

Course Design in Teaching of English to the First Year Engineering College Students in Chhattisgarh

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Abstract:

We have designed the shortest possible course to give maximum working results in the quickest possible time of 60 hours which can be divided into three sequential components of 20 hours each. I have used the first component in the first semester with very satisfying results. In this Paper, I am presenting the first component that comprises –

1. Phonetics (Sounds of English)

This facilitates teaching the use of articles with rules that have no exceptions.

2. 24 Auxiliaries or Special Verbs

This builds up a solid platform to learn Negative-Interrogative, Short Answers, Question-Tags, Agreement-Disagreement, etc.

3. Time-Tense Concept

This comes in handy to teach all the Tenses with the help of just 5 Matching Tables. Behind this shortest possible course is our belief that the learners are always capable of learning various related topics, if they are provided with the most essential teachable items. While learning to ride on a bicycle, the learner needs the trainer only as long as he learns to balance the handle. Other skills he learns himself.

Teaching Engineering students is a challenge. They expect English teaching to fall in line with the teaching of other Engineering subjects. They look forward to the teaching of English to be scientific/mathematical, logical and comprehensible in nature to suit the grids they have. They are motivated to learn English to get a good job. This pushes them to make concerted efforts. Their personal characteristics, like discipline, confidence and experience, also facilitate learning. They want to quickly develop workable command of English needed for interviews, group discussions and presentations of their written work. Our course suits their needs.

Key words: First Year Engineering College Students, course syllabus, Teaching of English, Chhattisgarh, India

Introduction:

Teaching English to Engineering students is a challenge.

Students Background

The students that come to the first year college are 17-18 years of age. They have done their higher secondary school certificate (matriculation) at school. After five years of primary education they have done secondary level (sixth, seventh and eighth years) and higher secondary level (ninth, tenth, eleventh and Twelfth years) at school. The majority comes from regional language medium schools (in Chhattisgarh, it is Hindi). So, they have had six years of English at secondary and higher secondary levels. Those who come from English medium schools (they are not many) have had 12 years of English. In principle, therefore, they come to first year college with sufficient knowledge of the structure of English and they are supposed to understand and express themselves in workable English. But in reality, that is not the case. Most students 'do' their English with the main aim to pass their examinations and they are able to do so with the help of bazaar notes (that are published every year before the examinations and are available in the market)

and rote-learning. Even most teaching is geared to prepare the students for the examinations rather than to enable them to learn the language.

Most students, therefore, when they come to college, suddenly realise that they need English if they wish to go for engineering or medicine, at least as a library language. They are frustrated when they are confronted with lecture-method teaching of English in the college classrooms.

In short, there is always a wide gap in reality between the entry level proficiency (entry competence)-of the first year college students of General English and the take-off point in the teaching of English at college level that invariably results in cumulative language deficit.

Students' Needs and Wants

On the basis of my experience and exposure as a 'teacher' at this level I can say that most students need a workable and working command of English at the end (school) so that, when they go to an engineering or a medical college or in any field, they are not handicapped by lack of English in comprehending various reading texts and understanding lectures which are most often in English.

Since the take-off point in the First Year College Course is well beyond the actual entry level proficiency of many, the majority feels frustrated throughout the course and what they want at the end of the course is a pass. Most teachers, as indeed the commercialized bazaar-note writers, cater for this 'pseudo-need' of the students by preparing them somehow for the examinations.

In order to pin down their immediate needs I always have an informal chat with the students on the first day and ask them questions like:

Do you want to pass the exam? Or, do you want to learn English?

Do you want to come to a stage from where you can self-learn?

What do you wish to learn in English? Speaking? Grammar? Learning to read? Learning to write? etc.

The answers to these questions are always positive in the sense that they are all expected answers. They do want to learn the language and soon cross the initial language barrier. They are very fond of Spoken English (because of the social desire rather than the academic need). They have a deep rooted faith in Grammar and they believe that they cannot learn English without grammar. They think that they will be able to read and write in English if they know their grammar well.

Apart from this informal chat, I give them a short diagnostic test to find out their difficult areas in grammar and to pinpoint what actually is needed to be taught. In this situation when I am writing this, I make use of my own experience and try to perceive the potential needs of the students on the basis of that, and fill-in the relevant parts of Hutchinson and Waters (1987:59) framework used for needs analysis.

Our course suits their needs.

