

Second Language Teacher Education at a Distance : A Case

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Confronted with the problem of number, the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India, (CIEFL, for short) in earnest introduced in early 1970s, off-campus training programmes for the teachers of English. However, looking into them vis-a-vis the phenomenal worldwide growth in the field of distance education, which obviously includes India, one would find them wanting. The issues that are intriguing in this context, inter alia, are:

- (i) the problem of relevance : the Institute, over a span of nearly 20 years seems not to have considered evolving a workable mechanism by which the socio-academic relevance of the programmes could be brought under constructive scrutiny
- (ii) the problem of number : the Institute considering the pattern of student in-take, has yet to meet the exigencies — the primary concern for which the programmes have been instituted.
- (iii) the problem of 'non-innovativity': the programmes save the cosmetic paddings, still continue to be outside the distance education framework.

Focussing on the last of the three issues mentioned, this paper attempts to take up for discussion some operational aspects of 'learning experiences' and 'transactions' pertaining to the programmes under review. In the process, the remainder of the issues also gets clarified.

India is a multi-lingual country where English continues to play a significant role in all walks of life, especially in the area of higher education. Teaching of English as a second/foreign language and the training of the teachers of English is an on-going educational concern which attracted the attention of Indian distance educators as far back as early 70s. An appraisal of one of the major efforts in this area is therefore timely — distance education as a system should be able to answer some of the issues raised in this presentation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the broad educational spectrum, English language, literature and linguistics teaching (ELT, henceforth) is one area that has been and still continues to be in a state of flux, notwithstanding various reforms conceived of, propounded and devoutly pursued since 1950s. Reflecting on the pandemic situation, Gokak was of the considered opinion that "... there is a crisis today in the teaching of English in India and standards have fallen at an alarmingly rapid rate. We are faced with a general breakdown of standards in the learning of English ..." (Gokak, 1961). One, who is aware of the prevailing ELT situation in India — irrespective of the degree of understanding — is quite likely to accept that this scenario has not changed much even after three decades since the statement was made.

2. A MISMATCH BETWEEN 'DEMAND' AND 'SUPPLY'

A little bit of retrospection would help us draw a reasonable conclusion that attempts made hitherto towards curriculum reformation, when carried out, apparently have satisfied, if at all they do, either one component or the other of the curriculum in isolation. Discernibly, it has led us as Koul remarks, "... to misplaced emphasis ..." (Koul, 1981), analogous to the proverbial blind identifying the elephant. Reasons attributable to this nebulous state of affairs are many and it is not as though we are unaware of most of them.

Nevertheless, one primary reason might be our reluctant receptiveness to new knowledge generated consequent on social intervention. The prevailing situation mirrors Einstein's remark that, "... with the unleashing of the atom, everything has changed save our mode of thinking; hence we drift towards unparalleled catastrophe ..." (as quoted in Goldman, 1989). Similarly, if Marshall McLuhan, for instance, were to comment on teaching, in all probability, he could have reacted that with the development of television our way of thinking and communicating would change; while our educational institutions would try to maintain their old identity — however obsolete or morbid it might be. In short, bringing in an equilibrium between the mutually antagonistic phenomena of preservation of the best of the past and the orientation for change warrants academic acumen and foresight. Speculation, along with associated implications — adverse or complimentary — is better than lack of it. And, in the context of ELT, it is precisely what is wanting.

In a Foreword, Verma sees "... a need for redefining the goals and objectives of ELT in India and reassessing ELT-based programmes and projects, keeping in view the status and function of English in the Indian multilingual setting ..." (Ramadevi, 1992). Further, it is espoused in the Foreword that there is a need to design a new model or a set of new models based on the needs of learners and the socio-cultural and educational setting in which English is being taught in India.

