

VALIDATION OF ENGLISH BRIDGE COURSE FOR THE COLLEGE LEVEL

Dr.Arockiados Esther Shanthini
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Bon Secours College for Women
Thanjavur.

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to study the vitality of designing and developing the English Bridge Course for the college level students. Present day academic institutions are involved in the task of preparing the students to face the international arena which is dominated by English. The objective of College English curriculum is to develop students' ability to use English in all-round way, especially in Listening and Speaking. This equip the students to interact, exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels independently to meet the social, economic and academic needs. The Bridge Course was designed to meet the requirements of the learners so that they could use English as a referential Language. The Bridge Course is introduced in the Professional and Arts colleges of Tamil Nadu to give a rapid intensive revision for the College entrants to enable them to pursue their degree Course in English medium. The Educationists have been successful in delivering the English Bridge Course Materials for the first year undergraduate students of their respective colleges. But never the less importance must be given to the even distribution of the Language skills.

Key words: Bridge Course, Language Skills, curriculum, ELT.

English is the '*Lingua Franca*' of the world. Advent of Internet, IT Revolution, and software are becoming new utility for written and oral communication in English Language. English is a progressive, dynamic and flexible language with communicative and educative value. There is no doubt that the world's knowledge is enshrined in English. It has been the language of diplomacy, higher administration, higher education, superior judiciary and information technology sector. English is considered to be the language that promises social status and career opportunities in India. It was Lord Macaulay in 1835, who was the first to emphasise the need for English Language teaching

in India. He imported the language through his 'Minute of Education'. Now English Language has deeply entrenched its roots in our country that prided itself in Tamil and Sanskrit, the classical languages of the World.

Present day academic institutions are involved in the task of preparing the students to face the international arena which is dominated by English. The objective of College English curriculum is to develop students' ability to use English in all-round way, especially in Listening and Speaking. This equip the students to interact, exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels independently to meet the social, economic and academic needs. Therefore, cultivating the students' ability to use English for communication and fostering their Language skill competence is a major goal of English Teaching in college. The English bridge programme or a course at the college level aims at supplementing the same.

'A Bridge programme is a higher education program specifically designed to assist a student with an attained initial education level to attend college courses and achieve a terminal degree'. All over the world, the bridge course is gaining popularity since the need for bridging the gap is felt in the other disciplinary areas of Education. This article will first discuss the main aspects of designing the English bridge course for the first year undergraduate students at the college level.

English is introduced at the primary level in the schools and even after twelve years of learning English, the students find it difficult to pursue their studies at college level in English medium. Most private schools follow English but the government schools follow the state language with English as the second language. The students hailing from mother tongue medium schools are confident and happy when they enter into college. After entering into colleges they are transplanted into a hostile and an alien atmosphere where they are linguistically at sea as English is the medium of instruction in most institutions dispensing higher education. Hence this scenario gave birth to the entry of bridge course in the colleges of Tamil Nadu for the first year students.

The concept of bridging the gap was always present in the Educational scenario in many states in India. In Tamil Nadu the concept of 'Samacheer Kalvi' has been emerged to bridge the gap and to provide uniform education to all students of Tamil Nadu. The Language teachers at

