

ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL IN ANDHRA PRADESH: ISSUES AND CONCERN - PERSPECTIVES OF PRACTICING TEACHERS

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Practicing Undergraduate Teachers of English in the 179 Government Degree College across the State of Andhra Pradesh collectively desire that the Communicative Competence of the students should improve. The Year I Integrated English Curriculum introduced in the State during the academic year 2005-2006 and the Year II Integrated English Curriculum introduced this academic year, 2006-2007, are welcome changes. The modified Curriculum facilitates the language use of the students in all four skills-Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing.

A Survey of a cross-section of Teachers across the State reveals that two important factors dominate the undergraduate English classroom in Andhra Pradesh. They are:

- A. The varied achievement levels of English among undergraduate students
- B. The large classes where student strength varies from 60 to 120 students per class.

Teachers all over the State feel that these two factors must be vital inputs for teacher trainers, material developers, syllabus designers, and assessment and evaluation experts. It is the practicing teachers who link curriculum objectives, teaching methodology, and evaluation techniques. Teachers across the State feel that assessment and evaluation are an integral part of the teaching-learning process. (Alderson & Wall 1993) Teachers feel if the focus of the General English Curriculum is to develop the student's proficiency in English and improve their communication skills, it is unfair and educationally unsound to put all the students through the same pattern of assessment, considering the different proficiency levels that students have in English.

Teachers know that no group of learners is homogeneous. To make teaching-learning of English more meaningful and effective and to cope rationally with University regulations to have a common examination for a student population with a wide range of language abilities, teachers feel that changes in the assessment of students must be adopted. Streaming of students based on their proficiency level in English should be considered. A graded examination pattern could be developed with different levels of ability built into the various components. (Bachman & Palmer 1996)

Teachers across the State feel that any assessment and evaluation practice is meaningful and effective only when it is designed keeping in mind the large heterogeneous English Classrooms in Andhra Pradesh where first-generation learners from the vernacular medium sit alongside third-generation learners with 12 years of English medium education.

The impact of assessment practices on Undergraduate English classroom teaching is overwhelming. It dominates the teaching-learning process Teachers feel that the existing testing practice forces them to teach English as a subject and not a language. (Cohen 1994) The entire year is spent “coaching” the students to “pass” the examination because marks obtained in the examination are the only criterion to judge the student’s proficiency in the language.

An analysis of the results of General English for the academic year 2005-2006 across the State shows a disturbing trend. The pass percentages in English have increased dramatically from 75% to 97.2% in most colleges that followed the new pattern of assessment recommended among the modified curriculum. Teachers across the State are concerned because they feel that the results are not a realistic indicator of the student’s proficiency as the language scores have risen significantly without increasing the communication competence of the students.

Many teachers felt that the assessment pattern gave scope for students to be “coached” to “game” the exam without developing the language skills. A test or an examination is a tool, a technique to measure the students’ expression of knowledge, skills, and abilities. Testing and Assessment are often very subjective, thereby creating discrepancies in evaluation patterns. The test is so designed that two different assessors can give two very different scores for the same answer. (Wall & Alderson 1993)

Teachers/Assessors follow a key with predetermined answers and guidelines supplied by the examination department of the university thus making it possible for anyone to assess the students not necessarily a practicing teacher. Teachers feel that the assessment of student’s performance must be made fair, objective, and constructive. The method by which the student’s performance is assessed should be clear to the teacher, the student, and the assessors. Teachers all over the state realize that student assessment should be a continuous activity and are aware that a variety of assessment techniques can be used to evaluate the student’s progress in language learning.

However, teachers find their very large classes a constraint because of the mixed ability levels of each student's learning process. The teacher believes that assessment is neither fair nor constructive whether it is formative or summative when the same assessment procedure is used to evaluate all the students in the heterogenous classes.

Another phenomenon that disturbs Undergraduate Teachers of English is the status given to English as a subject in the overall evaluation system The marks obtained in English do not affect the overall final grade/percentage/class Division of the students. Students do not take

English seriously and aim for just 35 marks. The minimum score required to pass the English examination. The student's priority is on graduating rather than on developing their language skills. The assessment tests students on their memory rather than their language skills. This allows students to score the minimum required to pass the examination. Guides are available in the market with model question papers and readymade answers students get reasonably good scores without actually learning the language. (Biggs 1995)

When assessment practices change teachers must be updated on the assessment practices. Most teachers feel the need for an orientation course in testing assessment and strategies. Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) is vital for teachers who deal with language learners who learn English as a second language and foreign language at the undergraduate level in Andhra Pradesh, as is the case in the rest of India. Many of the learners are often first-generation learners. (Hughes 1989) The teacher feels that Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) orientation should be patterned on the model of The AP State English Lectures Retraining Programme, a joint venture of the Directorate of Collegiate Education of Andhra Pradesh started in 2006, which aims at updating the Teaching practices of English Lecturers by training them in communicating Language Teaching so that they can provide their students with effective English language communication skills. Teachers across the State feel that updating the teaching practices of English Teachers is laudable but can be effective only if their assessment methodology is updated too.

To conclude Undergraduate Teachers of English across Andhra Pradesh believe that since they are the actual classroom practitioners and have in-depth knowledge of the various kinds of learner profiles that exist in the large English classrooms of Andhra Pradesh, practicing teachers should be involved in developing material, in curriculum design and evolving assessment and evaluation practices for the undergraduate students.

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