3. WHO SHOULD 'BELL THE CAT'?

The spirit behind the observation made above should convincingly be demonstrated in implementation. Put differently, 'to design a new model', the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, being an apex agency for the promotion of English in this country, should take the lead. Unlike the other institutions of higher learning, the CIEFL enjoys the unique freedom of choice of what to teach. The price for freedom, however, is a heavy increase in responsibility and a concomitant duty to demonstrate the efficiency of its actions. It is time the CIEFL started with a completely clean sheet reviewing and resetting its aims and accordingly identifying means to achieve them. One such stock-taking is imperative for one of the operational areas of the Institute, i.e., teacher preparation in general and particularly with reference to the correspondence programmes which were introduced in the early 1970s primarily to impart training on a scale larger than what was possible through their face-to-face programmes.

4. THE PROGRAMMES AT THE CIEFL

That the Institute introduced training programmes through the correspondence mode, as early as 1972 is noteworthy. In the absence of them, the Institute could have drawn almost a blank in terms of its contribution to the national endeavour of training the teachers of English.

A mention of a study carried out in 1981 is in order here. It gives an estimation that there were nearly 400 thousand teachers of English to be trained. And, an analysis of the training imparted by English Language Teaching Institutes, Regional Institutes of English and the CIEFL put together, over a span of 15 years between 1963-1978 shows that the national effort could achieve only 26% of the total task. The study further shows that in every seven years there is 20% increase in the number of teachers (see Koul, 1981 for details). While indicating the magnitude of the problem of ever increasing number of untrained teachers of English, it also shows that the Institute under discussion, given its stature, does not seem to have made any significant contribution to the aforementioned national effort.

This notwithstanding, on the one hand, the correspondence programmes have provided the Institute a much needed insulation from adverse criticism from outside agencies; and, on the other, they themselves have come under attack for lack of quality — interestingly most of which has been from within the very Institute which offers them. Self-evaluation is a healthy phenomenon, if it is directed for the better which, however, the CIEFL cannot claim.

Lack of quality, in this context could possibly be interpreted as :

- i) lack of relevance in content-input, considering the prevailing ELT scenario in India
- ii) lack of relevance in terms of the mode used for the intended purpose, i.e., imparting training
- iii) lack of 'innovation' in the mode in use.

I start with interpretation (ii) addressing to those who seemed to be either genuinely or otherwise concerned about the quality because the mode used is alien to their assumedly well-defined role-domain.

Because of a long oral tradition, in India, anything short of class-room education is looked at with disfavour, considered relatively substandard and, at times, resented. Besides the predilections induced by culture, distance education as a system has been, and to a large extent, is still being so manoeuvred that it has gained an unenviable status of a revenue-earning mechanism. By implication, the drawbacks attributed to it should in fact be viewed as those in implementation — a parallel situation of which can be traced elsewhere, particularly in formal education. Academically, therefore, the system per se is not inefficacious. In fact, there is a relatively better 'quality assurance' i.e., the proactive process that prevents failure and 'quality control' i.e., the reactive process with the concept of rejection, in distance education, because the teaching/learning process in this system, unlike the classroom situation, does not depend on the resourcefulness or otherwise of one single teacher.

Viewed against this backdrop, it should be clear that the 'how' of imparting training does not pose any threat to quality. This leads us to interpretation (i) which questions the 'what' of training.

Skirting around and overlooking the core i.e., teaching process per se, language teacher education focuses on ancillary areas such as applied linguistics, methodology or language acquisition and thus looks "fragmented" (Freeman, 1989). Put differently, although the outcome i.e., successful language learning and teaching is recognisable the knowledge of the process i.e., how it is accomplished remains to be, at best, hypothetical and incomprehensive (Long, 1980; Schumann, 1983; Larsen-Freeman, 1987; Thomas, 1987). However, it is this 'knowledge' that should form the content of the second language teacher education.

Thus, I make an 'is' and 'ought to' distinction here. In so doing, I refer to the degree of impact the programmes under discussion leave on the participants. By imparting training, isn't the Institute committed to produce better human resources? If that is the objective, has it been fulfilled? Or, if it is not the objective, what is it? In essence, I am looking into the 'nature' of training and not the available content per se; and by implication, content is seen as that what emerges as a result of purpose-setting, which in turn is largely determined by the target clientele. Curiously, it appears that the order is quite the reverse in the present context. The claim therefore seems to be that the training package available is good enough to meet the needs of a heterogeneous group. This kind of 'generalistic' type training, in effect, "is potential enough to do more harm than good to an unwary trainee" (Koul, 1987). The focus should therefore be on identifying ways and means to 'degeneralise' the training and frame 'multiple syllabi' in the form of modules.

