Chapter I

Introduction
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INTRODUCTION

English language is prescribed to the students of Engineering in the first and second semester (I year B.E.) of the eight semester course. To maintain uniformity in the standard of English language learning and teaching, a common syllabus prescribed by Anna University is followed throughout Tamilnadu. Though the other foreign languages such as German, French, Russian etc., are also given as options, most of the students opt only English language. Whatever may be the option, the medium of teaching in Engineering Colleges is only English.

English language syllabus of the B.E./B.Tech. course envisages the following short term and long term needs of the engineering students:

- To communicate with peer group, teachers and officials (Government and Company) fluently in English.
- To explain a process with clarity and accuracy.
- To state the operation of an equipment / machine in sequence.
- To write the principles involved in the design of an equipment / machine.
- To report the results of an experiment in proper form.
- To give instructions to the subordinates.
- To write letters to Offices / Companies – letters of application, complaint, permission, leave etc.
- To write business letters assuming different roles.
- To prepare technical reports and make a list of recommendations.
- To listen to lectures, speeches and take notes.
- To read the passage and comprehend the ideas and interpret them.
1.01 **English Language Syllabus for the Engineering Course**

The course content in English language is prepared keeping the short term and long term needs of the students in mind. The syllabus designers have prescribed a text book prepared by the Humanities and Social Sciences Division of Anna University. The book was prepared in consultation with the English language experts of Thomas Valley University (formerly known as Ealing college of Higher Education) U.K. and first published in 1990 in two volumes. The preface to the I and II reveals that the authors have followed ‘Skills approach’ to make the students use English language in the classroom and encourage interaction among them. Tasks on reading, listening, role play and discussion and oral pair work are given in the text under different units which are substituted with language development exercises. Browsing through the contents, anyone could find one of the most needed topics – ‘Business Letter Writing’ inadequately dealt with in the prescribed text.

1.02 **Need for Training in Business Letter Writing**

The Engineering students would find them placed in different positions in industries / companies / Government service dealing with sales / purchase / production / transaction of different nature. The responsibilities include communication which is mostly through letter writing. Hence the students of Engineering should be adequately trained to meet the career – requirement. Further, the competitive global market and the changing business scenario both in India and abroad demand a well-planned and suitably worded business letters which reflect the reputation of company.

1.03 **Teaching of Business Letters in Classrooms**

In Indian classrooms, letters are taught using a few models. The teachers start with format of different types of letters – personal letters, official letters and business letters. They give sample letters for each type. This is followed by exercises to be done by the students. The teachers focus mainly
on grammatical and structural accuracy in relation to content. The intricate relationship between the writer, addressee and the content and the operation of the language are left to the students to perceive. Specifically, ‘tone’ and ‘point of view’ reveal this intricacy in every stage in the course of letter writing. These areas are safely omitted in teaching even at the College level. The assumption that the students would perceive ‘tone’ and ‘point of view’ may be valid. A few students, who have proficiency in English language can feel the ‘tone’ and ‘point of view’ in letters but not all.

1.04 NEED FOR FOCUS ON ‘TONE’ AND ‘POINT OF VIEW’ IN BUSINESS LETTERS

Business letters are written with a specific objective of making the addressee respond positively. The industries/companies in which the Engineers are employed, decide the efficiency of the engineering graduates only through the successful result in business. Naturally, they have to adopt a suitable ‘tone’ and ‘point of view’ in business letters which will bring the desired result. Frequently, the strain in business relationship is due to the use of inappropriate ‘tone’ and ‘point of view’. As the Engineering students’ professional career is anchored on business there is an imperative need to train them in writing business letters with special attention to ‘tone’ and ‘point of view’.

1.05 BUSINESS SCENARIO IN INDIA

Majority of the people in India are illiterates whose per capita income is very low when compared with most of the countries in the west. Hence, the purchasing power of the Indians is poor. Considering these facts, the industries, companies manufacture and sell the products at ‘affordable cost’. Further, the Indians have the tendency to bargain with the sellers to get products at low price.

