Managing English Teaching Outcomes in Universities: An Experiential Learning Case Study of ESL/EFL Interventions

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Abstract

In countries where English is a foreign language, universities are expected to enhance the communication skills of their students after overcoming the deficiencies that they typically carry over from their schooling years, and the challenge for universities is to achieve this through the few mandated courses. This paper describes an auto-enthnographic case study of a series of interventions for improving the English teaching outcomes over a decade by the dean of a private university of Karachi. Each intervention was refined over a number of semesters through several execution cycles consisting of design, implementation and evaluation. Interventions were tried and tested until the outcomes could no longer be improved with the given resources. Issues identified through the evaluation of a particular intervention led to the design of subsequent interventions.

The interventions consisted of changes made to the number of courses, grading criteria, selection of learning methodology, assessment strategy, hiring qualifications, teacher development, medium of instruction for technical courses, design of environmental culture, quality control across multiple sections, level of student engagement, intensity of instruction doze, lab and instruction credit hours, assistance from senior students, and out of the box designs of course interactions.

Experiential learning and analysis of these interventions demonstrated that traditional classroom based interventions centered on a teacher do not work unless they are accompanied by immersion experiences in innovative, collaborative and flexible learning environments. Experiential Learning and Project Based Learning (PBL) techniques which can stimulate and inspire the students were found to be more effective. The study proposes an innovative structure for conducting English courses that would provide an immersion experience to students which would be concentrated in time and space to help overcome many of the identified issues.

Keyword: *English Teaching, Eperiential Learning, ESL, EFL*

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INTRODUCTION

Around 2002-03, the President of a degree granting a higher education institution (HEI) in Karachi held several meetings with the Dean regarding his worry about raising the English communication skills of the students. President of the HEI was a retired Air Commodore who hailed from the Engineering Branch of PAF and who had been in senior positions in training and development wing. His contention was that the new recruits in military, especially those in the technical branch, are mostly from rural areas. They had not been to English medium schools, and had little exposure of English speaking environment. At the time when they enter the training academy, most of them can't even speak a single sentence. However, within a few months after their recruitment, they are speaking fluently in English. How can the academics in universities learn from this experience of the military training academies? How can the academics ensure that students of universities also start talking and writing in English within a few months of their admission? Why English language courses being taught in the universities fail to achieve similar outcomes with visible improvement in skills of the students? Why even after completing several courses over a number of semesters, the students are unable to speak fluently?

There were extensive discussions of dean with directors of colleges and chairpersons of departments that led to a consensus that there was merit in this expectation of the president for course outcomes to demonstrate visible improvement in English competency similar to that observed in the military academies. Interventions described in this paper were designed and implemented for meeting this challenge.

Deliberations with faculty related to this challenge initially focused on understanding the difference between the intent of the two institutions, namely, military academy and university; whereas the culture of military academy is based on developing the habit of obeying orders, the culture of a university is focused on developing thinking and reasoning. In military academies, verbal humiliation and physical drills and punishments are allowed, whereas the same or similar techniques could not be employed in universities. In military culture, questioning the order of superiors is unthinkable:

There's not to make reply, there's not to reason why, theirs but to do and die. [Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred Lord Tennyson].

On the other hand, the mandate of universities is to develop critical thinking, stimulate questioning and encouraging the students to ask the question "why". Socratic Method of teaching is often considered to be a cornerstone of instruction methodology wherein each question is expected to lead to another question, which in turn leads to another and then to several others. This process stimulates learning through intellectual debates and development of critical thinking.

Whereas military institutions focus on the use of precise and unambiguous phrases for executing well defined commands and tasks, focus of universities is to make students understand complex concepts, which may often be mutually contradictory, and to explore complicated reasoning threads, and to communicate ideas. Hence, techniques found useful in military institutions were found to be not directly transferable to the universities.

Universities were then relying on English language teaching that was based on old grammar oriented methodologies and had failed to incorporate modern pedagogical innovations. The lack of interest and engagement of students in English learning could be attributed to insipid courses and techniques failed to connect with the students and stimulate them. The classroom environment needed to be completely redesigned with resources that can engage students in learning (Ahmed, Khan, & Munir, 2013).

Faculty deliberations led to the exploration of experiences and theories that suggested that functional English can be improved in short periods of time. Several examples of situations and institutions were studied where rapid progress had been observed with visible outcomes. Call-centers getting established in Pakistan around that time had specialized training programs that enabled a newly hired trainee to start communicating and begin selling on telephone with target customers in USA using the US accent in a couple of weeks. A few alumni who had joined these programs were interviewed. A few exploratory meetings were also held with English training institutions like Berlitz and Dominos to explore the prospect of outsourcing a couple of English courses. Their well-defined and carefully structured level-wise instructional modules were reputed to enable the trainees to progress in well measured steps every few weeks. Academics like John Taylor Gatto who contend that basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic could be learned in a few months were also studied.