the Undergraduate and Postgraduate level in Colleges and Universities realized that the students had difficulty in learning when they take their lessons in the medium of English. Most of the students had problems in learning English and hence the need for a course was felt among the teachers to facilitate communication in English in a better way. The Bridge Course was designed to meet the requirements of the learners so that they could use English as a referential Language. The Bridge Course is introduced in the Professional and Arts colleges of Tamil Nadu to give a rapid intensive revision for the College entrants to enable them to pursue their degree Course in English medium. An academic year in a college mostly starts with a Bridge Course in English. The duration varies from just a few days to a fortnight. The Bridge Course is implemented at the tertiary level of the student's educational period. However The history of the Bridge Course reverts back to the year 1969, when Brendan J. Carrol, Education officer , the British Council, Madras delivered the course book, 'The Bridge Intensive Course' for Indian Students of English. The book was prepared and revised with the assistance of Educational professionals like J. Hobbs, N.S. Prabhu and R. Swaminathan. The course book was specially designed to help pre-university students to brush up their English in preparation for their college course. The course lasted for ten days and it was suitable for students who had not previously used English for their lessons. Later the Bharathidasan University conceptualised a learner-friendly 'bridge course' in English to prepare first-generation students from Tamil medium for undergraduate courses. The course, termed to be a bonanza for the deprived majority of deserving students, facilitated them acquire minimum requirements of language skills for any graduate programme. The course, was designed by R. Manimohan, a research scholar at Wageningen University, The Netherlands, was made compulsory in all affiliated colleges from 2005-2006. It has been felt for quiet sometime that the teaching of English at the tertiary level in India has not been successful primarily because the learner's experience of English has been confined to only course text- based contexts with the limited duration of the course program. In addition to that the Bridge Course is obviously meant to bridge the divides caused by the medium of learning in schools, the rural-urban divide et al, when school step into portals of Higher learning. And in Tamil Nadu students of State Board usually learn English just like other subjects, not as a Language.

At various times across the years the ELT professionals are involved in the task of studying the relevance of the terminal level of the secondary education and the entry level in collegiate education. Bridge Course is implemented at the tertiary level Looking at the present state of ELT in South India, the first thing that strikes the observer is not much improvement has taken place in the last thirty five years as far as the Bridge Course is concerned. There are a vast number of Councils, Commissions and the like to monitor the work being done in Language teaching in the colleges at the state level. But few professionals are able to keep in touch with everything that is being done at the state level so that a concrete plan of action is obtained.

So many Educationists have been analysing on English Bridge Courses conducted in colleges for the first year students, but few of them explored the Bridge Course in English systematically. Prof. G. Balakrishnan, former vice principal, St. Joseph's College, in a discussion with Heads of the Departments of English, M. Rema, Shrimati Indira Gandhi College, and A.M.Mohamed Ibrahim of Jamal Mohamed College, Tiruchi exchange their views on the Bridge Course. 'Has it been helpful in transforming students belonging to rural parts, especially first-generation undergraduate students, from diffidence to confidence?'

Customising the learning of communicative English as per the requirements is of foremost importance, explains G. Balakrishnan, former vice-principal, St. Joseph's College. For instance, the five traditional components in the order of spoken English, comprehension, grammar, study methods and group work are outdated. Spoken English involves learning of articulation, intonation and stress. But this means nothing to a student from a rural background. Learning intonation and stress can wait. The effort has to begin with students speaking out their own sentences coined by them, even if they commit errors, says Prof. Balakrishnan. Students have to be encouraged to speak what occurs in their mind with spontaneity. They are likely to find to their pleasant surprise that speaking in English becomes easier with simpler yet quite effective approaches like making self-introduction, role playing, spinning a yarn, describing pictures and so on. It only means that a much higher duration is required for meaningful learning of communicative English. They argue that more duration is needed for a successful Bridge Course in English. And the discussion concludes thus, 'Bridge course is a beginning and not an end itself'. A bridge course needs to be followed up throughout the year. For a

discerning learner with a Tamil medium background, the approach to the bridge course could be tweaked by confining grammar to the learning of tenses, comprehension to listening and reading, and attaching high importance to group activities. The educationists acknowledge that the rigidity in the educational system with the time constraint does not permit to fulfil the approach to bridge course. The purpose behind pursuing higher education is employability. So the bridge course can be developed into a continuous career development programme.

NAAC stipulates the relevance and importance of Bridge Course as an obligatory functional part of tertiary level education. Professor R.Krishnamoorthy points out in his article thus:

‘The most appalling aspect about the bridge course in the present scenario is that it is conducted in a haphazard manner. The genuine, laudable objectives like enabling the students to shed off their fear for English and to feel at home with English in the college curriculum have been given a go by and a mania has been created around “innovative techniques’ and “novel materials.”