To carry on the business the companies and the sellers attempt to fulfill the expectations of the customers in quality and price of the products. They
also offer credit facility to the customers who sometimes delay the payment. The competition in the market has forced the sellers/companies to reconcile with the attitude of the customers. Similarly, the wide choice of products available in the market has increased the expectations of the customers. Hence, both the companies and the customers are equally firm in their business dealings. In such a situation, problems are bound to arise. The Engineers who are employed in companies have to achieve success in such an environment.

1.06 CHOICE OF ‘TONE’ IN BUSINESS LETTERS

The complex situation in Indian business demands the expression of different ‘tones’ in business letters. Though many tones could be expressed using language suitably, only five tones are selected for the study – Anger, Threatening, Persuasive, Complaint and Reconciliation. A close observation of the business letters written in western countries reveals that tones such as anger and threatening are either not at all used or used mildly. But in Indian business context use of anger and threatening tones is unavoidable because neither the companies nor the customers have the tendency to respond to complaints or letters easily.

Generally, problems/issues are represented/informed using complaint tone which highlights the inconveniences/problems faced by the writer. Naturally, the inconvenience leads to anger tone followed by threatening tone. Thus, these three tones develop as a natural order. But the order followed in the study is slightly altered considering the difficulty level thus — Anger, Threatening, Persuasive, Complaint and Reconciliation. Anger and threatening tones pressurise the addressee to act. In Indian context, unless pressure is expressed or exercised, it would be very difficult to get things done. At the same time the expression of anger and threatening should be in refined language which would reflect the writers’ academic background and the reputation of the company.
Persuasive tone and reconciliation tone are absolutely necessary for promoting business and achieve successful results. Indians yield to persuasion. In some situations, use of reconciliation tone itself serves as a persuasion in business letters.

1.07 RATIONALE FOR THE CHOICE OF TONE CHANGE

In the process of writing business letters, there will be chances to use more than one tone depending on the situation. For example, the baseless complaint of the customer may force a dealer to use anger tone. If the latter uses forceful terms throughout the letter expressing anger he will lose the customer. Naturally, he will change his tone in the last part of the letter to reconciliation or persuasion to retain the customers. The companies use the tone change, ‘Anger to Threatening’ in business letters addressed to customers who are willful defaulters (in credit settlements). Similarly, the customer who purchases an item which fails within a short period starts his letter with complaint tone and moves to anger tone. The tone change from reconciliation to persuasion would reflect the writer’s positive attitude which pays rich dividend in business.

1.08 POINT OF VIEW

The writer reveals the consciousness of his official, social and economic position in business letters. His point of view has to be in tune with his position. In business letters, the point of view of the writer exercises considerable influence on the addressee. Four points of view are experimented in this study.

i) A company official’s point of view (higher officer to subordinate).
ii) Company official’s point of view (subordinate to the officer of higher rank).
iii) Customer’s point of view (to company)
iv) Company’s point of view (to customer)
The Engineering graduates would take up different positions in the hierarchy of administration in their career (higher officer or subordinate). The content, in the letters written by the higher officer to subordinate or vice versa, may be the same but when an officer of higher rank writes to his subordinate the choice of vocabulary and sentence pattern would be different from those used in the letter written by the subordinate to the higher officer. The students of engineering need to be trained in expressing the point of view suitable to his position.

The role of customer demands the realisation of the consumer’s right and also his interest in knowing the details which would be advantageous to him. His point of view would be to persuade the seller to give good quality product at a reasonable rate. Hence, the selection of words and sentence structure should reflect the point of view of the customer. Finally, the company official, who responds to the customers on behalf of the company highlights the company's point of view. With regard to concession statements, the company takes a careful view of the price (keeping the demand and supply as criteria) rebate, packing and forwarding charges etc. The company’s interest gets reflected in the letter.

Considering the lack of focus on business letter writing in the syllabus for under graduate Engineering students in the State and the non availability of the material on ‘tone’ and ‘point of view’ which are abstract in business letters, the research topic was finalised. Before exploring the area of research further a careful study of the related studies in the area is necessary to avoid repetition. Hence, a comprehensive review of the related works is attempted in the next chapter.