The challenge was to learn from these examples and to design techniques and systems to achieve the desired outcomes in a university with its constraints of course structures, credit hours and time schedules.

METHODOLOGY

The study presented in this paper is an autoenthnographic study (Starr, 2010) and consists of a series of interventions undertaken to manage communication skills outcomes as a dean of a private sector degree granting chartered university/HEI. It covers a period extending from the start of 2002 to 2012-2013. The communication skills courses were being run for students of faculty of computer science and information systems, faculty of management science and faculty of engineering. Maximum number of students in courses was 40 and average was around 33. Typical number of sections of English related courses.

This is a qualitative study that explores the constraints and issues related to the implementation of various interventions. It is based on a study of personal recollections of the discussions, decisions and analysis of the outcomes of the interventions. Some notes, presentations and memos were also reviewed. A previous version of this case study was posted on the blog (Hyder, 2015) and the link was sent via email for obtaining feedback of the decision makers, including the president, chairperson.

Importance of English in adding value to the lives of people through its prevalence in business, government and society has led to its introduction as compulsory courses in universities and schools of Pakistan (Ahmed, Ahmed, Bukhari, & Bukhari, 2011). However, effectiveness of such courses, credit hours and their intensity required determination. English is increasingly being considered as an essential requirement for growth in professional careers. Students coming from backgrounds where exposure to English is minimal are often at a disadvantage

(Nawab, 2012). Universities need to design environments for improving English competencies (Tariq, Bila, Sandhu, Iqbal, & Hayat, 2013). However, effectiveness of such efforts often suffer when there is difference in perspectives of English teaching as a language versus as a subject for gaining knowledge (Ahmed & Rao, 2012, p. 95). Use of traditional criteria for English competency assessment had been found to be a de-motivation for both teachers as well as students. There is therefore a need to adopt better assessment frameworks such as the formative assessment which are closer to how learning takes place (Wei, 2010). There is also a need to use better techniques and methodologies for improving learners' proficiency (Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). Issues related to background of learners and teachers, and the amount of emphasis to be placed on accent and pronunciation versus the demands of communication require a careful assessment (Khamkien, 2010).

CHALLENGE OF PROVIDING IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

The first conceptual challenge of research was to ensure that the teachers appreciate the difference between "knowledge" and "skills". Knowledge can be acquired by observation and by attending lectures of a teacher or by memorizing information. However, skills can only be acquired through "learning by doing".

Extensive discussions with English teachers were organized to make them appreciate that skill is something that can only be "learned by doing". Typical examples used to illustrate this difference were those of swimming, typing and cycling skills. These skills cannot be learned through attending lectures, even if they are being delivered by world's top experts! To learn to swim, one has to dive into the water and learn by trying to swim. No amount of listening to lectures by even Olympic gold medalist or watching videos will help. Only getting inside the water and thrashing it about would start the learning process. Similarly, teachers cannot learn cycling by observing Tour-De-France cyclists, or listening to lectures by expert cyclists who had been winners of prestigious competitions. They need to sit on the cycle and start pedaling before they can learn to hold it steady. Similarly typing cannot be learned by reading any number of books or by observing people doing typing. Learner must sit on the keyboard and start pressing the keys with all the ten fingers before his learning can start. Through this example, teachers were told to appreciate that language skills such as speaking, writing and listening are skills that need to be acquired by actually trying to speak, trying to write and trying to listen. Conventional lecturing would not help much.

Increasing the focus on how skills are learned and imparted became the essential thrust of the conceptual distinction that teachers were encouraged to understand and appreciate. However, implementing "learning by doing" concepts in a class room was found to be difficult for a conventional teacher. It was observed that conventional teachers found it difficult to leave the podium and concede the central position on stage to the students and let them practice interactive conversation and discussion. They also found it difficult to let the students write in the class room without intervention, continuous instruction and monitoring. It was also difficult for them to allow the students to listen without getting interrupted. Designing a stimulating environment where students could immerse themselves in English speaking, learning and writing activities was required. Learning by doing, experiential learning or project based learning were concepts that were difficult for the teachers to adopt because of the structural reasons that have been "learned" through a process of trial and errors as described below:

ADMINISTRATIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES

In early 2000s, the institution did not have an English department as there were few programs and few hundred students. But as the number of programs increased, the number of students also increased. The increase in the number of sections and the number of students studying English courses necessitated the establishment of a separate department of English to effectively manage the course outcomes. The head of the department was expected to ensure that the contents of English subjects and their teaching methodologies should lead to the desired outcomes. Hence, a senior professional was engaged as the head of the department. He had extensive experience of managing English teaching in a vast network of schools run by the educational system of air force. Initial recommendations of the new head were to increase the number of mandatory English courses in the bachelor's curricula and to gradually switch to faculty with specialized English background such as masters of linguistics or literature. Later the English Department was made a part of a full-fledged faculty of humanities and sciences. The new faculty was conceived as a supporting college, offering shared courses such as English, Mathematics, Islamic and Pakistan Studies required by the curricula of degree programs offered by specialized faculties of management, computer science and engineering.

