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CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)

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ABSTRACT

English for specific purposes is shortly termed as ESP. It stands for teaching English for other disciplines like medicine, engineering, law, etc., other than English major. On a generalized aspect, the English faculty is often put to many different challenges in teaching English for specific purposes such as, a prevalent state of confusion in deciding the levels of grammar required for specific teaching, the development of vocabulary in students both from tamil and English medium schools at an equal rate pertaining to the field taught, getting the students to actually converse and write in fluent English, difficulty on the part of the faculty to get thorough with the terms and concepts relating to the specific field of teaching, and so on. Given the syllabus and a stipulated time-frame., where to lengthen and where to cut it short, of the topics at hand, is yet a bigger challenge. The expected time frame for completion of the syllabus exceeds when the level of students are a combination of the vernacular medium and the English medium. Bilingual adherence of teaching, poses a great difficulty to the faculty, as it is time consuming, and it creates a lot of frustration and boredom in other English medium students, which at times keeps the teacher unable to balance the sessions equally interesting for both. It is highly difficult for the English faculty to get their colleagues to understand the difficulties of teaching language to the students in a confined atmosphere, with less or little exposure to the language based activities, even in the form of extra-reading or library usage for language purposes. More often bearing criticisms is a great challenge.

The current paper here is an attempt to throw open my personal experience of teaching English for the Law students at a private college, admitted to the 5 year B.A., L.L.B, degree. The paper is more of a subjective description of my personal handling of English for Law students, hence obvious of a theoretical presentation.

KEYWORDS: English, specific purposes, challenges, syllabus, bilingual

INTRODUCTION

English for specific purposes is shortly termed as ESP. English for Specific Purposes(ESP) is a learner centered approach to teaching English as an additional language, which focuses on developing communicative competence in a specific discipline such as academics, accounting, agrology, business,

IT, teaching, and engineering. According to the definition in *English or Specific Purposes (Tom Hutchinson and Alan Walters,1990-CUP)*, ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reasons for learning. Simply, it stands for teaching

English for other disciplines like medicine, engineering, law, etc., other than English major

Speaking of teaching English for specific purposes, on a generalized aspect, the English faculty is often put to a state of confusion in deciding the levels of grammar required, on the firsthand. Secondly, the development of vocabulary poses the biggest challenge pertaining to the field taught. Thirdly, getting the students to actually speak in English itself becomes challenging, based on their cultural and traditional preferences of the language. Above all, the major difficulty lies on the part of the faculty to get thorough with the terms and concepts relating to the specific field of teaching.

The current paper here is an attempt to throw open my personal experience of teaching English for the Law students at a private college, admitted to the 5 year B.A., L.L.B, degree. The paper is more of a subjective description of my personal handling of English for Law students, hence obvious of a theoretical presentation.

THE TRAUMA

Trauma – sounds puzzling though, was exactly what I underwent when I voluntarily applied for the post of Assistant Professor in English, at a Private Law College in my hometown. A long gap of ten years after, I was attempting to push myself into teaching English, in-fact into the field of teaching itself, then at the school level and now at the collegiate level. The Management was flexible enough to understand the trauma and difficulty I was personally facing, and allowed me the privilege of choosing the syllabus that I felt comfortable handling with. I was luckily saved to choose the first year syllabus of the first semester, for the Law students of 5 year B.A., L.L.B Degree. Safe, in terms of handling a batch of students, who were just then school pass-outs and it helped me to balance the level of learners I had handled previously.

INTO THE PAGES OF LAW

'Law and language' by R.P.Bhatnagar was the book specified in the syllabus I preferred to handle. Pushing me into reading through the pages of the book eased my inner doubts and fears of handling English for Law students, but not without difficulty. Difficulty arose in the form of prose

lessons each pertaining to anecdotes, references, etc. from original law precepts, most of them introducing an array of vocabulary, mood and set-up all exhibiting Legal procedures. I being a Master level graduate of English, felt challenged to decide on the right proportion of deliverance of the topic as and only that needed for the Law student. "To be or not to be" was my disposition at hand, be it grammar, vocabulary, composition, comprehension and even prose. Where to lengthen and where to cut it short, of the topics at hand, was a bigger challenge given a stipulated time-frame by the Management. My worlds got swirling into a storm, thinking of a justified delivery of the syllabus within the allotted timeframe.

TIME MANAGEMENT

Time management is one major challenge faced by the teachers of English for specific purposes in common. Unlike the core subjects, a faculty of English needs to equip oneself with the vocabulary, terminologies and concepts of the given discipline, beforehand the delivering of English. The syllabus for English for any specific purpose of teaching obviously covers atleast a unit or two of topics based on the core subject. In my case, the syllabus had one whole unit allotted for teaching fifteen prose lessons combined into one book, as mentioned earlier 'Law and Language' by R.P.Bhatnagar. Apart from this the syllabus also had the whole second unit for grammar, right from sentence, kinds of sentences to almost degrees of comparison, speech, voices, etc., upto every other topic of what could be called as basic grammar lessons. The remaining three units were dedicated each to vocabulary, composition and comprehension respectively.

