



MJAL

The modern journal of applied linguistics

Volume 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974 – 8741

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An Alternative Part – II General English Syllabus for English Literature Students by S. Mekala

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

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Students**

by

S. Mekala

Author

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MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

Content

Abstract
1. Introduction
2. Need of the Study
3. The Role of a Syllabus
4. Constraints
5. Survey
6. Inferences
7. Proposal of the Part – II General English Syllabus
8. Recommendations
10. Conclusion
References

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

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by S.Mekala**

Abstract

The students of English Literature need to improve both their language proficiency and literary sensibility during their course of B.A English Literature Programme. The thrust of this study is to make certain suggestions for ensuring a greater match between Part-II General English syllabus and Part-III English Major syllabus in an English Literature curriculum in the ESL context. The survey administered in the form of questionnaire led to a statistical analysis of the views of the students regarding the need for an alternative Part – II General English syllabus for English Literature students. This paper, a part of the doctoral research carried out by the author proposes to design a separate Part – II General English syllabus for the English Literature students. The objective of this special General English is to help learners, acquire proficiency in the English language thereby preparing them for being independent learners of English literature, able to interact with literature with a fair degree of literary sensibility.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary Indian context, English has to be considered a means for mobility and modernization of views and attitudes. It is no longer to be used as a tool for liberal education and for civilizing captive people. It is essential to reorient the attitudes of learning English in the Indian context. Given its importance in the national context, and its role in higher education in the state, there is a strong need to raise and maintain the standards of English teaching in the colleges and universities in Tamilnadu. A positive step in this direction is the recognition of the need to improve the English language abilities of students by providing an alternative syllabus for English Literature students.

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

2. Need of the Study

In spite of this important role of English in the educational system, and the objective with which the teaching of English is done at the undergraduate level, the conditions in which it is taught are far from being ideal. Most of the literature study gives importance to content-oriented targets, which deal with the components of literature with learners merely acquiring summaries of literary texts. The literature curriculum needs to be attitude-oriented, which refers to the kind of learning experience that is attained through various relationships developed in particular environment that prevails in the classroom. Shirin Kudchedkar in her article in 'Some Reflections on the Teaching of Literary competence and Literature through Language' asserts that, "A major criticism of the existing B.A elective courses in English Literature at Indian Universities is that they do not teach the students literature but rather teach them about literature." (Kudchedkar 1998).

It has been noted that the Study Group reports, reports of the Curriculum Development Centres, UGC summer Institutes reviewed the learning / teaching of English in the country and made recommendations for improving the quality of English learning at all levels of education. The recommendations of the Study Groups remain a theoretical offering, which could not be transferred to practical implementations.

3. The Role of a Syllabus

It is a well-known fact that Syllabus is a vital tool for mediating the expectations between students and the faculty. A syllabus refers to a particular plan of a course of study. It is a document that details the structure and operation of one's class. It can also be called the basic reference document that guides students and the instructor through a course (Breen 1984). This study considers syllabus as one of the facets of curriculum. The functions of a syllabus are both informative and pedagogical in nature. Widdowson has defined syllabus differently as the

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

specification of a teaching programme or pedagogic agenda, which defines a particular subject for a particular group of learners (Widdowson 1987). Such a specification provides not only a characterization of content, the formalization in pedagogic terms of an area of knowledge or behaviour, but also arranges this content as a succession of interim objectives. In Munby's words, ESP Courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner (Munby 1978).

Syllabus designers should take into account the proficiency level of learners both at the beginning and at the end of the course, while designing a course on English Language and Literature. Linguistic competence and literary competence should go hand in hand with the syllabus moving from a study of the common core language aspects to that of the more abstract and emotional language of literature, without necessarily having to start from Chaucer or Spenser because that is what has always been done. The practice of coaching students with difficult literary texts of a distant past should be reviewed and suitable changes must be introduced.

4. Constraints

A course in English Literature should concentrate on improving the language proficiency and literary competence of learners. But the present system trains learners only in mastering the literary content of the syllabus. No efforts have been taken to improve their Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW) skills, Study skills and Dictionary skills and to strengthen their critical sensibilities. So there is a need to educate students with an alternative syllabus which will help learners develop their communication skills and sharpen their literary sensibilities as well. Academic, attitudinal and administrative constraints have come in the way of designing an appropriate syllabus for English Literature students. The major constraint identified in this study is the mismatch existing between Part – II General English and Part – III English Major Syllabuses.

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

In the case of the present syllabus followed in the colleges affiliated to the University of Madras, the mismatch of Part – II General English and Part – III English Major are in the extremes. Difficult and challenging literary texts are prescribed for study in the first semester knowing well that the students do not have the minimum English language abilities to understand these texts. So the chances of improving the language proficiency of the learners are slim, as the students are finding it to difficult to follow the prescribed texts especially in Part – III English Major.