NUMBER OF MANDATORY ENGLISH COURSES IN EACH PROGRAM

Around 2003, the university had two courses of English in the four-year bachelor programs of business (BBA), computer science (BS CS) and Engineering (BE). The first impulse was to add more English courses to improve the skills. The number of English courses were increased from two to three and then from three to four. Around 2007, university had four English courses in BBA, BE as well as BSCS.

The table indicates the number of English related courses during various years. By 2006-07,

Years	Count of English Courses	Mandatory English Courses in BS, BE and BBA Curricula
2002-03	2	English, Communication Skills and Report Writing
2005-06	3	English-1, English-2, Communication Skills and Report Writing
2006-07	4	English-1, English-2, Oral Communications, Communication Skills and Report Writing
2011-12	4	English-1 (Real Life Communications), English-2 (English for Social Interaction), English-3 (Business Presentations), English-4 (Professional Competence)
2013-14	3	English-1 (Real Life Communications), English-2 (English for Social Interaction) English-3 (Business Presentations)

number of courses had increased from 2 to 4. However by 2013-14 the courses had again dropped down to 3.

In the BE programs, switch from 3 to 4 courses had to be reversed to make room for the regulatory requirement of PEC inspection committee. The committee had initially called for reducing English related courses to 2 and using the freed space for some other courses. PEC's inspection team could not be convinced on the emphasis accorded by the university on English and it was decided that the university would reduce the courses to 3 from 4. Programs other than Engineering continued to have four courses for a few more semesters.

Analysis of learning outcomes indicated that the mere act of increasing the number of English related courses was not enough in improving the communication skills. The intensity of English courses was dependent more strongly upon several factors other than the number of courses. Coupled with this observation was the increasing clamor for freeing up space for entrepreneurship and other areas. Hence, the fourth course was also dropped from the BSCS program and the BBA program. Credit hours allocation for the fourth English course could no longer be justified and by 2013 in all bachelor programs there were only three courses.

INITIAL QUALIFICATION OF ENGLISH TEACHERS

Increase in number of English related courses to four necessitated new hiring and discussion focused on competencies of the teachers and their initial qualifications. Conventional norm in higher education institutions till early 2000s was towards engaging visiting faculty for English related courses. Their hiring criteria were their functional competence, superior communication skills and level of engagement with students instead of their degree specialization. They had to be functionally good in English, both in reading and writing, and their qualification had to be preferably MBA. An MBA with prior degree in linguistics or literature was considered a plus, but not a mandatory requirement. The assumption underlying the conventional wisdom was that a person with business background would be better at teaching "Business Communication". The assumption according to Dr Abdul Wahab, who used to be the Director and Dean of IBA for a long time was that in technical professional degrees, institutions should not attempt to teach literary English, but should instead focus on functional English, which is more important for communication in formal business settings. He used to say that English teachers who are without business background often emphasize areas in English that are not driven by the business objectives. Language requirements for business and professional environments are much different from the technical competency in linguistics and the flowery requirements of literature. This thought came to dominate many of the institutions and was only dislodged by the increasing regulation of HEC towards hiring of specialized teachers.

The urgency to improve the learning outcomes of English related courses made it imperative to try all suggestions. Hence, it was decided to move away from pre-2000 IBA's experience of communication skills teachers and insistence on teachers having a mandatory business background with good functional business English skills (with formal English degree qualification only an optional plus) to formally engaging teachers who were required to have a formal degree; MA/MS in English, Linguistics, or Literature.

However, the experience of this switch indicated that mere changing of the primary degree

requirements for English related teaching did not produce an immediate visible change in the learning outcomes.

MEDIUM FOR TEACHING NON-ENGLISH COURSES

It was realized that mere increasing of the number of courses or mere hiring of teachers with specialization in English or linguistics was not going to bring the appreciable and visible change that the institution was expecting. Interventions made in only 3-4 English related courses in a bachelor's curriculum of around 40 courses cannot administer the doze necessary to create the desired impact. The delivery of doze in 3-4 conventionally taught courses spread over four semesters was found to be insufficient. Hence, a need was felt to increase the doze in the environment and also in courses other than the mandated specialized English related courses.

