

Content or Skills?: An analysis of the Tamilnadu State Board Draft syllabus in English

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ABSTRACT

The Tamil Nadu Government has recently published the Draft Curriculum for English to be implemented soon. This paper attempts a review of the syllabus. It outlines the theoretical background of curriculum designing in English and analyses the Preamble to the syllabus. It then brings out the merits and demerits of the draft syllabus and offers suggestions for reframing it.

Key words: curriculum, CLT, evaluation

The curriculum design for second language learning will specify the objectives, the content, the sequential arrangement of material, methodology and evaluation. The objectives will be derived from the goals / aims of the particular course, which are competences in the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. As Brumfit points out, “.... A syllabus must specify a starting point, which should be related to realistic assessment of the levels of beginning students and ultimate goals which may or may not be realized depending on the abilities of learners and their purpose in a particular course” (75). Assuming that the starting point of our learners is at the zero level which will be the case in most of the rural and many of the urban schools, realistic goals must be set for each year, reaching the ultimate level at the end of a ten or twelve year course. J.B.B Allen’s suggestion, though not explicit, may be relevant here. He recommends that “the

ultimate aim is to encourage the students to use all the sources available to them to meet the demands of a particular target situation.” (68). In our case, the target situation is fluency in oral expression, discourse competence and to some extent socio-linguistic competence. However, as the English course in Tamil Nadu has a ten-year / twelve-year duration, the target level for each year must be clearly specified, which will be the starting point for the subsequent year.

A syllabus design usually consists of conceptual framework, the syllabus, materials, classroom activities and evaluation. Once the objectives are spelt out, the conceptual framework suitable to them is made, followed by the content (what) materials (with what), classroom activities (how) and evaluation procedures explicitly stated. The conceptual framework or the principle is based on “the theories of

language and of second language acquisition, learning.” (Janice, 16)

With this brief outline of the concepts behind the curriculum designing let us examine the *Draft Syllabus Tamil Nadu 2017*. It is appropriate to begin with the “Draft position paper on Teaching of English,” which after setting out the aims of English Language Education, reviews the present scene in Tamil Nadu. This, in fact, is an indirect way of doing ‘needs analysis’. The preamble clearly states that the focus should be on understanding and speaking rather than grammar or syntax. (emphasis as in the original document) . It also points out “knowing a linguistic or grammar rule does not result in the ability to use language effectively. We experience language when we use it to comprehend by listening and reading or to express ourselves by speaking or writing. In this process of making meaning we develop vocabulary and internalize the grammar of the Language.” This statement, one can conclude, is drawn from the principles of Communicative Language Teaching. The interactive learning experiences suggested also reflect the CLT approaches /methodology. The preamble further emphasizes the need for clearly articulating “learning outcomes, learning experiences and processes that develop the necessary competences for each stage of school- Primary, Upper primary, Secondary and Higher secondary. It emphatically states that English is best learnt not when taught as subject but as skill. Finally, the position regarding evaluation is refreshingly sensitive to

language learning outcome. Evaluation or assessment should ideally measure competence and should be use/performance based. In other words, the focus is on use of language rather than the content of lessons and grammar knowledge.

The reason for such a detailed discussion of the preamble is to point out how the focus gets dissipated in the actual syllabus and to show where the stated purpose gets fulfilled.

For example, the preamble emphasizes the need for clearly articulating the learning outcomes and so on for each stage, primary, upper primary, secondary and higher secondary. But in the syllabus the outcomes for Class 1 to Class 5 are given for each class, and not for a five-year course. They are not also stated with clarity. Further all the four skills are given equal importance along with ‘listening for phonemic awareness’, vocabulary building and grammar, in clear violation of the stated principle. Greater importance should be given to listening and speaking in the primary classes. And especially it should occupy a major part of first year instruction. It is suggested that the objectives can be stated on the model given below:

The pupil

1. listens to instructions and responds physically. Examples are: *go to the blackboard, show your book, go out, come in,..*
2. listens to questions and answers in a single word. Examples are: *Where is*

your book? Answer: *Here. Who is your friend?* Answer: *Dinesh.*

This can be followed by Total Physical Response exercises. For example: *touch your nose*

Children can practise them in small groups and in pairs. The classroom can be turned into a physical Education Training ground. Children learn listening and speaking simultaneously.

This activity alone may take more than a month for **all children** to master it. In the meanwhile, language functions for socializing such as greetings and apologizing can be introduced.

Command words like *go, come*, and names of the organs of the body, *ear, nose*, may be written on cards and children can be trained to read them and then copy them. This can be done through games.