With the question of how to realise this objective, we now enter into the domain of interpretation (iii), which asks for

innovation and equates lack of it to that of quality. I take for discussion but three aspects pertaining to the issue of innovation:

- i) distance teaching materials which in the parlance of distance education are called self-instructional materials (SIM, for short)
- ii) distance tuition through tutor-comments on the assignment responses, facilitating 'two-way communication'
- iii) personal contact sessions

Before I proceed any further, let me clarify that by the expression 'innovation' is meant an attempt to ameliorate a given situation within specified boundaries and without warranting changes in the existing social structure or in the way we think about education (Kuhn, 1970; Goldman, 1989).

Now I take up the issues in the given order.

4.1 Distance Teaching Materials

The Institute under discussion seems to have an uncanny temerity of sorts to retain the programmes that were produced nearly twenty years back, without making required changes either in terms of content or of 'presentation'. I certainly entertain the hypothesis that the correspondence programmes under review need to be revamped in terms of content, if they are to serve the intended purpose for which they are created. No single individual, however, will be able to suggest the 'what' that needs to be revamped or the 'what' that needs to be deleted, pruned or incorporated, keeping in view the current trends in ELT. A think-tank, therefore, is necessary for this purpose, the constitution of which should include in-house expertise available across the boundary line that seems to have been drawn, though invisible, between the Department of Correspondence Courses and other 'non-Correspondence' departments and outside experts and practitioners. Another rewarding possibility would be to reorient the M.Phil. and Ph.D. projects and use the outcomes as agents of change.

And as regards 'presentation' the materials have yet to incorporate 'elements' that would help simulate interaction between the teacher and the student — which is what is highly essential in the context of distance education. Of the many, the following two characteristics of SIM are conspicuous by their absence:

- i) learner activeness : elements that engage the students in various academic activities
- ii) access devices : devices that enable the students to reach the content with ease.

A thorough overhauling of the materials is therefore imperative.

The paper, however, does not focus on this micro issue. What is required is an organizational system of the following kind that looks into immediate concerns and looks beyond, facilitating a continuous evaluation of the materials:

