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Teaching Communicative Skills in English Class at Tertiary Level in Dhubri District (Assam): A Study

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Abstract

In the post-colonial India, English has established as a global language despite the multi-lingual nature of the country. Changing its past role reminiscent of a colonial legacy English has been poised for its new role of empowering the learners with the much needed communicative and social functions in a globalized world. India is fully aware of the overwhelming position English has come to assume on the world stage and the growing demand in English language learning the world over. As a result, there has been an explosion of the demand for English in academic and nonacademic sectors. This craze is reflected in the attendant demand for the introduction of English rights from an early stage upto the higher level. In Indian context there is an urgent need and necessity to adopt Communicative Language Teaching as an effective method for our English teachers. The vision of 21st century Higher Education in India is to produce skilled human resources for the all-round development of the learners so that they can re-mould the nation. In this direction CLT can contribute a good deal in making the learners competent for their adjustment and survival in the rapidly changing world. In this paper an effort has been made to focus on the current practice, need and prospects of teaching communicative skills to the UG level learners of Dhubri District (Assam).

Key Words .Communicative, Survival, Competent, Empowering, Nation.

Introduction: In the Post-colonial India, English has established as a global language despite the multi-lingual nature of the country. Changing its past role reminiscent of a colonial legacy English has been poised for its new role of empowering the learners with the much needed communicative and social functions in a globalised world. For India is fully aware of the overwhelming position English has come to assume on the world stage and the growing demand in English language learning the world over. As a result, there has been an explosion of the demand for English in academic and non academic sectors. This craze is reflected in the attendant demand for the introduction of English right from an early stage or at the very initial stage of schooling. Realizing the global needs of the learner's traditional English language teaching methodologies need to be replaced by some newer ones. The call of the hour is not to be strongly engaged with local vs global dichotomy in teaching English language. In Indian context there is an urgent need and necessity to adopt Communicative Language Teaching as an effective method for our English teachers. CLT as an approach or method has passed many phases in the rest of the world but in the Indian teaching learning situation it is still in its infancy even in the post communicative language teaching era. The vision of 21st century Higher Education in India is to produce skilled human resources for the all round development of the learners so that they can re-mould the nation. In this direction CLT can contribute a good deal in making the learners competent for their adjustment and survival in the rapidly changing world. In this paper an effort has been made to focus on the current practice, need and prospects of teaching communicative skills to the UG level learners of Dhubri District.

On scope of the present research: The paper takes the coverage of a few of the UG colleges located in the rural and semi-urban areas of Dhubri District. A sincere effort has been made on selection of the colleges geographically to have a clear idea about the existing teaching-learning situation of English language in general and communicative skills in particular in those colleges. It is worth mentioning here that the UG colleges mean educational institutions that stand between the Higher Secondary level and the University level. In the Arts Stream, English class is both for Compulsory General English

(GE) and Honours. In Science Stream there is the English class for Compulsory Functional English paper (FE) and in the Commerce Streams is the Compulsory English class for Communicative & Functional English (CFE).

The area of data collection: Dhubri district has been contributing to field of Indian higher education with more than ten UG colleges for general education. Most of the colleges are now Govt. aided and very few still remain unaided. The colleges fall under two types on the basis of physical facilities available and on the basis of geographical location.

- a. Semi-Urban College
- b. Rural college

The Semi-Urban colleges of the district under my study comprise of two colleges:

- i. Bhola Nath College (UG level programs for Arts, Science and Commerce streams).
- ii. Dhubri Girls' College (UG level programs for only Arts Stream)

The Rural Colleges of the district under my study comprise of five colleges:

- i. Chilarai College (UG level program for Arts Stream)
- ii. Halakura College (UG level program for Arts Stream)
- iii. Mancachar College (UG level programs for Arts and Science Stream)
- iv. Bilasipara College (UG level programs for Arts and Science Stream)

Methodology: An assortment of people was considered for this research ranging from the English language teachers and learners to the parents and the prospective employers. The principals of those colleges provided some valuable information with regard to the student strength, location and management, physical facilities, instructional facilities, procedure of evaluation, library facility and modern language labs etc. This was carried out with the belief that a proper analysis of communicative needs, current practice in teaching English and prospects can be made.

