

# Fundamental Concepts in Designing of Syllabi in English (Special) and General English Courses at Undergraduate Level

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## ABSTRACT

*A syllabus needs to be evolved rather than imposed from outside. However, quite often as it were, it is imposed from outside in the sense that a few teachers or a group of teachers consult some standard books and go on to make a list of what they feel are important topics in them. It is proposed here, in this research paper, to differentiate between General English, or Compulsory English or English (Compulsory) as it is variously called, and English in literature. It is also proposed to differentiate between curriculum, syllabus, and course content, and to bring out difference between the syllabus at the school and collegiate levels, vis-à-vis the aims, objectives, content, materials, methodology of teaching and learning, and methods of evaluation.*

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## 1. Introduction

A syllabus should be born out of explorations that seek answers to certain questions related to the target population for whom it is meant: teachers who would be engaged in teaching; a sound rationale with regard to the utility of what is sought to be done; geographical area in and the level at which it would be implemented; the manner in which it is planned to be implemented; the content to be included for teaching and learning; the materials to be used; the time it would take to complete it; the teaching aids needed; the way in which way it is planned to evaluate the outcome of the programme etc.

Syllabi must grow out of experiences not only of the teachers who are engaged in teaching its contents to their students, but also one that must be shaped out of a detailed needs analysis done, taking on board all the stakeholders in educational institutions. The reason, simply stated, is that any given syllabus must answer a need or a set of needs. It cannot be designed in isolation. Undergraduate level gains importance as it is a transitory stage between the school and graduate levels and acts as a buffer between the two- a kind of a shock absorber as it were so that the transition is completely without any major hitches.

English did not enjoy importance in the educational policy of the Government of Gujarat until recently when it was made one of the core subjects at the 10 and +2 levels. The scenario has happily changed with other new initiatives of the Government of Gujarat wherein it seeks to offer multilevel training courses to a target population in the age group of 15-35 under the banner of the Society for the Creation of Opportunities for Proficiency in English (SCOPE) and the new courses it seeks to introduce under the Language Laboratory Scheme in some select colleges in Gujarat through Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad.

It is proposed here, in this research paper, to differentiate between General English, or Compulsory English or English (Compulsory) as it is variously called, and English in literature. It is also proposed to differentiate between curriculum,

syllabus, and course content, and to bring out difference between the syllabus at the school and collegiate levels, vis-à-vis the aims, objectives, content, materials, methodology of teaching and learning, and method of evaluation.

We live in a changing world and modern times have been witness to rapid changes. Modern needs require constant development in every walk of human life and these have been much greater in magnitude and impact as compared to the earlier times. It is therefore obvious that educational and social demands for development have also been affected positively in this fast developing world.

In other words we can argue that education and learning have been affected significantly so much so that syllabi today seem to be on the threshold of revolutionary changes. Gone are the days when syllabi would remain unchanged for years together. The systems put in place require constant changes and hence the focuses on the syllabus design and methodology in English literature and general English in this research work.

The general belief in education is that curriculum or syllabus development is an ongoing process and no nation can afford to go slow in the matter. This is so because the development of the nation is dependent upon the syllabus or curriculum that is put to use in educating its future citizens. Whenever there is any discussion on the process of designing of syllabus, we are confronted with the question as to whether the end-product enables the students to be competent enough to be able to contribute to the development of the nation. In fact, any curriculum must meet the learners' needs, societal expectations, community aspirations, regional and national needs, and also international standards to whatever extent it may be possible.

Page et al (1979: 95) explain that the term *curriculum* is used to denote an organised course of study undertaken by a student in or under the aegis of a school, college, university or any other institution of learning. More commonly, it is taken to

mean the set of studies organised for a particular group of students, college etc and, variously, as the set of desired learning outcomes or the structured set of learning experiences aimed at achieving such outcomes.

A meaningful syllabus or curriculum has to be responsive to the needs of a society, reflecting the needs and the aspiration of its learners. It is this belief that has provided me with the idea of undertaking research in the process of design and evolution of curriculum.

