

Relevant and Student-Friendly Course Materials for Distance Education Programmes: A Case Study

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Abstract: *The paper argues that the course materials produced for Distance Education programmes must not only be student-friendly but also relevant. The author has got the experience of producing two course books for Part II English, for BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) course, offered by SASTRA University, Thanjavur, through distance mode. Both the syllabi and the materials for these courses were prepared with an eye on the relevance of content to the student needs.*

Key words: English courses; relevance

1. Introduction

Materials production for language learning, especially in area called English for Specific Purposes, is not an easy task. Dubin and Olshtain (2000) consider creating materials through which people can effectively learn new languages as a highly specialised craft, one that needs to be perfected through immersion in the activity itself. They are also of the view that a worthwhile textbook requires insights from teaching, but it also requires craftsmanship from writers. The teachers/writers should put aside their successful classroom materials and to think about the specialized requirements of a textbook.

2. Curricular innovation

Curricular innovation is a managed process of development whose principal products are teaching (and/or testing) materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values that are perceived as new by potential adoptors. The curricular innovation emphasises the fact that the primary goal of any project in curriculum and teacher innovation must be to promote deep, on going professional change which specifically involves engaging teachers in developing new materials, methodological skills and values (Markee 1997). Innovation must be thought of not only in curriculum and syllabus framing but also in materials production.

3. Factors to be considered in Materials Production

3.1 Selecting texts

In choosing a literary text for use with your students, you should think about three main areas. They are: the type of course you are teaching, the type of students who are doing the course and certain factors connected with the text itself (Lazer 2004). Lazer gives a checklist to be considered while choosing literary texts to be included in the syllabus.

3.2. Checklist for Choosing Literary Texts

i. Type of Course: Level of students, Students' reasons for learning English, Kind of English required and Length/intensity of course

ii. Type of Students: Age, Intellectual maturity, Emotional understanding, Interests/Hobbies, Cultural background, Linguistic proficiency and Literary background

iii. Other Text-Related Factors: Availability of texts, Length of text, Exploitability and Fit with syllabus.

4. English Courses for Students of BFA Course at SASTRA University

4.1 Course Objectives

The two English courses offered to the students of degree course in Fine Arts aim at developing the communication skills essential for performing artists. The performing artists like the dancers and the musicians, in the present day context, have to be proficient in the English language for many reasons. First they have to be good at interpersonal communication in their day-to-day activities. Secondly they have to interpret their performance in English to the mixed audience. The performing artists play several roles in the media – as compere, as judge etc. Some times they have to address an audience on professional themes and write reviews and articles on their area of expertise to the print media. The course caters to all the above communication demands of the performing artists. To facilitate easy learning the course book has been designed in the self-instructional material (SIM) pattern.

4.2 Course Structure and the Relevance of the Course Content

Paper 1

The course comprises four blocks. Block 1 deals with six literary texts. Block 2, vocabulary and grammar, Block 3 – reading and comprehension and Block 4 – writing. The relevance of the course meant for the performing artists is that the six literary texts prescribed in Block 1 are carefully chosen with an eye on the student-needs. They are:

1. Shantiniketan - C.F. Andrews

2. Indian Dancers – a poem by Sarojini Naidu
3. Culture by K.M. Munshi
4. Dream of an Artist - an extract from ‘The Guide’ by R.K. Narayanan
5. Revolutionising Sadir – A profile of Rukmini Devi Arundale – Sunil Kothari
6. Ideal Qualities of a Dancer.

Under the vocabulary item in Block 2, a glossary of dance terms with their definitions is provided with a view to enable the learners to understand the dance writings easily and to define such terms well.

In Unit 3 of Block 4, titled “Speaking and Writing on Dance” nine articles taken from the ‘Friday Review’ of ‘The Hindu’ Newspaper are provided. Reading of those texts will help the students to speak on dance performances and write reviews on dance recitals. Specialized words and expressions related to the field of dance, used in the articles are identified and given as a list with an instruction to the students to try to use them in their speech and writing.

Paper 2

Paper 2, offered to the second year programme, covers Literary Texts, Listening, Speaking and Writing. Again in this paper the six literary texts prescribed are relevant to the student needs. They are:

1. Interfaith Values for the Global Society – Dr. Karan Singh
2. The Relevance of Sri Aurobindo’s Philosophy Today – Nani A. Palkhivala
3. Never Never Nest – Cedric Mount
4. How I became a Public Speaker – Bernard Shaw
5. The Panorama of India’s Past – Jawaharlal Nehru
6. The Dance of Shiva – Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

Block 3 covers areas of public speaking, presentation skills for performing artists. Block 4 discusses writing strategies like narration and description and writing review articles and media reports.

5. Feedback from Students

In order to collect the views of the students who are the ultimate stakeholders of the courses, a questionnaire was served to all the 27 students who studied the first year of the B.F.A. course in Bharathanatyam. A questionnaire with five close-ended questions with a three point scale was used for the survey. The questions were intended to elicit their responses on the

relevance and the usefulness of the course. The responses were collated, tabulated and percentage analysis was made. The analysis of each item is shown under:

1. All the 27 students i.e. 100% averred that the course is either VERY RELEVANT or RELEVANT.
2. 95% of the respondents stated that the content of the course is either HIGHLY ADEQUATE or FAIRLY ADEQUATE.
3. 96.66% stated that they like the course
4. 90% of the respondents are of the view that the course helps them in making professional presentations and writing.
5. All the 27 students are of the view that more relevance texts can be included in future. They wanted better focus on professional speaking and writing skills.

6. Conclusion

The course, by being discipline-specific, tries to hone the professional communicative skills of the performing artists. From the feedback it becomes clear that the learners find it very interesting and useful. It is hoped that the case study presented will serve as a good model for the distance education courses especially in terms of relevance.

References

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