In addition to the various informants, the area that was covered to gather data was discussed. It is very difficult to measure the communicative proficiency of the UG learners through objective measures. Considering this I tried to know all stakeholders' feelings when they express freely and at length on all aspects.

Background of the learners: The students from Dhubri district are from Behari, Bengali, Rajbonshi, Minority and some other communities. So, there always prevails a bi-lingual, tri-lingual and multi-lingual atmosphere. Generally, the students from the primary upto the UG level have to use Assamese as their L1. It is also the widely circulated official language in all the Government offices and other formal domains. It is apparent that there is a strong tendency of the students to communicate in the local language inside and outside class. Even some teachers who are insiders there, use the local language like Rajbonshi and Bengali in some situations while communicate with their students. Assamese for them is L2 and English occupies the status of L3 or L4 from the perspective of usability in daily life. Most of the families in the district depend on agriculture around the year, so the learners are from economically challenged background. Some private English medium schools have grown in the district these days but students' enrolment is very minimal. From this, it can be inferred that most of the UG students are from Assamese medium schooling background. They enter for higher education in the UG colleges with a poor command over the English language. Factors like illiteracy, lack of awareness, poor economic condition etc., on the part of the parents play a crucial role in their possession of sufficient communicative competence in English. This is the stark reality of the students in the rural areas of the district.

Apart from this, it can be said that there are a good number of Char areas in the district lacking in adequate infrastructure of the schools, the teachers and the learners. The smallest number of students comes to the UG colleges in the district knowing nothing about the importance of English language at present context.

The background of the students in the semi-urban parts is a little bit better. Their parents are literate and they realize the needs of English language learning and its future possibilities. Every year one can observe the tendency in students to get admitted in the colleges located in urban areas or semi urban areas to pursue higher education in the hope of having quality teaching.

Current practice of teaching English at the select UG Colleges in the District: Most of the students of the district are from economically poor family background. Majority of students use single

notebook meant for all classes. They are not in the habit of buying texts though some can easily buy. Teachers, instead of, encouraging the learners acquire the basic skills of English to communicate confidently, merely translate what is there in the texts. Even in the English major class, there is an unhealthy tendency to translate the meaning of English words into vernacular tongue for better understanding of the students. Teachers are very eager to finish the syllabus and finishing this is the ultimate goal of English language teaching in the UG classes. As a result, the learners show a very indifferent attitude towards English partially owing to the approach of the teachers. Teachers are not accustomed to arousing motivation in learners in English class. What I think personally, it is the ability of the teachers that can greatly influence on the minds of the rural students. Truly speaking, proper practice in using English language is not given to the students. An ideal platform is not created in the class. Everything is being taught like mathematical or chemical formulas.

Teachers are not teaching the language skills for larger communicative purpose to the students. The classes are generally devoid of devoting so much attention in the target proficiency in English. The other sub-skills like pronunciation, stress, intonation, creativity in writing etc., have been ignored by teachers. The colleges are producing a large number for non-creative, ill-equipped, incompetent graduates.

Teaching communicative skills in rural areas is definitely a great challenge. It is a challenge in one sense that all theoretical knowledge acquired as part of ELT training goes haywire in the classroom.

The process of teaching English in rural areas is challenging but enjoyable because it involves innocent language learners. Teacher role is also more demanding. It is the teacher who is the model, to whom a student looks for all language learning needs.