Analyzing the syllabus is a prerequisite for teaching, in order to allocate the number of sessions required for each topic. Now why is this posing a bigger challenge? The expected time frame for completion of the syllabus exceeds when the level of students are a combination of the vernacular medium and the English medium. Most of the lessons, even words need to be literally taught in bilingual method, which obviously took more sessions for a justified rendering of the lessons. Even off- hour assistance to the vernacular medium

students could not help much in enabling the students to pick-up with the lessons at a pace equal to that of the English medium students. Most of the times even to arouse the interest of the vernacular medium students poses to be challenging, owing to their own inhibitions towards the subject right from school days, either for reasons of the teachers' lack of sound knowledge in the subject or for reasons of more patriotic attachment towards their own native language, in this case, the native language being Tamil. Most of the students of this Private College hailed from the southern districts of Tamilnadu, who exhibited very strong feelings for their mother tongue. Obviously bilingual method of teaching was time consuming.

DOUBLE CHALLENGE

Beginning with the actual classes for students, I preferred to start with the prose lessons of the prescribed book. The challenge faced by me as a faculty, was to motivate the students into English as well into the subject of Law, coz the students were just school pass-out and mostly from non-law backing, means to say, only few were either wards or relatives of law based people, either lawyers, magistrates, judges, etc. So there posed a double challenge towards getting the attention of students equally into English and Law simultaneously, as well, on my part I was supposed to have atleast fairly good referential knowledge about the authors, characters, constitutional references, anecdotes, precepts, original court proceedings, judgments, etc of law, as and when they appeared in the lesson. This referential study consumed more hours of preparation time, which almost consumed even the least of my personal outlet time, causing a lot of stress and burn out until the completion of the syllabus.

Gradually proceeding onto grammar and other units of the syllabus, I must admit that I was literally not very sure if I needed to go into detail with each topics of grammar. As discussed earlier, most of the students though were graduated out of English medium schools, were not very much good at grammar and with those from the tamil medium, nothing much could be expected when it comes to grammar. Simultaneously, I would be put to guilt, if I failed to recognize the need and interest the tamil

medium students showed as days rolled on, in order to make a serious effort to their chosen profession. This in turn encouraged me as a teacher to inspire them towards taking good interest in the mastery of the English language. This motivation on either sides – teacher and student is one appreciable outcome for all the challenges faced by the teacher.

Bilingual method of teaching though approved as a standard mode of teaching, has its own drawbacks, when it comes to teaching of vocabulary. Words and its meanings have a vast difference in application to the preferred context from that of the bilingual to English. Most of the times it is a challenge to the faculty to find the right word from the vernacular language only as an approximate substitute to the given word in English. It is as well challenging for the student to understand the usage of the right word for the right context. Also as already the difference of the tamil and English medium exists among students, it is obvious to see the tamil medium students struggling to master words and its meanings. Bilingual adherence of teaching, poses a great difficulty to the faculty, as it is time consuming, and it creates a lot of frustration and boredom in other English medium students, which at times keeps the teacher unable to balance the sessions equally interesting for both.

CHALLENGE OF LSRW

English language is all about the basic four skills of LSRW – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. In my experience, it is basically yet another challenge faced by the faculty of English to develop the LSRW skills in the students, especially with the Law students, coz, most of the students carry the idea of themselves having become a college student strong into their minds. The batch of students I handled, were just then school pass-outs. Any attempt in making the students to either read the lessons out loud or take notes on the taught lesson, created boredom in them and they felt it a repetition of their school set-up. With such adamancy or boredom, whatever it was to be addressed, as a faculty of English, to get them to read or write in English was a great difficulty. Here the reading or writing was just the initial attempt as a practice session for fluency of the language. Here, I

am not speaking of any extra-reading or creative writing as such. That should be gradual stages.

Reading and writing go hand in hand with the skills of listening and speaking. Though the students cooperated better in listening to the classes taken, when it comes to expressing or speaking, either they suffered in the choice of the right vocabulary or grammar or sometimes pronunciation. And as discussed earlier, their graduating into the college, made them dumb-founded, except a few, to even express their ideas without inhibitions. The students felt it was their choice or rather right to choose to answer to the questions asked by the faculty. It was not always I could expect the response of the students towards a coordinated development of LSRW skills. Many attempts of motivation could help to move the minds of only a few students towards a simultaneous development of all the four skills. Difficulties apart, I must accept the fact that the students were much interested on discussing out of book topics, in a bilingual method; it was only the prescribed topics that created a kind of lethargy and negligence in them. But the syllabus, I must agree has been rightly chosen for good motivation into their profession and career.