#### *English (Special) Courses*

English (Special) courses are those courses that students who are desirous of reading for a Bachelor's degree in English language and literature as a specialization opt for. There is no exaggeration in saying that English literature is of great importance in world today. No doubt it was the same in the earlier period, but this modern world is developing rapidly and English literature enjoys a good position in this fast growing world. This bold statement appears here because the term *English literature* is the combination of two words, i.e. English and literature. Quite needless would it be to say that English language is considered to be the language of opportunity in the contemporary world. English is seen as a boon for those who are conscious about their needs in life in terms of a career as well as the means to develop it. This is so because the English language rules almost every field. When the word *English* is combined with *literature*, then the combination of these two, i.e. *English literature* becomes very important.

#### *Undergraduate Level*

This is the level from where begins the part of the formal education that we call *tertiary education*. This includes the three years of collegiate education: FY, SY, and TY of any degree programme. Undergraduate level is also called the first degree level because a student gets his or her first degree certification from a given university after completing a three year programme successfully.

## **2. General English and English in Literature: the Difference**

### *General English or English (Compulsory) or Compulsory English*

The main focus in General English is on the teaching of English language rather than the teaching of English literature. In other words, courses in General English aim at developing linguistic competence in students so as to enable them to benefit from it in their future study of English literature. General English lays the foundation for the students for their study in various areas of specialization through English as a medium of instruction. Learners who have been able to reach a certain level of proficiency in English find it easy to do courses in English literature because various shades of meanings become clear to them.

Notwithstanding all this, educationists are bothered about whether General English is really taught in a way as to help the students develop linguistic competence to be able to benefit from it in their given area of specialization? In most of the colleges, whether it be Science, Commerce or Arts College, General English does not receive adequate attention both from

the students and the teachers. They take it as a burden because their attention is usually focused on the main subjects. Also, students do not consider General English as a part of their syllabus so they do not attend classes meant for it and work only to get passing marks in it.

Needless to say, the blame for this is partly that of teachers. It is so because most of the teachers are not familiar with the aim behind the teaching of General English, which is to help students gain linguistic competence and even those very few who are aware of it do not seem to be doing anything concrete to help attain this aim.

This indifferent approach to General English apparently affects the performance of students opting for English (Special) throwing up poor results. One needs to be good in English because unless one develops in himself/herself sufficient linguistic competence to be able to read books in English, it is impossible to recoup the loss. This, to my mind, adds up to the loss of the nation in the long run because our educational institutions provide for the manpower need of the country.

Our national policy of education since independence recognises English as a 'library language', which is why we lay emphasis on reading and writing in our educational institutions. Students are expected to learn grammar, comprehension, précis writing, and composition in General English classes in tertiary education, be it an Arts, a Commerce or a Science College.

What is prescribed as a text on this course is some form of literature or the other like one act play, short stories, poems etc, though varying in the degree of difficulty, which is usually low. The learning of the rules of syntax, of morphology, of the lexes etc helps students in English, including English literature at a later point in time if they were to choose English (Special) as their area of specialization. The aim of teaching some form of literature or the other is to prepare a foundation for higher learning.

### *English in Literature*

English in Literature is one step ahead of General English. General English caters to needs like developing comprehensive skills, skills of précis writing, composition skills, and linguistic skills, like reading and writing in the main. Besides these, the intention behind introducing them to some minor forms of literature is to develop in them a certain level of literary competence. When developed further, this literary competence would enable them to study English literature and understand the literary uses of language. Linguistic competence grows further into communicative competence, and if literary competence were to be developed adequately in these learners, their appreciation of literary texts would grow manifold.

The primary objective behind the teaching of English for literary purposes is to help give the learners a broad historical perspective of English culture and literary tradition. This would include a clear awareness of the chief literary characteristics, trends, movements, ages, etc. Moreover, it also intends to develop appreciation of major literary genres like poetry,

drama, novel etc in a particular age or period and the growth of minor forms of literature like prose, essay, etc.

It is here that linguistic competence will aid the students. The greater the command over English, the more enjoyable would be the study of English literature. Moreover, English for literary purposes would enable the learners to become fluent and confident readers of variety of literary forms and to develop self-awareness in their understanding of the reading process and of critical practice. There is no end to literature and no literature can be studied in isolation. However, even in case of other subjects, English aids the learners gain mastery over their chosen branch of knowledge.

