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THE NEED FOR CULTURE SPECIFIC SYLLABUS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNERS OF
ENGLISH: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The existing engineering English language syllabus prescribed by the JNT University and the Osmania University focuses on improving all the four language skills among the engineering students. However, a close examination of the results and the placements across various engineering colleges makes it clear that the professional students are unable to get placed properly due to the lack of effective language skills. One of the major targets of the engineering English syllabus is to make the students well-equipped with all the four skills of language - listening, speaking, reading and writing. This paper attempts to find out whether culture specific syllabus helps in improving the English language skills of the engineering students in the state of Telangana. This study is based on the responses of the English teachers working in various Engineering colleges to a structured questionnaire on the culture specific syllabus.

Keywords: culture specific syllabus, language skills, structured questionnaire, engineer students

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INTRODUCTION

The students admitted into engineering colleges in Telangana state come from different backgrounds. Most of them hail from regional medium schools and colleges. The students feel shy and fearful when it comes to expressing themselves in English. This is a common phenomenon in spite of the fact that they have spent almost twelve years in learning English language before joining engineering course.

Language is a part of culture and that it plays a very important role in it. Some of the social scientists go to the extent of saying that culture is not possible without language. Culture is reflected by language and it is influenced and shaped by it. Language is the symbolic representation of people, as it includes the historical and cultural backgrounds. Language also depicts the approach to life and their ways of living and thinking.

Brown (1994) quotes,

A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture. (p.165)

In the words of Geertz.C. (1973)

Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their actions. (p. 145)

Many linguists tried to explore the relationship between language and culture. Nida (1998) holds the view that Language and culture are two symbolic systems. Everything we say in language has meanings, designative or sociative, denotative or connotative. Every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture and culture is more extensive than language.(p.29)

Language and culture are interrelated. Kramsch (1998) describes language as a 'principal means' whereby the people conduct their social lives. She states that language in relation with 'context of communication' is interrelated with culture in 'multiple and complex ways'. Culture is present whatever the language discussion is. Language learning can be facilitated by having a careful selection of culture related material in textbooks. Textbook evaluation can help both learners and teachers to achieve their goal of language and culture learning.

According to Md. Aslam (2003)

Quality textbooks should be prepared that are culturally familiar and linguistically appropriate to their respective levels. (p. 23)

Cortazzi and Jin (1999) opined that there are three factors - teachers, students and textbook authors - that play a vital role in culture. According to them,

A textbook is useful if learners, teachers and textbook authors share the same cultural values. If they don't share the same cultural values, then at least they should be familiar with the cultural norms of one another.(P.118)

Aim of the Study

The present study aims at finding out the need to include culturally relevant materials to facilitate better performance in English among the engineering students of the state of Telangana.

Methodology

A total of 50 teachers from 15 different engineering colleges (OU & JNTU) in the state participated in the study. A structured questionnaire was administered to them to elicit their responses on the culture-specific syllabus.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through the structured questionnaire along with the analysis is presented below:

1. Given a chance, would you like to change the present Engineering English syllabus?
 - a. Very much
 - b. To some extent
 - c. Not very much
 - d. Can't say

This question was asked to know if the teachers really wanted some changes to be made to the existing English language syllabus prescribed for engineering students.

The responses to this question presented a very remarkable picture. A vast majority of the sample teachers wanted to make changes to the current English syllabus if they were given the opportunity, but of varying degrees. Of the total sample teachers, 27% were in favour of the modification of the syllabus to a great extent. Another 67% of the sample teachers wanted changes to some extent. On the other hand, 6% of the teachers were not very certain with regard to this point. The remaining teachers felt that the syllabus is good

and did not require changes to the existing syllabus. This indicates that there is an urgent need for making changes with regard to the present English syllabus.

It can be observed from the above data that the present English syllabus requires some modification, as per the teachers' responses. Making changes to the present syllabus will require a lot of preparation and planning. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that textbooks needed to be altered or revised to suit the ever-changing needs of the students. This is clearly evident from the positive responses of the language teachers who are in favour of the change.

2. In the wake of globalization and global cultures, do you think that the local culture is getting diluted and facing danger?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. To some extent

To this query, the teachers showed a very positive response. A majority of the teachers gave the opinion that our culture and cultural practices are facing a threat on the wake of globalization. Global culture is rapidly becoming a fashionable concept in the present day context.