LACK OF LITERARY CO-CURRICULAR AND EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

In the introductory part, as I mentioned, mine being a private law college, has its own restrictions on the carrying out of co-curricular or extra-curricular activities. Most of such activities had Law as the prior subject at hand. Rarely or hardly, did English and other allied subjects of Political Science, Economics, or Sociology have any chance of such activities? English being taught as a language and mostly felt its usage by the law students in their Moot court arguments needed an extended platform to develop on the above said skills of LSRW. When such activities were limited, the exposure of the students and the probability of each student getting a chance to express his language abilities, either in the verbal or written form becomes a question mark. Ultimately this has a great impact on the poor standards and performance of their language subject. The more the students are allowed to interact and display

their ideas, opinions, understanding, etc., the more beneficial it is for the teacher to motivate them towards a holistic mastery of the language, and thereby save the difficulties of the confined classroom sessions.

English is the common medium of instruction in the college and it becomes essential for the law students to master the language, atleast for the better understanding of the concepts and terms of the Law subjects, though the University that the college is affiliated to, allows the students to attempt their exams in Tamil. This concept of writing the exams in Tamil had drastic effects on the interest and motivation of the Law students towards the mastery of the language. Further, as for Tamilnadu, except the state capital of Chennai, the lawyers practicing in other district courts were not required to speak or file a document in English. Only in the High of Chennai, English is mandatory. Most of the students hailing from their native district other than Chennai, had the option to practice their profession in Tamil, and this posed a great challenge to me as English faculty, in gaining the interest and respect for the language from the students.

STAFF EXPECTATIONS AND CRITICISMS

The English faculty is the most targeted of all the staff, both by the Management and the colleagues, coz, English language is evidently assessed by all, as it is the common medium of instruction in the college. Every other staff or colleague has something to expect out of the Language faculty that would be evidently witnessed in the language performance of the students. Most of the staff themselves being good at the English language had high expectations from the English Faculty in a short span of time. They see language as concept more than a language. Unlike their subjects, English cannot be just put into the minds of the students as a concept; rather it has to evolve out of the concepts taught in the subjects of law and its rational thinking. It is highly difficult for the English faculty to get their colleagues to understand the difficulties of teaching language to the students in a confined atmosphere, with less or little exposure to the language based activities, even in the form of extra-reading or library usage for language purposes. It is with difficulty the language faculty

gets to be criticized and tested for our potential of handling the subject, especially Law being one dominant field of study, English is always seen as 'David' in the eyes of 'Goliath' like Law. Eventually the eyes of the Management too get clogged with such criticisms and high expectations surrounding the English faculty, ultimately ending up the faculty in a tight corner between the two. As an English faculty I was put into a fix between being side-lined in the co-curricular activities and being mainstreamed in the criticisms.

RESTRICTED SCOPE FOR LITERARY ACTIVITIES BASED ON LIBRARY USAGE

The college has vast collection books on various genres, and it is said to be one well-equipped library among the law institutions of Tamilnadu. Books pertaining to self development, soft skills, personality and language development have a good share of collections among the racks of the library. Still whenever the students are assigned library hours or even during their personal hours of library usage outside the college timing, the students have a natural tendency to approach the shelves of law and other subjects, out of curiosity for grooming the potential lawyer in them. This serves a natural drawback in the mastery of the language for professional purposes. Any amount of motivation serves only less to get them to read books on life-skills or soft skills, for reasons of the pending assignments, and seminars given on other subjects. When assignments in English based on library usage is given by the faculty, the students stating reasons of the less number of books that can be availed from the library, excuse themselves from such extra efforts for developing the language.

CONCLUSION

At the end of travelling through the so-called challenges as discussed above, the English faculty finally ends to be put into a sort of self-doubt about a justified delivery of the subject or syllabus at hand, which I often personally suffered with the limitations of a specifically serving college of law, unlike the arts colleges, where English is taught more as Literature and language being evolved out of it. Here I could face the difficulty or challenge of putting myself into a new course of study on par with the law students, to upgrade myself with the

terms and concepts of law that I found myself a failure only to master very little of law. This obviously consumed more of my leisure time only to become a student of law, while preparing the lessons, because not much of what I had graduated from English at my college studies got repeated in the syllabus specified for the law students. Ultimately my personal work-life balance went out of proportion only to suffer a burn-out at the end. Such affectations could be best avoided if the institutions offered sufficient orientation into the specific/main subject at hand to the English faculty, along with sufficient referential books with the needed time for preparation of standardized notes or materials for student serving.

Whatever be the challenges in teaching English for specific purposes, it is always a pleasure teaching the language for the sake of the language itself because it has always been my cup of tea, to achieve the unachievable lack in students as regards the language.

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