Brainstorming of various suggestion led to considering interventions in the environment of the institution and insisting that instruction delivery must be in English in all non-English courses. Interventions in institutional environment contemplated included placement of big screens showing English content in cafeteria and other spaces on campus, creating a speakers stage where selected students would come regularly and speak on different subjects, forcing the students to talk in English in the corridors and monitored by wardens etc. These efforts soon fizzled out as initially some makeshift arrangements were done by assigning additional duties to employees and teachers who were already loaded with existing assignments. Deployment of resources required a much more careful analysis of the envisioned use. There were other reasons such as feasibility of appointing corridors wardens, justifying the investment in multi-media, big screens and audio equipment, identification of suitable spaces, and managing the interventions by qualified and competent personnel. Experience indicated that suggestions like these require dedicated resources, people, managers, financial budgets and continuous supervision by project managers who would initiate the suggestions as projects and would then hand over a working system with well defined processes to dedicated employees.

Forcing the teachers of on non-English courses to adopt instruction delivery in English also met with fierce resistance. Resistance came from teachers of courses such as "financial management" and "cost accounting" in the business area; courses such as "data structures", and "automata" in computer science; and courses such as "amplifiers and oscillators" and "signals and systems" in engineering. Teachers of these technical courses got furious when forced to adopt English medium in delivering the instruction. Their primary argument was that the learning outcomes of these highly technical courses are already complex, and students are having difficulty in understanding the lectures and passing these courses. Students are already having difficulty in understanding the complex concepts in Urdu, and their problem of understanding will increase tremendously in the foreign language. It is a challenge for teachers to explain such complex concepts in simple terms in Urdu, the language the students can understand, using analogies they are familiar with using the vernacular they are comfortable with. "We cannot trade-off the learning outcomes of the course with extraneous English related outcomes."

A system to monitor the use of English in non-English classes was developed. Teachers were counseled, and reprimanded on not using English as a medium of instruction. Use of

English in class was also made a part of their yearly appraisals. However, these measures failed to bring about the desired change. It was observed that teachers would start the lecture in English, but would simply switch to Urdu when they had to explain a technical or a complex concept, or when they found that the students were not responsive or were not paying attention. Some teachers wholeheartedly accepted the challenge and started using English as the medium. But, when students' grades started suffering, teacher evaluations by students also started suffering and complaints of such teachers by students also started increasing. As the "bell curve" started shifting towards the failures, the teachers dynamically started to adjust their medium of instruction to improve the understanding and hence the grades of the students. The vigorous campaign for forcing the teachers to adopt English for instruction continued for some semesters, but when the results were not encouraging and the routine drudgery set in, the initiative lost its intensity and eventually fizzled out.

The major learning from this experience was that teachers need to be fully committed to a policy before they can bring their energy and enthusiasm in teaching. They may go through the motions of compliance of an external command, but the spirit of the command may not be implemented and hence the learning outcomes may not be achieved. Furthermore, resources required for any intervention must be budgeted and made available to project managers whose deliverables need to be carefully managed.

USE OF VERNACULAR FOR ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT

Resistance encountered in trying to compel the faculty members to use English for teaching technical courses was not specific to this institution. A good faculty member teaching a technical course would always try to prioritize the demand of making the students understand the technical concept over and above the demand for ensuring English as a medium. This experience had been reported in several other institutions and also in other cities of Pakistan.

In 2010, the Dean of the university was engaged to conduct several professional 3-day training workshops for corporate participants in Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore. The experience of training interaction with corporate participants illustrated why class room lectures often fail to deliver. Corporate trainings demand that the course conductor engage the attention of the participants for the duration of workshops, day after day, and session after session with the condition that participants should not be dozing off, and should remain connected all the time. Otherwise, corporate participants run away from such trainings. Holding the attention and keeping the participants engaged was compared with a stage performance and class teachers was asked to design class interactions accordingly. Unlike corporate participants, students are captive audience who typically do not or cannot protest. Hence teachers often take the lectures as a routine activity and do not prepare their performances carefully.

A good teacher was expected to be like a good actor who should choreograph the entire lecture in his mind and respond to the moods of the audience with extemporaneous improvisations. Switching of language and moving across different dialects was deemed an important element in a teacher's arsenal. Also, included in this arsenal was the sprinkling of humor to maintain the attention of the participants. This was especially effective when the teacher used a "more picturesque speech" punctuated with local dialects and even decent slangs. Teachers were guided about these techniques to reduce the tension in the air and to create a

connection and it was found that typically technical teachers who did not have command on English were not able to captivate the students. They found it much easier to be lively and humorous in their own language than in a foreign language like English. When they found it difficult to crack jokes and build connectivity with the students in the alien language, they found it convenient to switch to the local language in which they were proficient to keep the class lively and engaging for the student. Hence, the furious resistance encountered from the technical subject teachers could be considered as a protest against the emphasis on English, which was robbing them of their pedagogical tool (use of their language) for establishing engagement and connectivity with students.