Further he points out that ‘there cannot be a readymade textbook for any bridge course.’ So in order to find out a remedy for this unhealthy situation the understanding of the real components of a Bridge Course and its Course material is necessary. The course book is an important source of input and a great opportunity for students to progress in the acquisition of Language skills. It is a fact that when learners like their course books, they like the course as well and become active participants of the course. Course books are the mostly used teaching and learning materials for both teachers and students. They not only facilitate with a framework for teachers in realizing the aims and objectives of the course but also play a major role assisting the teacher in conducting the lesson. On behalf of the learners, a course book truly affects their attitude and performance to the lesson throughout the course.

The purpose of introducing Bridge Course materials are:

1. To give rapid revision of English Language items learnt at school.
2. To help the first year students of the Undergraduate Course to pursue their studies in the medium of English.
3. To Bridge the gap between the divisions caused by the medium of instruction in schools.
4. To help the students to be confident in learning the language skills namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.
5. To give revision in Vocabulary and Grammar for the first year students of the Undergraduate Course.
6. To help the students to know various grammar items and patterns and the ability to use the Language appropriately and effectively in different situations.
7. To assist the students for a quick recollection of the things learned in the past and it also prepares them to face the classroom with courage and confidence.

A study was made as an attempt to analyse the English Bridge Course book samples prepared by the English Departments of different colleges of Tiruchirapalli. The samples were analysed considering the following questions:

1. To what extent is the Sample Course book material effective according to the physical appearance?
2. To what extent is the sample course book material effective according to its content?
3. To what extent is the sample course book material effective according to its coverage of the four skills of English Language?
4. To what extent is the sample course book material effective according to the level of the learners?
5. To what extent is the sample course material effective according to the vocabulary and grammar?

6. To what extent the course book is effective according to the exercises and activities?

The results of analysis revealed that all the samples of the selected colleges were effective in terms of its physical appearance, selection and organisation of content, level of the learners and exercises and activities in grammar and vocabulary. But all the three samples from different colleges did not have even distribution of exercises and activities for LSRW skills. They concentrated in reading and writing skills but little importance was given to listening and speaking skills. And so the first year students of the Undergraduate Course undergo two main problems while learning English: they have lower rates of verbal participation and they fail to express themselves with fluency and accuracy. Therefore how to design an effective Bridge Course Book in English to solve these two problems is the key issue of the Educationists and the Institutions that are involved in the evolution of the Bridge Courses.

The practical process of course and materials design should consider these problems into account and the Bridge Course must be designed and developed to solve the problems in the process of learning English. Considering these aspects the goals are set for the successful implementation of Bridge Course in English. The goals include:

1. To develop the skills necessary to take part in an academic study.
2. To obtain sufficient oral and written skills.
3. To communicate socially in English.
4. To develop the four skills of English Language namely, Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking.
5. To be able to efficient in grammar and vocabulary.

The Educationists have been successful in delivering the English Bridge Course Materials for the first year undergraduate students of their respective colleges. But never the less importance must be given to the even distribution of exercises and activities in the four language skills in English namely, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

The bridge course does serve the intended purpose, and the success is determined by the level of importance given for exposure and practice, according to V. Ayothi, Professor and Head, Department

of English, Bharathidasan University. And more importance and emphasis must be given to speaking than writing. And moreover 'the desired impact could be ensured if English is studied in the entire first semester in the form of a bridge course.'

A bridge course should lead to two goals : a) As a campaign to sensitise students to their linguistic predicament on the road to self-sufficiency and competency, and b) As the inauguration of the three-year-long co-curricular program to be implemented through weekly, fortnightly or at least monthly session workshops. If these goals are fulfilled the Bridge Course in English no doubt would create a strong impact on the first year college students and would help them to a great extent in their Academic Study.

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