5. Survey

This study has concerned itself with the designing of a separate General English syllabus for English Literature students. It was felt essential to undertake a survey of students' and teachers' views regarding the English language abilities and skills of students, teaching of English in colleges, difficulties of students in understanding subjects, the need for a separate Part – II General English syllabus and the usefulness of the papers suggested. The survey, administered in the form of a questionnaire, led to a statistical analysis of the views of students and teachers of the colleges affiliated to the University of Madras regarding the need for an alternative syllabus for English Literature students.

6. Inferences

According to the survey undertaken for this study, a large proportion of teachers believe that students joining English literature course lack minimum English language abilities required to follow lectures in English and study the prescribed texts in English. The survey has revealed that teachers regard students' lack of motivation to learn English and students' lack of exposure to English as their main difficulties for the study of English Literature in colleges.

In the rating of LSRW skills and Study skills, both the students and teachers have acknowledged the fact that they lacked minimum language abilities and skills required to follow lectures in English and study the prescribed texts. Majority of the students have indicated that they have

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

difficulty in following subjects in the first four semesters. This fact is acknowledged by most of teachers who have agreed that there is mismatch between Part – II General English syllabus and Part - III English Major and they have confirmed that there is a need to revise the Part - II General English syllabus for English Literature students. A substantial number of teachers have also declared that the course components of the existing syllabus do not meet the requirements of students after graduation.

To remove the mismatch existing between the Part – II General English syllabus and Part - III English Major, a separate Part – II General English syllabus with four papers is designed and the usefulness of the papers are analyzed in the survey. A majority of both students and teachers have replied positively analyzing the need of the benefit parameters and acknowledged that the suggested papers in the consecutive four semesters would be very useful. Since majority of respondents have claimed a preference for the profession as teachers and lecturers, it is necessary to follow a separate Part – II General English syllabus i.e., English for Literature Students to develop expressive abilities in English and job- oriented language skills. Experts and Members of Boards of studies have pointed out in their discussions that there is certainly a need for a separate Part – II General English course for the English Literature students and their suggestions in the design of the Part – II General English syllabus have been incorporated.

The syllabus of the special General English course can fulfill the English language needs of the learners of English literature. The specified number of hours, say 6 hours of General English per week can be devoted to develop LSRW skills, communicational skills, language proficiency and literary sensibility. This course also imparts knowledge of the study skills like note-taking, note-making, referring to a catalogue or bibliography in a library etc.

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

7. Proposal of the Part – II General English Syllabus

During the first semester learners can be exposed to Dictionary and Reference skills, which are indispensable particularly for a Literature major student. This paper on Dictionary skills will train them to refer to dictionaries for learning Grammar and English Usage, apart from checking the words for meanings, spellings and pronunciation. Language is not static but it is a dynamic system; it expands. So learners must be made to understand the need for the vocabulary expansion and to prepare for reading Literature. It is therefore claimed in this study that the imparting dictionary and reference skills will help learners in acquiring and using new vocabulary. When students are made to respond to open-ended texts, students are made to think beyond texts and encouraged to use the words newly acquired by them.

In order to equip learners with the nuances of Grammar, a paper on 'Grammar and usage' is offered in the second semester. Learners should be given opportunities to use the language, by which they will 'internalise' grammar. Grammar is the basic skeleton of a language and so learners must be acquainted with basic rules during the period of undergraduation itself. This will enable them to construct grammatically correct sentences and express their thoughts clearly and effectively.

Learners' writing skill could be sharpened by offering a paper on 'Rhetoric and Advanced writing skills' in the third semester. This training in the mechanics of writing, will equip them with the skill to write compositions, reports, synopses etc. It helps them to write creatively and coherently in English. It also familiarizes them with the rhetorical devices in the English language and acquaints them with the logical reasoning part.

The fourth semester may include a paper on 'Language through Literature'. This methodology directs them to critically analyze and interpret literary texts, say prose, poetry, drama, and novel. It also promotes emotional and intellectual involvement with texts, apart from the practice

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

provided in the language focused exercises that follow the literary texts. This kind of training enhances their literary sensibility by encouraging learners to find out their own meaning through a discipline of intensive reading, which will enrich their responsiveness to the text.

The methodological training that has been suggested, when offered in the four semesters of the General English syllabus, will form a grading or sequencing format in B.A. English literature course. The objective of this special General English syllabus is to help learners

- ❖ become independent learners
- ❖ take and make notes
- ❖ refer to source materials
- ❖ have a working knowledge of English
- ❖ enhance their critical writing

I Semester - Dictionary and Reference Skills

Objectives

- Learners will be able to refer to a dictionary to identify and find head words, compound words, inflexions, phrasal verbs, idioms and phrases, prefixes and suffixes.
- Learners will be able to find meanings of words, definitions, collocations, synonyms and antonyms.
- Learners will be able to understand the grammatical features of words and identify parts of speech, syntax of verbs, nouns, phrasal verbs, adjectives and adverbs
- Learners will be able to understand English Usage - formal and informal, written and spoken