This situation is commonly observed in seminars and training programs in Pakistan. One only needs to see the expression of the audience, their attentiveness and their responsiveness when a speaker is speaking only in English versus another speaker who comes in and starts punctuating his talk with engaging quips from the local vernacular that participants can associate with. This phenomenon can be observed in auditoriums full with even highly qualified faculty members having command of English who have lived and studied abroad for several years. There is a need to study the change in the expression and responsiveness of even highly Anglicized faculty during such switches. Experience of teaching at LUMS and even IBA where students are expected to have high competences in English indicated that a mix-mode approach increases the engagement and connectedness of the students, versus an English only lecturing for most lecturers.

COURSE NAMES VS. INTENT OF COURSE CONTENTS

The use of Islamic Studies and Pakistan Studies courses for providing additional exposure for improving English skills was also considered. To ensure that the teachers of these two courses which are mandatory for all undergraduate students, will also work on English outcomes a change in the organizational structure was made. The separate faculty of Humanities and Sciences which was given the charge of managing outcomes of English related courses, was also given the charge of areas such as Islamic Studies and Pakistan Studies in addition to Mathematics. Initially the idea was to give the control of these two courses to the English faculty so that they can use teaching of Islamic Studies and Pakistan Studies as a vehicle for English improvement. The objective was that through a careful selection of teachers for Islamic Studies and Pakistan Studies the institution will try to improve English outcomes while working on the objectives of these two courses.

There is an interesting academic issue related to the name of a course and its relationship with the contents of the course. The name of the course always trumps the intent of the course contents and the methodology irrespective of what gets written in the outlines about the learning outcomes and what is specified as the contents or pedagogy. Once a new intent of the course is defined under an existing name, the intent quickly loses its spirit once the initial drive and focus is gone. The intent of using the Islamic Studies and Pakistan Studies courses for additionally enhancing English outcomes was soon overtaken by the demand of the name of the courses. In a few semesters as the attention of the academic heads shifted elsewhere, the courses began to be conducted with the intent as encapsulated by their names, and not as specified in the outlines. This issue is also related to the philosophical debate of the name determining the structure and, in turn, influencing the contents and even the intent of whatever

is included in that structure.

USE OF TEXT BOOKS AND FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY

During this effort it was observed that many of the students were not buying books for most of the courses and therefore their reading of English was suffering. They were simply using the copy of presentations used by the faculty. The presentation slides were being perceived by the students as the content of the course for which they thought that they were responsible and for which they were expecting to be examined. The use (actually abuse) of presentation slides by teachers merits a separate case study that would highlight on one hand the dependency of the teachers on the slides, their inability to develop their teaching skills and knowledge, and on the other hand adversely impacting the students by constraining their scope of study to the few sentences written on the presentation slides.

The comments of the students when they were asked how they did home work if they did not have the textbooks also illuminated another dimension of the issue. They were found to be studying in groups, and the book purchased by one was being rotated among others. This issue was found to be connected with the issue of students plagiarizing their home works. Without the books the students' grades on the exams were also suffering because all students of a group were often unable to get together before every exam There were several reasons in Karachi during the period of study that used to hamper the plans of group study and included violence, strikes, closures, and load shedding. Furthermore, social constraints often discouraged female members to stay late at the place of other group members and are thus unable to study from the shared book.

To address the above issues buying of books by each student was made mandatory in each registered course. First couple of weeks of every semester were designated for the campaign to ensure that students are with books. The first week was spent in executing a relentless campaign to have the teachers check whether each student is with his own book with his name printed on it. This was done because students had started borrowing books from their friends when they feared checking by inspection teams. Reluctance of students to get the books was surprising because of the wide availability of cheap editions in market for as low as couple of dollars. Book fairs were held to encourage the students to get the books. Even a system of mandatory procurement of assigned text books was established.

Further analysis of the issue indicated that students thought that reading the book was not crucial for passing the exams. This problem was found to be much more prevalent in the non-business areas than in the business area courses. Informal survey was done about the books being read by students in other institutions and it was found that the behavior of not reading the books is endemic. The students were reading from notes but not the book! Interestingly, a particular term had been coined in UET Lahore to denote the person who supplied the teaching notes. Each class section has a couple of smart students who are recognized as "theta". These thetas take down the notes for every lecture, and make available these notes in the local photocopy shop for the rest of students to buy and follow. Enquiries at other universities indicated a similar culture. The issue of students not reading books was found to be widely spread and endemic in universities in Pakistan and requires further research.