The dispute between fluency and accuracy has long since been resolved and fluency takes precedence over accuracy. So teaching of grammar can be postponed to a later stage, as also the phonic drills. Grammar games and activities (see references for materials) can be employed after 3rd or 4th standard for teaching grammar covertly without using any terminology.

Pronunciation practice, stress, rhythm and intonation are introduced in class 6. Many questions arise as many eye brows are raised. Is it necessary to teach the segmental and supra-segmental features of the sound system to the young learners? Is

it possible for our teachers to master them and teach them? How many fluent speakers of English in general in our state can speak with correct pronunciation and intonation?

Yet another dictum prescribed by the preamble is that content must not be given importance. Ironically, literary appreciation is introduced in class 2 itself. Literary appreciation involves understanding the content material. It is an established fact that most of the class 5 students cannot read and understand class 3 textbook even in Tamil. Granting that in the revised curriculum children will have mastered reading skill and can read and understand the text prescribed, is it possible for them to appreciate literature?

This leads us to the question how reading skill has to be taught. In the draft syllabus there is a mention of silent reading only in the seventh standard. It can be started even from the fourth standard provided, this transferable skill is taught in L1 in the third standard. As for the writing skill, the objectives and the learning experiences for the primary are quite adequate for teaching the mechanics of writing.

The most important omission in the draft syllabus is the mode of evaluation. In the preamble it is mentioned that competences in skills will be tested and the modalities are being worked out.

Listening Test has been included in the syllabus in use now. But the questions to test comprehension are not of the objective type. It is better to have true or false and

multiple choice questions to test listening comprehension as well as reading comprehension. As for speaking skill, a battery of tests for each stage can be prepared and it can be used in oral interviews. For example, the teacher asks the learner five questions general in nature and the correct answers can be marked. The students can be asked to put five questions, and the correct questions will be scored. At the next level the learner can be asked to describe a picture in about five sentences and the correct sentences (not necessarily grammatically correct) can be awarded marks.

The syllabus, it is understood, is based on the Communicative Language Teaching approach. Though there are many varieties in CLT all of which centre advocate games and activities. An extension of it is Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT). In the lower classes the strong variety of CLT, that is, communication without explicit explanation can be practised. In the later stage, the intervention of the teacher through explaining the elements of the language including explicit teaching of grammar and vocabulary can be allowed.

It is difficult to arrange the activities and games in the CLT approach in the sequential manner, unlike in the grammar oriented syllabus. This difficulty can be overcome by organizing the activities with a focus on grammatical categories. Further, though repetitive practice has been discontinued in English teaching along with the behavioural approach, repetition is inevitable in actual classroom practice. A number of activities

are available for teaching a particular item and in a spiral or cyclic arrangement of the items there will be a need for repetition. So the teacher is expected to have a repertoire of activities and games.

In spite of the shortcomings in the choice, ordering and sequencing of the learning materials and the overload in the syllabus (perhaps because of the over enthusiasm of the curriculum framers), the primary objective of imparting language skills, it must be admitted, is not lost sight of. It must be appreciated that skill based syllabus has replaced the content based approach of the previous (that is the present) curriculum. The communicative competence of the learner is in the centre of the design. Syllabus designing in the communicative language teaching approach has always been a difficult process. Activities cannot be graded and sequenced as in the case of the structural or grammar based syllabus. And in the draft curriculum there is a sincere attempt to select the activities. There is a logical progression of the expected learning outcomes and as the learner moves from one class to the next, she is exposed to a variety of experiences especially in oral/aural skills. The objectives given for reading skill specify the mastery of literal and inferential comprehension for higher classes. However the success of this exercise will depend on the level, length and interest of the passage chosen for teaching reading skill. The syllabus for the eleventh standard is indeed a very ideal model to teach higher order skills of reading and writing. As for writing skill there are exercises in

summarizing. One can think of introducing paragraph writing even from the third standard. Writing the topic sentence for a paragraph and preparing an outline before writing short essays will help the learners structure their paragraphs and essays effectively.

If the curriculum framers fine-tune the present draft syllabus pruning certain items in line with the stated principles in the preamble and if they are less ambitious the English programme will be a great success in the State and there will be a remarkable improvement in the standard of English of our young boys and girls.

However, it all depends on three major factors: the evaluation system, textbooks and the training of teachers. Most importantly it is the teacher who has to make language learning simple, enjoyable and effective. She has to play the role of a facilitator, advisor and co-communicator.

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S. Rajagopalan