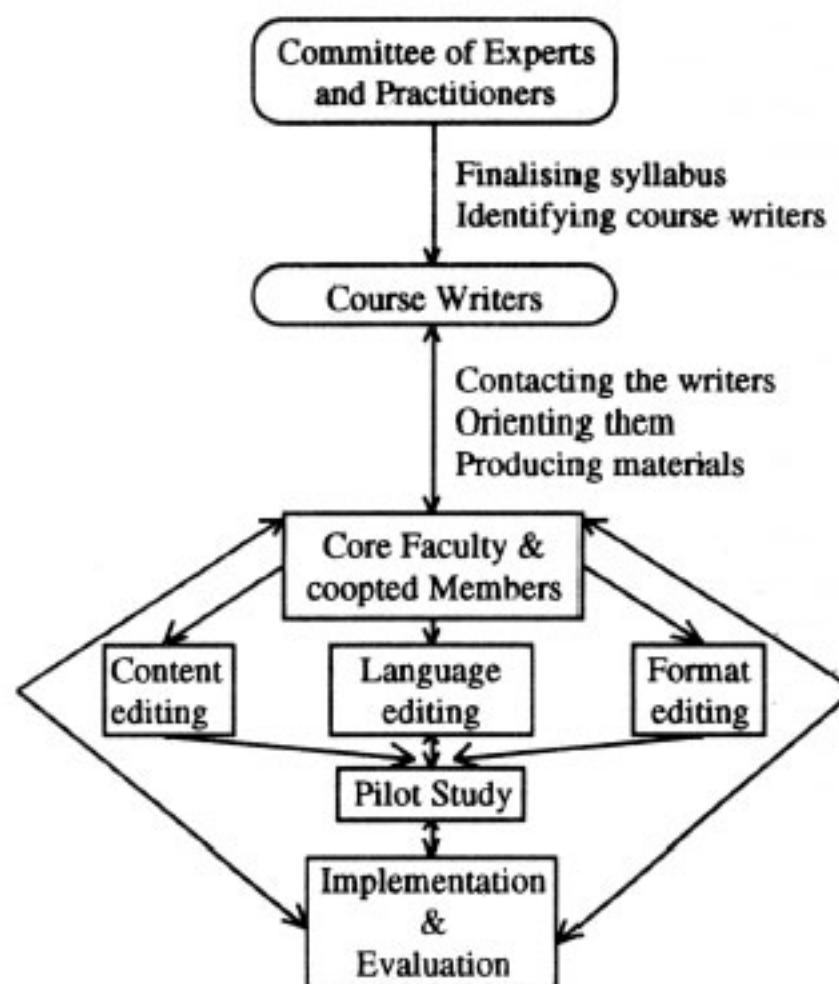


Fig 1: Structure for Material Evaluation

4.2 Distance Tuition through Tutor Comments

However self-instructional the materials might be, to help the students sustain their motivation, they need to be constantly interacted with. This essentially is the purpose of the assignments in distance education. Distance teachers, unlike their counterparts in the conventional systems, assume greater responsibility in 'evaluating' assignment responses. Locating and correcting what is wrong and finally awarding a grade is but a small part of it.

To effect distance education, writing constructive and meaningful 'comments' that suggest to the students their learning style, level of performance, limitations, suggestions for overcoming them for better, etc., is highly essential. This communication can be categorized into 'academic', 'personal' and 'supplemental'. The first two are self-explanatory and the supplemental communication is what emerges out of them.

There is no lack of evidence to establish the fact in the present context that not all tutors — those who have been coopted and the core faculty — handle assignment-responses with the attention and commitment expected of them. It should, however, be acknowledged here that CIEFL provides one full page along with each assignment response for tutor-comments, which may ensure an assessor's global view of the response, but that is not enough. It is equally necessary that comments pertaining to specific instances be written to localise the comments. However, neither is done with the level of professional fastidiousness which this operation deserves.

Various reasons can be forwarded to explain this state of affairs. One of them that needs to be highlighted is that the

tutors have not been properly tutored to realise how pedagogically significant their comments are. It clearly establishes the fact that proper training is essential for the tutors. Emanating from this proposition is the question as to who the 'trainers' might be. In the current scheme of things the core faculty of the Institute without any hesitation would assume the role of 'trainers'. However, ironically they themselves need training to function efficiently as tutors and trainers.

To design a systematic and effective language teacher education programme, Thomas (1987) suggests that one fundamental question, however insignificant it may sound, of why language is taught should be asked. Arguing that since language is taught to develop the language competence of the learners, it is emphasized that the teacher himself/herself should have that competence. By this logical progression a teacher educator needs language competence and in addition the competence in teaching how to teach language. This integrated framework can be presented as in Fig.2.