The inspection visits chairpersons and other senior officials continued for several semesters to ensure the possession of books by students. However, identification of the deeper roots of the problem of non-reading behavior pointed towards a malaise that has originated from the tuition culture of the pre-university years in Pakistan and also pointed to the pedagogical issues. This realization turned the attention towards the teachers and their teaching and grading behavior.

SIMPLIFICATION OF LEARNING OUTCOMES AND PASS/FAIL CRITERIA

The essential underlying issue was put forward eloquently in an advisory board meeting of engineering department where CEO of Aero-Car company held the faculty and industry members spell bound with his passionate plea. He had been listening patiently for a long drawn out description of technical engineering courses and their pre-requisites and could no longer take in the hair splitting technical stuff. He lashed out by saying that all this technical stuff is useless if the graduate cannot meet two simple requirements; having the ability to express clearly in simple but correct English his life objectives, and having the pursuit of excellence as a habit.

The mandate for a faculty member teaching English courses should have only two outcomes:

Only those students should pass the course who can write a page in English which should not cause any raised eyebrows. The objective should only be functional English necessary for meeting the basic requirements of most organizations.

Students should be able to confidently express their ideas in the interview or in a presentation. The objective should be to ensure that students overcome their shyness and be able to express their ideas coherently.

These requirements are better implemented using a pass-fail rather than an elaborate criteria of complicated letter grades. Grading that starts from passing at 2.0 and ranges to a maximum of 4.0 for A+ appeared counterproductive for the objectives of language teachings. Either student is able to communicate or not. Either student can communicate orally or not! Either student can express in writing or not! Grading objective should be to categorically tell us whether they meet pass/fail criteria or not.

ENSURING A CONSISTENT QUALITY ACROSS SEVERAL SECTIONS OF THE SAME COURSE

One of the major issues in academic management is to maintain a consistent quality of a course which is being taught by several teachers simultaneously in five or more sections. The unity of instruction and passing criteria often lose their coherence across sections. The problem becomes more complex when these sections are spread over multiple campuses. Additional complexity arises if some of these sections are taught by visiting faculty members who are not readily accessible for frequent coordination and communication. This being the case, head of departments found it difficult to communicate with faculty members promptly for the resolution of issues and for alignment of the intent and methodology of the courses. Meeting with visiting faculty a few times during the semester was found to be not often. Still another

complexity is to ensure that the intent and content of the courses remain consistent from one semester to another with frequent faculty changes.

Easiest way to resolve the logistical complexity mentioned above is to use the same teacher for teaching all the sections of a particular course. But, this was found to work only when the number of sections is five or less. It becomes difficult for a faculty to do justice with six or more sections simultaneously. Also, boredom and fatigue starts setting in when a teacher is expected to repeat the same lecture in five or six different sections every week. It was found that this option could only be maintained for a few semesters. There often arose situations where this logistical convenience had to be forcefully traded off with a competing requirement.

Strength of semester system lies in the ability of teachers to determine the direction of a course, to tweak the course contents in line with the course objectives and learning outcomes. Quality of a course then becomes a function of the ability of academic heads to communication and coordination with the teacher for ensuring the stated learning outcomes and their linkage with the overall vision, mission and objectives of the program. However, recourse to bureaucratic invasion of the class room to ensure consistent quality was found to produce worse outcomes.

FROM MEANINGLESS TO MEANINGFUL TAKS

A major problem in English teaching had been the legacy of Wren and Martin that keeps on seeping in again and again in the name of basics. Exercises in this vintage 1935 book are mostly are sentences designed for grammar practice that students find meaningless and disconnected from their life. Teaching English through grammar had long been discarded by experts but it was found to be ingrained in the psyche of the teachers who often professed their commitment to the new methods but could not leave the old school. Conversion of language instruction to class activities that are meaningful was found to be the major challenge.

Major impediment to the use of interactive and mindful learning activities had been the class-size, reluctance of teacher to think out-of-the box, to use teaching assistants and to encourage group activities. It was a challenge to find faculty members who could create good rapport with the students, who could develop an environment where students freely express themselves without fear and without humiliation.

Communication takes place when a student wants to passionately express his point of view on a subject about which he feels strongly. Teachers were found to be fearful of selecting topics on which the students felt strongly and which were considered meaningful by them. Design of engaging activities was found to be challenging. Topics and issues imported from alien cultures failed to work.

It was found that mistakes of pronunciation and grammar in speaking were often penalized with humiliation or scorn that made opening of mouth very costly. Development of an learning environment where mistakes do not have costs associated with humiliation and penalty required overcoming deeply held beliefs and attitudes of the teachers. Learning actually means, learning by making mistakes. On one hand, this requires a stress-free learning environment that was designed using the institution of lab hours and TAs as lab assistants as described below. On the other hand, this required revisiting the concept of grading and moving from letter grades and use of Bell Curves to formative assessments or authentic assessments.