### 3. Curriculum, Syllabus and Course Content

#### *Curriculum*

The term 'curriculum' is derived from a Latin term 'currie' which means racecourse or the body of course etc. The study of any curriculum can be undertaken using either the traditional or the modern concept of curriculum. The traditional concept of curriculum allows a curriculum to be understood as a list of topics to be taught or offered in a training course. However, the modern concept of curriculum enables us to look at a curriculum as the means employed to provide the students with opportunities for desirable learning experiences. Or, as primarily an aid in the process of adjusting an individual to the environment in which he or she functions from day to day and the wider environment in which he or she will have to organize his or her activities later. In short, a curriculum is taken today as a tool that enables teachers or trainers to mould their learners. For, it has a relevant philosophy of education, clarity with regard to aims and objectives, content, materials, methodology of teaching-learning, and evaluation.

It is in this context that refers to curriculum as 'the whole of interacting forces of the total environment provided for pupils and the pupils' experiences in that environment' and there is a view also that curriculum is enough to include any material or activities that will affect the learning, development, attitudes or behaviours of individual. A curriculum must, thus, help the teacher in accounting for issues like how he or she can: (a) organise learning activities in order to produce the desirable environment for optimum learning; (b) utilise the instructional materials for achieving the desired objectives; and (c) evaluate an individual's performance so as to determine the outcome of instructional materials.

In short, we can say that the concept of curriculum deals with the three Ws of the society, i.e. what (what is to be taught to a learner?), why (why is this knowledge to be given?), and when (when is this knowledge to be imparted?). In a nutshell, we can say that curriculum should be understood as the philosophy, purpose, design and implementation of a whole programme.

#### *Syllabus*

There is always confusion between two terms: curriculum and syllabus though a syllabus is a part of a curriculum.

Syllabus, in general sense, is a list of items or books which learners are supposed to use for the purpose of learning. A

syllabus is understood as the organization of the selected contents into an ordered and practical sequence for teaching purposes. Put more precisely, a syllabus may narrowly be defined as the specification and ordering of content of a course of courses.

What attracts me in these two definitions is their wording: 'organization of the selected contents into an ordered and practical sequence for teaching purposes' and 'specification and ordering of content of a course of courses.' The focus is clear in White for whom specifications precede the ordering of the content. We get to understand from that a mere listing of content cannot be passed off as a 'syllabus' because to be called a 'syllabus', the document should be clear on the philosophy, the aims and objectives it sets out to achieve, the material and methodology to be used for teaching-learning, the way in which the outcomes would be evaluated, and all this in a set time-frame.

Johnson (1982) examines the term syllabus in the context of its being an "organized syllabus inventory" wherein the phrase refers to the items to be taught. For Crombie (1985), it is a list or inventory of items or units with which learners are to be familiarized. In addition to specifying the content of learning a syllabus provides a rationale of how that content should be selected and ordered. Prabhu (1987: 86) observes that the functions of syllabus is to specify "what is to be taught" and in what order.

Having analysed all these definitions, one can say that syllabus is a list of items to be learned by the students, or specifications of the content. This is making it a little too simplistic because experience teaches us that a syllabus is not only a list of items or specification of content but also the ordering of the content to establish a logical connection between the items or units which are in the list. By this we mean, it should take from known to unknown matter or from easy to hard. In a nutshell, it is a plan of what is to be learnt.

#### *Course content*

We can classify course content as the heart within the curriculum and the syllabus which are its body. Course content can be taken as the subject matter and the theme of the contents specified. The content decides the quality of the syllabus. It is necessary, therefore, that the content be based on a needs assessment of the learners so that it meets the objectives and goals of the syllabus and this can be done through the needs assessment of the students.

Needs assessment is important in determining the content of the course because only through the needs assessment we can ascertain the needs of the students and choose the content to fulfil those needs so that the desired goals and objectives can be achieved.