A Survey on the Select UG colleges: Classroom observation: Classroom observation has been continuing in ELT research since sixties. This kind of observation is an essential strategy to investigate the problem of my paper. My experiences in the teaching profession inform me that there is a widening gap between the researches in ELT and the teaching practices of language teachers, between what our classroom practice now is and what it really ought to be. I have tried to observe the teaching learning process of GE in all the seven UG colleges with due permission from the respective Principals and the classroom teachers. I feel the necessity to have firsthand experience of the Functional English class for the science students from the two colleges where science streams are there. I extended the process of observation to one college which is running the Arts, Science and Commerce Streams. This was deliberately done by me keeping the following goals in mind.

- i. To observe the teaching practice of English in classroom at rural and semi-urbane colleges in the district.
- ii. To observe the teacher's role in teaching communicative skills
- iii. To see the atmosphere in the English class
- iv. To observe if CLT methodology is applied.

For collecting the required data for the study I separately prepared questionnaire for three groups: the English teachers, the students and the Principals of those colleges. Apart from those I approached various stakeholders outside the English classroom. They provided their views and opinions on the target needs of the UG learners in communicative skills. As my paper covers the UG colleges in the district, I must give scope to those students having English as Honours. The opinions of the teachers and their experiences in major classes and the students' feedback are also taken into account to formulate a broader perspective of the needs in communicative aspect of English Language.

The following informants were consulted

- i. Teachers
- ii. UG students of English class
- iii. Parents/guardians of the UG students
- iv. Prospective Employers
- v. Evaluators

There are as many as 15 UG colleges imparting higher education to the students. Out of these, seven colleges were selected. These colleges were located in the northern, eastern, western and southern part of the district. The details of the colleges visited as their institutional names, student population in English class (GE, FE&CFE) college wise and their geographical locations are all

tabulated below. Student populations in compulsory English (GE, FE&CFE) and in honors are shown separately.

Table 1: List of Colleges Selected for Study in Dhubri District

Sl. No	Name of the College	Streams	Total Nos of Students Selected for study	Location
1	B.N. College	Arts, Science & Commerce	GE=16 FE=18 CFE=50 Eng.Major=10	Bidyapara
2	Dhubri Girls' College	Arts	GE=14 Eng.Major=8	Dhubri (Town)
3	Chilarai College	Arts	GE=14 Eng.Major=8	Golakganj
4	Halakura College	Arts	GE=14 Eng.Major=8	Halakura
5	Mancachar College	Arts, Science	GE=14 FE=16 Eng.Major=8	Mancachar
6	Alomganj Rangamati College	Arts	GE=14 Eng.Major not introduced	Alomganj
7	Bilasipara college	Arts, Science	GE=14 FE=16 Eng.Major=8	Bilasipara

Total Nos of students selected for GE=100

Total Nos of students selected for FE=50

Total Nos of students selected for CFE=50

Total Nos of students selected for Eng. Major=50

About previous language proficiency of the learners: Previous language proficiency means their competence in English language, previous medium of instruction etc. Most of the students passed their H.S from AHSEC. Their medium of instruction is Assamese which the official language of the state is. English was taught them as a second language. They are very poor in spoken and written communication. Some students do not identify the difference between small and capital letters. They can not write correct sentences. A small number of students are from CBSE with an amount of language proficiency in English. Average students come to the UG colleges just securing either pass marks or grace marks in English. There have already been developing a phobia in their minds that English is a very tough language. Those students never create any passion to learn the language. Lack of exposure, the defective language teaching methods of their secondary level teachers, socio-economic condition of the learners affected their language proficiency at H.S level. This analysis offers us some clues to imagine the expectations of the learners in the English class at UG level.

Students' questionnaire survey: The quantitative data collected from the students' questionnaire used for the study was designed to satisfy the following objectives:

- i. To identify the lacunas in the existing English syllabus design for the UG learners under Guwahati University as the colleges under my study have been affiliated to it
- ii. To understand the learners' communicative needs
- iii. Whether the English classes at UG level are fulfilling the target needs of the learners
- iv. To know the perceptions of the learners in English class

The questionnaire contained 18 questions on the multiple learning experiences of the students in class. The students were of both sexes. The questionnaires were same for three groups of students. I separately conducted an interview session especially for the students having major in English. All the students belonged to the age group from 19-21 years. The data collected were as follows.