52% of the teachers agreed that the local cultures are getting diluted and facing danger because of foreign influence; 4% did not agree and 42% of the sample teachers were of the opinion that the influence is to some extent.

As our economy is opening up to the rest of the world and investments from multinational corporations in our country are on the rise, we seem to import not only their latest technologies, cosmetics, food chains, call centres, coffee houses, clothing lines etc., but also their culture. Thus, we unconsciously are in awe of them and welcome it into our lives. We unknowingly ape their lifestyles and way of thinking. This western or foreign influence has proven to be disastrous to our already deteriorating culture and social values which also seem to be lost at an alarming rate especially with the present and even more so with the younger generation. So, by including lessons which reflect our culture will not only help the present generation know their culture but also help them in learning the English language better through local culture as they will have some content in their mind to speak up and discuss.

3. Do you agree that students can relate better to the lessons if they are based on their own culture, customs and way of life? Yes/No

In response to the question 80% of the sample teachers expressed the view that the students can relate better to the lessons if they are based on their own culture, customs and way of life while 20% of the sample teachers did not agree to this opinion.

4. What is your opinion on the English language textbook(s) presently prescribed for engineering students of your college/university?
 - a. Indispensable
 - b. Beneficial
 - c. Supporting
 - d. Restricting
 - e. Ineffective

This question was asked to find out the opinion of the sample teachers on the English language textbooks presently prescribed for engineering students. Of the total sample teachers 2% said that the present English language textbooks are indispensable; 35% expressed that they are beneficial; 39% opined that the textbooks are supporting; 14% of them said they are restricting and 10% of the sample teachers had the opinion that the prescribed textbooks are ineffective.

5. What do you think should be the focus of an English language textbook?
 - a. The students' native culture
 - b. Culture of the English language speaking countries [like USA, UK, Australia etc.]

c. Cultures of different countries

This question was asked to find out the opinion of the teachers about the focus of an English language textbook.

41% of the sample teachers are of the opinion that the focus of an English language textbook should be on the students' native culture; 16% of them said that the English language textbook should focus on the culture of the English language speaking countries like the USA, the UK, Australia etc; while 43% of the sample teachers expressed the view that the English textbook should include all the aspects related to the cultures of different countries.

6. Do you think lessons or textbook material related to local culture will help in preserving the identity of local cultures and also help in arousing the interest among the students towards learning English better?
- Very much
 - To some extent
 - Not very much
 - Can't say

In response to this question, 62% of the teachers believed that incorporating familiar topics would be advantageous and valuable for the students. On the wake of globalization and global culture, the incorporation of cultural topics would eventually help in preserving the identity and authenticity of the local culture. On the other hand, 7% are not very certain with regard to this question. 5% of the teachers felt that this will not help in arousing the interest of the students and also in preserving the local cultural practices and its authenticity.

The sample teachers gave a very favourable response to this question. It can be clearly seen from the data that the sample teachers are in favour of the idea of incorporating familiar topics. Familiar topics, which are of interest to students, can make them actively participate in the discussion. They will show signs of interest and participation. On the one hand this will facilitate faster and enjoyable learning and at the same time also support in preserving our rich and diverse cultural practices and values and maintaining their distinct identity. Therefore, it is greatly felt that it is very essential to incorporate cultural material for the interest of the students and also to preserve and maintain its authenticity.

Findings

The following are the findings of the study:

- A vast majority of the teachers wanted to make changes to the current English syllabus if they were given the opportunity, but of varying degrees.
- A majority of the sample teachers gave the opinion that our culture and cultural practices are facing a threat on the wake of globalization. Global culture is rapidly becoming a fashionable concept in the present day context.
- 80% of the teachers expressed the view that students can relate better to the lessons if they are based on their own culture, customs and way of life.
- A reasonable number of the sample teachers opined that the textbooks are restricting and the prescribed textbooks are ineffective.
- A majority of the teachers are of the opinion that the focus of an English language textbook should be on the students' native culture.
- 86% of the teachers believed that incorporating familiar topics would be advantageous and valuable for the students. On the wake of globalization and global culture, the incorporation of cultural topics would eventually help in preserving the identity and authenticity of the local culture.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the study that culture specific syllabus in English would be helpful for the students of engineering in improving their English language skills. Since many teachers are in favour of culture syllabus, it is high time the syllabus makers thought about the culture-specific syllabus. Contents related to one's own culture would definitely have a positive impact on the learning of English.

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