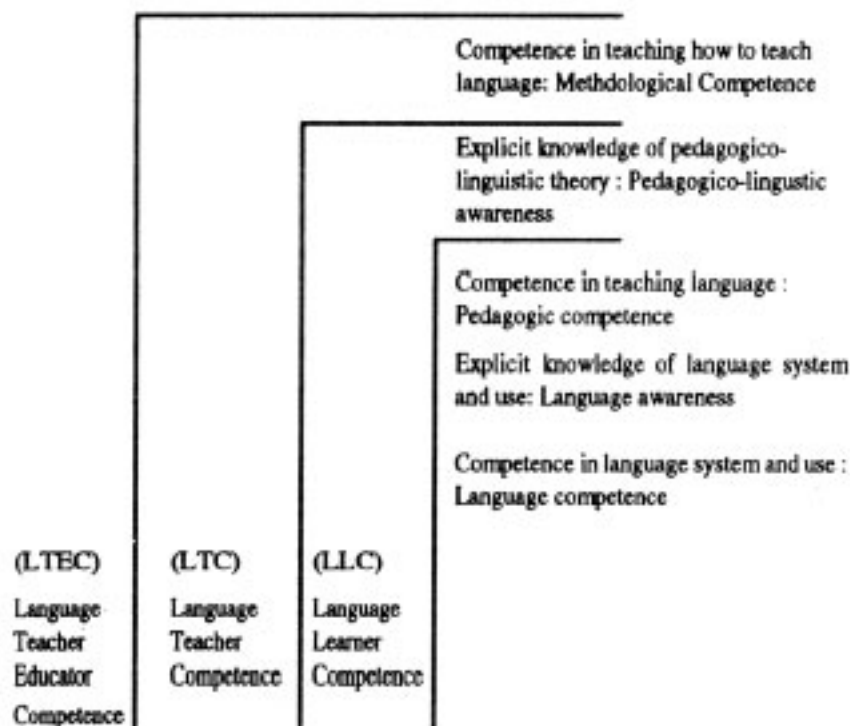


Fig. 2 Integrated framework of competence

In the present context, the language teacher educator needs to have an exposure to distance education, besides what has been described here. This emphasizes the need for training the 'trainers'. Further, their role domain ought to be defined well. In the context of distance tuition, for instance, it should be extended beyond the role of a 'moderator' to that of a 'monitor' which entails

- * supplying guidelines for evaluation of assignment responses to the external faculty members in order to ensure objectivity and uniformity in evaluation
- * streamlining the turn around time of assignment responses to realise the objectives of assignments in distance education
- * assessing the performance of the external faculty members and at a later stage providing the feedback to the training programme.

Though to a reasonable extent assignments help measure the academic performance of the students, there might be areas

which cannot be brought under the framework of assignments, and, therefore, need to be discussed face-to-face. Besides providing an opportunity to the students to have a socio-cultural exchange, the facility for face-to-face sessions should help in sharing academic experiences. By implication, these sessions should not be considered for teaching of the traditional type. Past experience indicates that this provision at CIEFL is by and large a desideratum. A look into it is worthwhile here.

4.3 PERSONAL CONTACT SESSIONS

An integral component of the correspondence courses of the CIEFL is the mid-course and end-course face to face sessions. Providing ample scope for socio-cultural exchange they do not seem to be concerned to do experience sharing, mostly because information dissemination gets the prerogative. Besides, the rationale behind the number of days kept for mid- and end-course sessions needs to be reviewed. Two issues arise in this context:

- i. If 'teaching' is the purpose of personal contact sessions, can't that teaching component also be incorporated in the materials, and if done, should attendance for this session be made obligatory?
- ii. Wouldn't most of the participants, being in-service and having other social preoccupations, find it difficult to be away from home and place of work to attend the sessions of the prescribed duration? (Related to this is the question of cost involved, a discussion of which is outside the purview of the present attempt).

A rationalistic way of looking at these issues is to understand the stages the participants move through in their academic pursuit and take decisions accordingly. The stages may be:

- * precourse
- * entry to the course
- * early days on the course
- * mid-course
- * examination or end-course
- * post course stage

Obviously, to satisfy the needs of these stages the contact sessions need to be spread across the duration of the course and the attendance optional.

5. CONCLUSION

The classical approach to curriculum development consists of the deceptively simple four stages of:

- i. defining the aims
- ii. selecting and sequencing learning experiences
- iii. identifying learning transactions
- iv. designing and developing assessment methods to measure the degree of success in achieving the aims.

Training the teachers of English is one of the broad aims of the Institute. To break this down into measurable objectives is far from easy nor is it any less difficult to plan the activities which will help accomplish them. But, if we believe that this

is an important area of endeavour, such analyses must be done. Experience shows that a major share of effort, energy and activity seems to have been concentrated on the second stage as regards CIEFL — though unsuccessfully. In the process “learning transactions” i.e., the actual activity has apparently been relegated to the background. However, in

distance education, ‘transactions’ are as important as ‘learning experiences’. It clearly indicates that we cannot avoid the responsibility of evaluation. Working in tandem, the Department of Correspondence Courses and other departments should take it up in order that the programmes on offer through the distance mode are given a fillip.

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