One can also select the content of the course by asking questions like how much can we teach? Or how much can be learnt by the learners? The class or the level of the students and the duration of the course also play a role in the organization of the content. A watchful eye kept on the level of

students ensures that the degree of complexity and difficulty of the content is in tune with what the learners can handle.

#### 4. Difference between the Syllabus at the School and Collegiate Levels

##### *Aim of Syllabus at School Level*

The aim of syllabus at the School level, especially at the +2 stage, is to prepare the students for the challenges of higher education. It also aims at incorporating such qualities in the students as would help them to play their part worthily and competently in the nation building.

##### *Objectives*

1. To give the learners a background that would enable them to do well when they enrol for higher education.
2. To incorporate moral, social and national values in the students.
3. To bring out the creativity in the learners to the maximum extent possible so that it could play a crucial role in shaping their careers.

##### *Content*

The content of the school syllabus mainly relies on grammar. It is so because the school syllabus is supposed to prepare the base for the learners to develop, which is as good as saying that the content of school syllabus is normally divided into two parts: (a) prose and poetry as a collection of smaller texts included in the textbook, and (b) grammar.

##### *Materials*

The materials in the school syllabus include text books, activity books, charts, maps, audio-visual aids etc.

##### *Methodology of teaching and learning*

Teachers adopt an interactive approach in teaching their students in the classrooms in school. Learners at school are still raw and need much attention from their teachers. It is usually a one-way with the teacher doing all the talking, with the learners as passive listeners. Teacher asks them questions as a part of his or her teaching, assigns homework, and asks them to complete their activity books. He or she uses other methods such as narration, description, explanation and exposition on the topic. The homework assigned and the completion of the activity books helps add to their learning. Normally students at school are dependent on their teachers and parents for their learning.

##### *Method of Evaluation*

An examination is the chief method of evaluation at school level and this is divided into three parts, i.e. Quarterly, Half-yearly and Annual Examination. The results from these examinations are confirmed through oral exams.

##### Collegiate Level

##### *Aim*

The aim of any syllabus at the collegiate level is to give shape to help develop the talent latent in the learners and enhance their competencies.

##### *Objectives*

1. To make them aware of future challenges and thereby to add to their levels of competence.
2. To develop in them the habit of taking responsibility for their own learning and to help them achieve their life goals.
3. To create in them the awareness of their surroundings, develop problem solving skills, and thus enable them to contribute to nation building.

##### *Content*

The syllabus at the collegiate level adopts a holistic approach to a given subject taught as a part of curriculum. The content of English literature includes the forms of literature, i.e. poetry, drama, novels, plays, etc. Besides this, it includes criticism and lays emphasis on the development of linguistic competency to some extent in them.

##### *Materials*

Like school syllabus, college syllabus mainly relies on textbooks, but it is supported with published articles and criticism based on the prescribed textbooks. Students can also use reference materials available in the library and make use of the internet for the purpose.

##### *Methodology of teaching and learning*

Lecturing is the chief method used at the collegiate level. The lecturer delivers a lecture on a given topic and the students listen to him or her. This again is a case of one-way traffic because a majority of the learners are passive listeners. Other methods in vogue at this level are seminar, workshop, cooperative and collaborative, lecture-cum-workshop; tutorial etc wherein two-way traffic is made possible.

The students at collegiate level rely mainly on the notes taken from their teacher's lectures. The students at this level are expected to be independent learners, who are required to use library books and materials available on the Internet for their enrichment as learners.

##### *Method of evaluation*

Examination method is the chief method of evaluation at collegiate level and this is divided into three parts: (a) Internal Tests, (b) Seminars and tutorials, and (c) External or Annual Examination.

#### 5. Conclusion

There are many challenges that teachers and learners face in teaching and learning of English (Special) and General English and there are various factors that give rise to such learning challenges. However, both teachers and learners can be empowered if the designing of syllabus is given due importance. Good knowledge of English and communication skills go a long way in giving a student a cutting edge on the job market. If employability of youth has to be strengthened, there is one thing that needs to be done: sharpening the English language skills of our students with a view to enabling them to have an edge over others in English. Many Strategic measures need to be done to do so effectively.

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