The responses are stated below in numbers that are in accordance with the number of questions in the Questionnaire provided.

Responses to:-

Question. No 1: Out of 250 respondents, 200 informed that they have been learning English in classroom for 8-10 years and 50 students from English medium background told that they have been learning for 14 years.

Question. No 2: 20 Students have gone through literary texts written in vernacular tongue. 5 students told that they read English texts outside their syllabus.

Question.No.3: Majority students reported that they do not attend English class regularly for some factors: lack of proper transportation, poor economic conditions, lack of motivation from family etc. They hardly feel any need to learn English except getting pass mark.

Question.No.4 : Out of total students, 160 students from GE, FE & CFE replied that they do not enjoy class. They prepared for examination either by collecting bazaar notes or notes from private tutors. They hardly get pleasure in the texts prescribed. A small number of students find English class interesting. Out of 50 major students, 40 responded that they want to enjoy their texts.

Question.No.5: From 200 students, 90 said that they do not purchase English texts. 80 students buy texts but text books hardly feel their finger touch. 30 students replied that they do not buy. 90% major students collect texts available in market and some reported that notes, references, summary on the original texts meant for students' help are all confusing.

Question.No.6: Those students who attend Compulsory English class said that they just do so to get pass mark and some do on compulsion. Some major students have high expectations in their classes.

Question.No.7: 150 students from GE/FE/CFE never speak English in class.20 students rarely do it.20 students sometimes communicate in English and 10 students frequently speak in English .Some major students speak English and others do not do so.

Question.No.8: Majority are not interested to use English outside class. 20% students try to speak English outside classroom and they feel the needs.

Question.No.9: 2% students choose to use English alone. 20% use both mother tongue and English. The rest use only local language.

Question.No.10: Majority consider that English is their L2 or L3.

Question.No.11: All reported that there is little interaction among students in English

Question.No.12: Students told that teachers use lecturing mode in English class and they do not use effective teaching aids.

Question.No.13: A few informed that weightage should be given to language and literature in class.

Question.No.14: Majority prepared for Examinations using guidebooks or by cramming up.20% students want to understand English as a skilled subject.

Question.No.15: Students with competence feel very shy to speak in English. Very few communicate in English despite, though they commit the errors. 2% students are rich in elocution.

Question.No.16: Majority cannot use four language skills for communicative purposes.

Question.No.17: No task based approach is adopted by teachers in English class.

Question.No.18: Learners are deprived of adequate exposure of English in class.45 minutes in English class is the daily time to hear English words.

Survey on questionnaire for teachers: Questionnaire for teachers contains 28 questions that help the researchers to have perceptions of English teaching. Responses were taken from 28 English teachers in the select seven colleges .The data collected are as follows.

Responses to:

Question.No.1: 40 % teachers replied that language proficiency is the aim of English class at UG level. 40% teachers said that literature is more enjoyable for learners. 20% informed that English class should be devoted to improving communicative skills of learners.

Question. No.2: Majority replied that the current classroom situation is not ideal to bridge the gap between learners' proficiency and the target proficiency.