How? Minimum Input Maximum Output

This course in my experience has proved out to be a very successful tool for the beginners to understand and express their ideas and thoughts from one person to another with the right balance of fluency and accuracy.

On the other hand it provides a platform to observe their own usages and gradually improve themselves on their own. And above all, it enables them to communicate in English in real life situations.

Why SOE?

It might be asked why a particular component is included in the course, for example sounds of English. Sounds of English are taught because it helps them to learn the use/choice of indefinite articles. At school the rule that they learn is: 'Use an before words beginning with a e i o u'. Then they are told there are exceptions. Therefore, when in this course they are told indefinite articles a and an go with countable nouns in singular (not with every word as the school rule suggests) and an precedes a vowel sound, and there are no exceptions, it immediately clinches the issue and motivates them to learn many more rules like that, i.e., without exceptions.

Countable/uncountable nouns are taught because this area is related to the teaching of articles. Also, one text-book at school level has treated stars as uncountable (thereby losing the distinction between countable and countless.) and it is useful to make the students unlearn that at this stage.

Why 24 Special Verbs?

"24 friends of not' (modal/auxiliaries) are taught (with more emphasis on "do", 'have' and forms of 'be' rather than 'ought', 'dare' and "need") because this facilitates the learning/teaching of Negative/Interrogative transformations, Short answers, Question-tags and Agreement/Disagreement.

Why 5 Matching Tables?

In tenses, only selected aspects are taught (as shown in the syllabus) and not others, as, in my experience, the students in general are able to learn the other aspects on their own from what they have been taught here.

The reason for transferring some of the grammatical items from the main course to this Course is: they can be better taught, at least in my view, in a composite and cohesive Course like this than as and when they come through a Reading Comprehension course like the main course. Here, the

students are able to concentrate on one language item at a time which is not possible in the main course.

Methodology

The Need for an Eclectic Approach

At present, teachers of English around the world prefer some form of communicative teaching and learning, rather than the audio-lingual method and its derivatives. However, we must remember that a successful teacher is not necessarily biased in favour of one method or the other. He should be first of all competent in and comfortable with the methods he wants to use. He should be able to select from different teaching strategies and methods to suit the needs of the students and the classroom situation.

It is important that the students are given ample opportunities to practice English in the class as well as outside. Internalization of the linguistic structures and their ready and easy retrieval for communication are thus achieved in many ways.

A diligent teacher continually learns new techniques from his peers and his students, as he interacts with them. His own English speech, pronunciation, and writing should be as close to the “standard” as possible, or native-like, if he is not a native speaker of English. He may use regional characteristics of English to inform and entertain, but he should be able to switch to the “standard” for presenting his lessons.

His writing in English should be simple and straightforward. He should have a good command of the language and its grammar. In the class, he should have a clear voice, and should be energetic and enthusiastic so that the class will come alive in his presence. It is important for him to get all his students involved in the drills and exercises conducted in the class. A good actor he should be!

Materials

The teacher himself has to select suitable material for teaching either from published text-books or newspapers, magazines and science journals or has to construct them on his own. The materials are basically teacher constructed, building in from social situations and/or popular contexts of interest like sports, cinema, and science, for example. Suitable pieces from newspapers, films, and science magazines can also be utilised as 'Unseen Passages' for Reading Comprehension. Language points can be extracted from them for teaching grammar. This is more and more possible as the course progresses.

Nowadays, we get enough materials in the form of audio- video cassettes and CDs. The teacher can sometimes use these materials in his classroom but must be careful enough to establish a balance between fluency and accuracy.

Conclusion

If such a Course is successful - in our experience it has always been - it enhances the employability skills, making the learner self-dependent and proficient enough in Spoken English Skills, Presentation Skills which surely gives an edge to the job seekers. This course if introduced on an official basis will have to be at least a short orientation for teachers doing this course along with teacher training to bring uniformity in learning and teaching of this course. This course has been tried out at MMCT and has brought promising results in the form of proficient learners and teachers of English and has equipped them with a tool to:

- speak English with desired level of accuracy and fluency and above all with more confidence, in a range of situations and on a wide range of topics.
- speak more effectively in public
- pronounce English more clearly and more accurately

- improve their skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing
- expand their vocabulary
- share their knowledge and skills with other professionals in their field
- develop their communication skills
- broaden their cultural and job placement horizon
- increase their confidence and creativity in English

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