and limited exposure to broadcasting, training students' phonetics through drill exercises for proper pronunciation of the consonants and vowels in English with intonation and accent. Teaching of Phonetics, which is offered as two papers of 100 marks each, emphasises on higher level of accuracy than fluency in speaking English. It is observed that the link up of Phonetics to vocation training has not been clearly established. The students are therefore unsure on how the exposure to the phonetics English can provide practical training for communication in the workplace.

The same problem emerges with the teaching of English in-situations also. Students are asked to write and then read out the dialogues on topics recommended in the syllabus (eg at the post office, at the bank). Singh 1999 states the practice in conversational skills is limited to memorising and reproducing these sample model dialogues, whenever particular topic is given. This indicates that the real communication skills are not developed through the task. Though the syllabus has provisions for fieldwork and visits to places which offer situations to practise conversational skills, it is yet to be effectively implemented in the colleges.

At present, the vocational aspect of the course has been compartmentalised to broadcasting training offered as three papers in the sixth semester. The 1999 study shows that the theoretical component is more focussed on, the practical training. Though there are various vocation training options in the syllabus, it is seen that the students' socio-economic background, motivation to join the course, interest in career options and the aptitude for training are not taken into account. Rather, all the students receive training in broadcasting, though only a small percentage

may get employed in jobs related to it.

Another neglected area is entrepreneurial training especially for those students who have a flair for self-employment. The functional English syllabus content for entrepreneurial development again focusses more on "theoretical information" and "the issues related to starting one's own private enterprise (Revised RIE syllabus). While the exposure to these would create more awareness among the students and teachers of the course further guidance needs to be given on the practical aspects of initiating an entrepreneurial venture, through minor project works and practical assignments.

These details on how Spoken English is taught through the vocational oriented Functional English course, can give us further insight into how the speaking skills can be taught to the undergraduate student, for employment purposes.

#### **Suggestions and Recommendations:**

We have seen that the existing English Major, General English and Special English courses at the UG level do not equip students with the adequate skills of speaking. The Functional English course, though more geared towards providing employment related skills, also need to relate the teaching of the speaking skill more specifically to vocational training. In the light of these observations, I extend the following suggestions/recommendations to improve the teaching of Spoken English in order to enhance the employment prospects of the UG student at the University level;

1. Need to implement the recommendations of the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) Report (1989), and to introduce the revised UG curriculum' for the General English and Special English courses.
2. Special English or Functional English, which provide scope for focussed language skills development to be made obligatory for the English major students.
3. Functional English course to be effectively linked t with on-the-job training and field work through Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the University and the training institutes. The assistance of the UGC-Vocational Cell could be availed in this regard.

4. Organise teacher training programmes in collaboration with teacher training institutes (like Academic State Colleges, CIEFL, RIE-Chandigarh) addressing issue like Spoken English in large classes, training student for employment, teaching inter-disciplinary, need-base English courses etc.

5. Ensure infra-structural facilities to colleges-in terms of furniture, teaching materials and well equipped library Make provisions for a media centre within each university where students and teachers can have access to audio/video cassettes, films, documentations educational programmes, computer-assisted language learning modules etc.

6. Appointment of teachers who are equipped to teach inter disciplinary English courses.

7. Initiate campus selection for varied jobs for graduates as in professional courses.

#### **At the college level;**

1. Need for more coordination among the teachers of English for integrated teaching of 'language' and Literature.

2. Need for inter-departmental interaction between Arts, Science and Commerce departments in a college, to develop need based Spoken English courses, it will also enhance the quality of vocational training provided through the FE course.

3. Develop a common tasks and activities data bank within the English Department of a college that can be used by all teachers to develop the speaking skills in students.

4. Appointment of part-time lectures, local resource persons and experts for even distribution of work-load in the English Department and for specialised teaching requirements.

5. Introduction of periodical review sessions between the University, the Principal of the college and the English teachers to assess how the English courses in general and the speaking skill in particular is being taught.

6. Encourage students' feedback on teacher performance, teaching methodology, teaching materials and examination system to improve the quality of Spoken English training offered to the undergraduates.



### **At the classroom level;**

1. Role of the teacher to be of a facilitator who would encourage the students to do maximum-speaking with minimum communication stress.
2. Minimum correction of pronunciation and intonation, i.e. more, emphasis on fluency than accuracy is needed.
3. Training to be given on discourse management during long transactional turns and short interactional turns with genuine information gap between the speaker and the listener. In other words, more importance to be given on what the speaker means than what the word mean.
4. Speaking tasks should take into account the students reasons for learning spoken English, his/her culture identity and academic background.
5. Exposure of the students to authentic day-to-da conversations announcements, commentary, compering news bulletin, radio/TV programmes for understand the art of speaking English and modifying as the conversation progresses.
6. Training needs to be given regarding how to modulate one's voice, for presentation of scripts, extempore speeches and conversation with others. A range of employment related language functions like greetings, making requests, enquiries, complaints, extending invitations, negotiating and persuading people etc. may be practised. Special emphasis can also be given on the speaking skills and non-verbal gestures needed for business communications, appropriate and effective telephonic conversations and different types of interactions with clients and customers.
7. Testing should focus on the student's ability to communicate effectively in the spoken mode, with due credit given for accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, grammar and presentation. A continuous record of the student's performance in different occasions for different purposes can be useful to assess the student's overall development of the employment related speaking skills.

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