- Question. No. 3 Teachers are not happy with the content of English syllabus .It undervalues the needs of learners at the global context.
- Question. No. 4: Those students are happy who just want to score pass marks in English.
- Question.No.5: 60% replied that literature-language integrated approach can provide ample scope for the learners in their communicative skills if teachers can use literary texts for communicative goal of the learners.
- Question.No.6: All said that large classroom, lack of motivation, teaching aids have been demotivating the teachers to teach communicative skills in English class.
- Question. No.7: All said that GE/FE/CFE classes comprise of more than 200 students. So, teachers try to manage the class by lecturing only. Pair work/Group work/Discussion with learners are always healthy.
- Question.No.8: All said that only 10 % students are communicative. Only 20% teachers encourage the students to speak in English and the rest of the teachers just perform their duty in class.
- Question.No.9: Motivation was neglected by majority of teachers. Very few motivate learners to participate in Debates, Seminars, Speech competitions etc.
- Question.No.10: All replied that 90% students do not bother about their language needs.
- Question. No. 11: 5% students can be categorized as competent or confident in communicative skills of English. Their day to day communication in English and writing skill give the evidence.
- Question.No.12: No such extra period for writing in teachers' time table was given to students. Writing activities have totally been reduced in classroom.
- Question.No.13: Home Assignments are generally given to students. English major students are engaged for preparation and presentation of Seminar papers. There is no activity on Project Reports.
- Question.No.14: Writing skills are evaluated only in the final examination answer scripts. Most of the students cannot write well.
- Question.No.15: For better communicative purpose writing skill needs to be developed.
- Question.No.16: Students are not generally encouraged to write in a creative manner.
- Question.No.17: Learners feel the task of writing as an extra burden when writing tasks are assigned to them. It is very hard to engage them in writing tasks like preparing papers for seminars, articles for college magazines, departmental wall magazine etc.
- Question.No.18: Errors of students' writings remain uncorrected. Learners hardly approach the teachers.
- Question.No.19: Medium of writing in Examination is Assamese. Surprisingly, even some major subjects were written in Assamese language.
- Question No.20: Teachers will have to travel a lot for successfully guiding the students in writing skill.
- Question.No.21: Question papers do not encourage students' creative side. Learners just reproduce whatever they prepare for examinations by simply cramming up.
- Question.No.22: All teachers replied that there is always the need to use mother tongue in English class.
- Question.No.23: 20% teachers never encourage the use of mother tongue in English class and the rest use it.
- Question. No. 24: All said that speaking along with its various sub-skills was not taught in the class in a planned manner .There is no oral test for the students.
- Question No.25: Most of the teachers ignore pronunciation aspect in the English class. They just focused on the content delivery to the students.
- Question.No.26: All said that viva voce needs to be compulsory in examination.
- Question.No.27: Only 5% students have innate urge to use English outside class as observed by the teachers.
- Question.No.28: Majority of the teachers never try to understand the psychological factors of the learners in learning language skills.

Survey on questionnaire for the principals of the colleges: Following are the responses to the Questionnaire offered to the Head of the select UG Colleges in the district under study.

- Question.No.1: B.N. College, Dhubri Girls' College and Bilasipara College are located in semi-urban areas and the rest in rural areas.
- Question.No.2: On the basis of the information provided, only one is Girls' college and the rest are co-educational institutions.
- Question.No.3: Only two have well equipped modern language labs installed recently.
- Question.No.4: Majority of the learners are from Assamese medium background.
- Question.No.5: Only four colleges have resourceful libraries. This enhances 'Reference skills' of the learners.
- Question.No.6: Three colleges have UGC Internet Resource Center but it is not accessible to the learners.
- Question.No.7: All the Principals told that cultural activities are not conducted frequently. They did as per the guidelines of the academic calendar for the session.
- Question.No.8: Annually, elocution, debates, essay writing competition, extempore speech etc., are organized but student participation is minimal.

Discussion of Results:

- (a) **On students' questionnaire:** Students have already been devoting long years to learning English but they are not comfortable in the language for communication. The average unsuccessful rate of the students in UG level is caused by below pass marks in English. Learners hardly feel the need to acquire proficiency what the outside world demands from them. Their urge to communicate in English is always sidelined by many factors .Some noticeable factors are social, mental, economic, cultural, political and bureaucratic. Students spend time talking and sending-receiving SMS on mobile phone, chatting on face –book, watching T.V, listening to music and radio not for language proficiency. They are not regular to attend classes. Some want to speak but they do not open their mouth. They feel very shy as others often pass negative remarks on them. They feel scared of committing errors. With teachers' teaching methodology they are not happy.
- (b) **On teachers' questionnaire:** Teachers are not motivated to bridge the gap between the existing language needs and target needs of the learners. They have been ignoring the demands on the learners by the global world. It is found that teachers in the district have not been adopting task oriented approach in the English class. Most of them are sticking to the traditional method. They blame the syllabus designers, policy makers, examination system, large classroom etc. Very few teachers are interested in pursuing ELT programs in their teaching career.
- (c) **On questionnaire for the principals:** Very few have been taking initiatives in installing language labs in the colleges. They are annually conducting extra-curricular activities. Two of them deplore on the student participation in these events.