PROJECTS PRESENTATIONS AS PLATFORM FOR ORAL EXPRESSION

To increase presentation practice, students were provided with a platform for making individual presentation in every course of the semester. Under the Project Based Learning (PBL) initiative, teachers had been directed to assign a group project in every course. The objective of the PBL initiative was to develop an environment for learning by doing through experiential learning projects that would enable the students to work on real life projects. This connectivity with real life issues would help motivate the students, help them learn skills and would influence their hearts and minds (Hyder, 2015). As part of this initiative, it was mandated that there would be at least one individual project presentation by a student in every course.

A feedback system was implemented to track whether faculty were actually ensuring that students were making presentations in their courses. Some teachers implemented this diligently whereas other did not. Logistical constraints were a major reason cited for not enbaling the individual presentations. If there are 40 students in a class and there are 8 projects for five students per project, then at least half an hour is required for each project presentation if each student was expected to speak for 5 minutes. Provisioning for switch over time, time-overrun and other technical glitches, at least four hours were required to enable individual presentation by every student of class of about 40 students. Teachers were not willing to take out this time from their lecture time as they already were complaining about not having enough class sessions during the semesters. Note this was also the time period when strikes were being called in the city every few days. The time logistics constraint was cited as the major issue.

Lack of commitment of teachers to the philosophy of PBL was another reason why the initiative could not be sustained. The objective of improving English presentations also suffered when it was reported that many of the project presentations were taking place in Urdu. Where the teachers insisted and forced the students to make presentations in English, it was found that students were parroting through rote memorization in their allocated time. This again defeated the original intent of the initiative. Hence, the initiative after running for a few semesters, lost its intensity and eventually fizzled out.

A major learning from this was that an intervention that does not impact the grade often loses its urgency in the university environment. If the grade is being assigned to an activity but that activity is not conducted formally through adequate allocation of time and other resources then it it can quickly lose its original intent.

TEACHING ASSISTANTS AND PARTICIPATIVE SESSIONS

It was noticed that several courses in engineering and computer science had formal lab credits, whereas courses in humanities and management science did not have such lab credits. Courses such as Programming Language in BS Computer Science and Digital Logic Design in BE Electronic Engineering were designated as 3+1 credit hours; where 3 credit hours meant that the time table would allocate 3-hours of students-teacher contact sessions per week, and +1 mean that it would allocate 3 hours of students-Lab Facilitator interaction in a lab.

It was decided that the courses English also required formal lab sessions of +1 where students would get an exclusive 3 hours of lab interaction with an English facilitator. The 3

credit hours of English courses were designated as 2+1, where teachers were allocated 2 hours of class sessions per week and for +1 credit hour the students would be allocated a 3 hours of a lab class session to be conducted by a Lab Facilitator.

As the time table slots were divided in chunks of 1.5 hours, allocating a slot of 2 hours was found to be infeasible. Hence, the management decided to allocate more than the technically time duration for the 2 Credit Hours session. Two sessions of 1.5 hours were allocated. +1 Credit Hours of lab sessions got translated into two back to back sessions of 1.5 hours each. The labs for speech and grammar related courses were held in computer labs with listening devices and online MCQ type grammar building software. English courses that did not require lab equipment were conducted in classrooms with more flexible chairs arrangements that allowed multiple group discussions to be held simultaneously in a class room. Lab session were facilitated by TAs who were senior students who had scored excellent grades and whose English was superb.

The use of TAs instead of teachers yielded several unplanned benefits. Students who would feel embarrassed in making mistakes in front of the teachers were much more forthcoming in front of their fellow students who were the TAs. With only the mandated requirement of attendance and no threat of grading, the lab sessions created a more congenial learning environment. There was greater participation and richness in interactions with TAs. TAs had a greater empathy with the students and went out of their way to help the fellow students and were more forthcoming in giving extra time. Students who got assigned as TAs found these interactions contributing to their personality development. Their confidence and their interpersonal skills improved and many of them assumed leadership positions in various student societies and activities. Of course, the stipend on a per-hour basis drawn by the TAs provided them some financial support.

System of lab sessions and the use of smart senior students as TAs was found to be a great help in developing the English communication skills. The system was also tried in computer science labs for improving the programming skills and was found to be greatly successful.

PRESCRIBED DOZES AND STRUCTURAL (CREDIT HOUR) CHANGES REQUIRED FOR IMMERSION EXPERIENCE

A review of the interventions discussed above and experimented over several years demonstrated that the major reason for not obtaining the desired outcomes from language courses is the inadequacy of doze. Both the frequency and the potency of the courses need to be carefully calibrated to realize the expected impact.