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

- Learners will be able to identify the features of English, phonetic symbols with reference to IPA pronunciation and be able to identify sounds, accent and stress
- Learners will be able to make notes, make mind maps and take notes

Syllabus

- Find the Word – head words, compound words, derived words, Inflexions, prefixes and suffixes, phrasal verbs, idioms and phrases; exercises for practice
- Find meanings of words – words with one or meanings, definitions, examples, collocations, sign posts, words with similar and opposite meanings; exercises
- Understanding Grammar – parts of speech; syntax – verbs and nouns, phrasal verbs, adjectives, adverbs; exercises
- Usage – formal and informal, written and spoken words, usage notes exercises
- Pronunciation – International Phonetic Association (IPA symbols), identifying sounds, accent and stress; exercises
- Reference skills – making notes, making mindmaps, taking notes

II Semester - Grammar and Usage

Objectives

- Learners will be able to refer to a grammar book that will give them the necessary information on English Usage.
- Learners will be able understand the grammatical patterns and to be aware of grammatical errors.

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

Syllabus

Theoretical and practical studies designed to cover the study of simple sentences, their constituents and organization; verb phrase constituents and their organization, conditional clauses; reported questions; use of article and other determiners; use of prepositions; tense and aspect; the auxiliaries and ‘modals’; sequence of tense; question patterns; subject-verb agreement.

The books on ‘Collins Cobuild English Grammar’ (1990) – HarperCollins Publishers and ‘Collins Cobuild English Usage (1992) – HarperCollins Publishers can be used as reference books.

III Semester - Rhetoric and Advanced Writing Skills

Objectives

- Learners will be able to write correctly and effectively in English
- Learners will be able to familiarize themselves with the Structure of Modern English Grammar and Discourse

Syllabus

The book ‘Strengthen your Writing’ by V.R.Narayanaswami can be prescribed as a textbook to the students who can learn how to go about writing a paragraph, Letter-writing, Note-making, Description, The use of Graphics, Essay-Writing, Telegrams and Short Tasks, Precis-writing and Abstracting, Report Writing.

The following topics can be dealt with, to equip the students in the rhetoric of writing. The Rhetoric – Organising the Composition - Discourse – Coherence – Cohesion – Intention – Exposition – Argument – Persuasion – Description –Narration –Paragraph – Sentence – Diction – Metaphor – Tone and other aspects of Style.

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

IV Semester - Language Through Literature

Objectives

- Learners will be able to develop an understanding of the discourse features of English
- Learners will be able to understand the stylistic features of literary texts
- Learners will be able to develop and enhance their literary sensibilities, their creative and critical thinking

Syllabus

The following topics can be dealt with to introduce the students to literary concepts and a practical approach to the study of English analyzing the texts.

- Principle features of stylistics
- Register and literary language
- Exploring narrative Style
- Patterns of cohesion in a short story
- General patterns of response
- Principle features of discourse analysis
- Models for the analysis of discourse.
- The analysis of discourse structure
- Discourse strategy: maxims and relevance
- Discourse strategy: politeness phenomena

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

8. Recommendations

The proposed syllabus recommends learners and teachers to play the role of active participants and interactors in the language learning operation. The syllabus is structured on a framework, which would develop the student's expressive abilities in English and higher level skills of expression. It ensures a conscious understanding of the nature and structure of English equipping them with profession-oriented language skills.

The classroom teaching activity involves silent reading sessions, discussions and debates and analysis by students. Students are not 'taught' texts but are invited to respond critically, and express themselves intelligently and creatively. The aim is to create interest and develop aesthetic sensibilities in students. The classroom activity is like a 'spring board' enabling students to think and respond appropriately. The teaching methodology is geared to this end ensuring 'free play' and 'lively interaction' among learners, which in turn, make learning interesting, effective and useful.

Falling in line with these teaching techniques, it is recommended that the method of testing and evaluating must also undergo a change to suit the nature and aim of the course. The shift is from the traditional way of testing, which demands memorized answers to a pattern in which the student is expected to respond to discourse / stylistic device critically and aesthetically. So the test is to evaluate the students' critical and intellectual response to a text. An attempt can also be made to encourage and lead learners to use English to talk about their responses to literary texts. This non-conventional approach focuses on, beyond the classroom, the prescribed texts and examinations.

9. Conclusion

MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

The proposed syllabus holds good in the ESL context. With the studies students undertake in the first four semesters of Part – II General English course, they are able to map out a literary framework that will help them to approach the study of literary texts more purposefully. So this study establishes a greater match between Part - II General English and Part – III English Major Syllabuses and ensures the achievement of the perceived objectives of the courses. They help learners improve their language proficiency which in turn builds up the literary competence of learners. In brief, a specialized Part – II General English syllabus has been suggested to evolve English for Specific Purpose (ESP) kind of framework that can be called ‘English for Literature Major Students’.

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MJAL 1:3 May 2009

ISSN 0974-8741

**An Alternative Part-II General English Syllabus for English Literature students
by S.Mekala**

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