Material analysis: We now approach to have a clear idea about the suitability of the materials (GE/FE/CFE) at the UG level in developing the communicative skills of the learners. The materials analyzed for the study are listed below.

- B. A General English Textbook (For Sem I&II)
- B. Sc Functional English Textbook (For Sem I&II)
- B. Com Communicative &Functional English (For Sem. II&III)

Broadly speaking, the syllabus means to fulfill the needs and to create interest, aspirations in the learners. The syllabus designers prepare a syllabus for the students of schools and colleges for learner centered activities. Gauhati University has offered B.A (GE) English syllabus without considering the immediate needs and future prospects of the learners. Looking at the very first page of 'B.A (GE) Semester Syllabus' we can have the very first line as:

"The new B.A English syllabus develops from the innovative and expansive thrust of the previous one and is designed to prepare students to understand and use the English language effectively, build vocabulary and introduce them to current ideas and issues as represented in some of the best examples of English writing. This is true of the General, the Alternative, the Elective and the Major courses."(Quoted from the English Syllabus under Semester System, Guwahati University) B.A GE contains prose pieces like The Swadeshi Movement, The River, poems by William Blake, Seamus Heaney, common errors, voice change, Tag Question etc. are there. Even teachers are not encouraged

to teach grammar in context. Students from major in Political Science, Economics, and Philosophy find no interest in them. If the university authority had provided adequate texts, learners would have been strong contenders for various jobs in the today's world. The teachers never invest any effort to teach communicative skills by using these texts.

The syllabus for FE is full of clear cut aims to develop LSRW through meaningful communicative activities. The text 'Cambridge Advanced English' is a motivating text, but the real translation of the task based activities in classroom by teachers is a matter of concern for the teachers. This text is challenging to the learners in rural areas. Only accessing written performance of the learners will not be enough. The CFE for B.Com students is more theoretical than practical.

On the quality of teaching communicative skills (Researcher's Observation): For a developing nation like India needs competent workforce equipped with communicative skills. In 'Institutional Accreditation Manual for SSR Affiliated/Constituent Colleges', Criteria 1-Curricular Aspects, it has been stated: "All learners have access to value added programmes, including communication skills/soft-skills." (NAAC Revised Manuals, P-107). We use skills for various purposes. In this context the language teachers of the district are lagging behind to produce sufficient number of students in that direction.

The learners have been learning English as a content subject. They are not involved in task based activities. Role plays, group discussions etc. find no place in the English class. Teachers have been teaching the learners keeping them quite passive. Modern teaching aids that are available in one or two colleges are not properly used by the teachers. There are some teachers who still consider the minds of the students as a pot to be filled in or a blotting paper to absorb as that the students somehow get pass marks. Teaching communicative skills have totally ignored in the General English class at UG level in the district.

Conclusion: Teachers need to pay more attention to the development of learners' communicative needs. 'Misconceptions and misinterpretation of CLT among teachers are one of the main reasons for difficulties in implementing CLT in ELT classrooms.' (Penner, 1995; Lewis and McCook, 2002). The following tenets of CLT will bring a very positive result in our language classroom.

- i. a need based syllabus
- ii. integrated language skills
- iii. contextualized teaching
- iv. student centered teaching
- v. integrating literature for language teaching etc.
- vi. using language labs

Teachers should consider language learning-teaching as a fun and help the learners to use language independently. Universities need to make viva-voce mandatory for learners. Instead of large classes, small classes should be encouraged to implement CLT. Student should be made free from the pressures of examinations.

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