There is a need to rethink the credit hour for courses that require Experiential Learning content. The standard university format dictates that a 3-credit hour course can only have a 3-hour session in a week and a minimum of 45 hours in about 15 weeks of a full-length semester. One-size-fit-all interpretation of the credit hour is a major impediment in the lack of realization of outcomes in courses in general and in English courses in particular.

Following a typical time table where English class sessions are sandwiched between other courses lose their efficacy. Often the attention of the students and the teacher need to be concentrated in the desired doze. A doze of 3 hours per week is too low a potency to be effective

in language learning.

There is a need to experiment with out of the box solutions for language teaching. Class sessions for English courses need to be concentrated in time and space. This was experimented for a batch of students when they were forced to register in only English courses during a summer crash semester. Classes were held in a designated corner of the campus where only the English course classes were scheduled. Both the courses were running back to back with a break. The entire area was designated as an English only area and wardens were posted to ensure that all the communication take place in English. Teachers were allowed to use the canteen area and other shared spaces for informal and formal sessions. The results were tremendous. The experiment could not be continued because of the logistic reasons for making available rooms, students, courses, and teachers concentrated in space and time together for the duration of the course.

Based on the above experience, it is proposed that the following format should be adopted: English courses should be offered only during summer crash semester or during breaks. Exclusive time of 3 weeks should be allocated per course. Hence, during 6-weeks of a summer crash semester, two English courses could be conducted in an overlapping or in a back to back fashion. 5 hours of interaction time daily is recommended for 9 working days. This would meet the semester requirement of 45 hours of contact sessions in two weeks. Each day can be divided in two 2.5 hours learning sessions with a couple of hours of tutorial and lunch break sandwiched in between. Learning sessions would be conducted by teachers and tutorials and break to be supervised by TAs to ensure that the language used during this time is also English. Third week should be for experiential learning exam as well as preparation. The second course may follow immediately after the first one using the same format.

In this design, both courses should run simultaneously from morning till afternoon in a secluded part of the campus which is restricted to the students taking the English courses only and which should also have a small cafeteria so that the time for informal lunch can also be used as part of immersion experience. The environment should force the students to eat, drink and study nothing except English during the stipulated weeks and the scheduled timings.

If somehow teacher comes with a structure where students for the entire semester could be given this kind of an immersion experience where all interactions across five-six stipulated courses are conducted in English, then this framework would provide much better results. This structure would require that the program director need to identify 3 English courses and 2-3 other courses that could be conducted by a selected bunch of faculty members who had been tasked with ensuring the English learning outcomes as an essential part of the learning outcomes for the semester.

FIRST LANGUAGE VS FOREIGN LANGUAGE ASSUMPTION

The issue of trying to compensate for the lacking in the foundation of English [3] at the school level through the introduction of a few courses at the university level is related to the assumption that students of universities and school do not study the whole semester but at the end of the semester they started learning. This assumption is the single biggest reason of why students have not been able to learn English as Foreign Language in Pakistan. The

assumption in all English medium schools is always that the students ought to know English as a native British from Oxbridge does. They are reprimanded from the very beginning as if they should have the competence of a born British. They are shown contempt for their most trivial pronunciation mistakes as if a born British has made that mistake. Our schools and universities treat the students as if they should know English, they should understand English and they should speak English as if it is their mother tongue and also their first language. Starting with this assumption, our curriculum outlines, our dealing with the students raises the stakes and makes it hard for our students at different levels of competency to gain much from the English classes in schools and especially so in the universities. Hence, techniques of Berlitz and many of the call center company training programs are much more effective.

CONCLUSION

This autoethnographic case study of managing English language outcomes described a series of interventions designed by the management and dean of a private institution of higher education (HEI) in Pakistan with degree granting charter across various disciplines. Experiential learning of experimenting with various interventions indicate that the problem of achieving the expectations of the English language teaching outcomes at the university level is much more complex than initially envisaged. Interventions conducted over a period of over 10 years revealed multidimensional linkages among a host of issues. Trying to address one issue leads to another issue. The interventions experimented and described in this case study dealt with deficiencies in students inherited from the school level, exam orientation of students developed in the tuition culture at the intermediate level, use of obsolete language teaching methodologies by teachers, establishing suitable administrative structures, selecting appropriate skills and qualifications of teachers, developing an immersion environment for project based learning, obtaining support from teachers of non-English related courses, design of course names, lack of reading habits and functional illiteracy of teachers, avoidance of books by students and teachers, selecting a suitable grading strategy, design of meaningful learning tasks, establishing an environment rich in interaction with seniors and fellow students, and ignoring the implications of English as a first language vs as a foreign language assumption.

The study proposes a design of English Course structure that would provide an immersion experience to students concentrated in time and space that can overcome many of the issues mentioned above.

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