CHAPTER TEN

NATURE OF LANGUAGE WORK IN SYLLABUSES AND QUESTION-PAPERS

"Overteaching and underteaching are alike in this: each leaves the pupil with a mass of impressions that he is unable to digest."

- S.H. Hopper

The syllabuses of English as a compulsory subject as well as its question-papers have changed a little, lately. There has been for some years, a welcome trend to play down the importance of the teaching of literature and the testing of its knowledge, and to play up the importance of the teaching of the language and the testing of its knowledge.

Language-orientation of the syllabuses of Compulsory English and its question-papers is undoubtedly the need of the day. But what sort of language work should form part of a syllabus or a question-paper? A mere repetition of all the language work done at the earlier levels is no satisfactory answer. It appears that at many levels at college, students are made to face the ritual of teaching almost all the grammar points they had been taught at school. One wonders what good such repetitive teaching does to the students, except that it gives them an excuse not to take English lessons seriously.
The language part of a syllabus of Compulsory English at the college level should be based on the following considerations. Once the syllabus is flawless, the question-paper takes care of itself.

(i) Is it remedial teaching of the language items already taught earlier? If yes, one has to be selective as regards the language items. An unorganized repetition of all the language items learnt earlier does not serve any purpose because students, finding that all the items being taught are the ones taught earlier, think that language lessons are meaninglessly repetitive and, therefore, lack motivation to be attentive to them.

(ii) Is it intended to teach some additional grammar points? If yes, they must not be casually mixed up with the basic grammar points learnt earlier and perhaps taught at the college level for reinforcement. In language learning it is necessary to give the learner the feeling of having reached a level of proficiency and progressing therefrom to higher stages of attainment.

The investigator felt that the language orientation of some syllabuses did not have a scientific basis. He
conducted a small experiment to verify whether the language orientation of the syllabus of Compulsory English and/or its question-paper at a particular level of one of the universities in Gujarat did have a scientific basis. The experiment and its findings are detailed below.

**EXPERIMENT**

For the reasons earlier stated, it was necessary to verify whether the type of language-orientation of syllabuses and question-papers that is fast finding favour with the course-designers of English in universities in Gujarat has a scientific basis. The implied emphasis on 'a scientific basis' in this statement is not for its own sake. As discussed earlier, a language-orientation having only a scientific basis could be meaningful. The experiment carried out for the purpose is based on a simple testing of two groups. The details of the experiment have been given below.

**Test Material :**

The question-paper in English for the year 1972 for Pre-University Commerce of the Gujarat University had two sections. Section one consisted of questions
on comprehension, tenses, indirect narration and story/letter writing - the topics in the syllabus for the year. Section Two consisted of questions on the text-book prescribed for the year. Either section carried 50% of the total number of marks for the question-paper. The Language Section of this question-paper was used as test-material. (The test material has not been given in the Appendix as the university treats the said section of the question-paper as confidential.)

Each of the questions making up the language section was to be answered in the blank space provided for it. While the questions on comprehension, tenses and composition carried 10 marks each, the question on indirect narration carried 5 marks. The university has fixed one hour's duration for the completion of this section. Following it, one hour's duration was accepted for either of the tests.

The tests were administered to two groups of students: (i) a group of Pre-University Commerce students of a college affiliated to the Gujarat University, and (ii) a group of S.S.C. students of a school in Ahmedabad. Neither group was specially formed for the purpose. While the first group comprised the students of the smallest of the Pre-University classes at the college,
the second comprised the students of one of the S.S.C. classes at the school.

The knowledge of English of both these groups was tested with the test material described earlier in this chapter. Neither group was informed of the test it was expected to take, in advance. The tests were carried out when the academic year was approaching its end. By that time, the Pre-University students had been taught all the topics covered by the test material. The S.S.C. students had also learnt these topics. The teacher of English for the S.S.C. class pointed out that one topic was only partly known to them. They were taught how to turn a monologue, directly narrated, into the one, indirectly narrated. The relative question on the test material was on turning a dialogue into indirect narration.

Pre-University Commerce Group:

No special instructions were necessary for the Pre-University Commerce students who were tested with the material described. In the light of the pattern of university question-paper in English for the level, they had been trained during the year in answering the types of questions the test-material comprised. There was no likelihood of any of the students having ever read the
language section of the question-paper in English being used as test material, because it was not made available by the university to individuals or college libraries.

After being informed of the objective, the students took the test under strict supervision. No cases of copying were noticed, thanks to the students' co-operation. While the objective was explained, they were told that the same test was to be administered to some S.S.C. students and that their own performance might not be better than that of the S.S.C. students. They were told this on purpose and it was noticeable that they took the test in all seriousness and to some extent, with a spirit of challenge.

S.S.C. Students:

Compared to the Pre-University Commerce students who took the test, the S.S.C. students were at a disadvantage. They were totally unfamiliar with the pattern of the question-paper they were going to face, and were certainly not specially trained to answer such questions. It was necessary, therefore, to give them some explanations and instructions.

They were given an outline of the question-paper. That is, they were told how many questions there were in the question-paper, what topics they covered, etc. As
regards the question on tenses, they were told that in each of the ten sentences of the question, there was: blank space for the insertion of the appropriate tense-form of the verb suggested into brackets. They were told that the tense was suggested by the context created in the sentence and that no context required them to use the future tense. (Only the Present Tense and the Past Tense were on the syllabus of English for Pre-University Commerce.) As for the short questions on comprehension, the students were told that they might find them as simple as the ones they were used to. Where the meanings of words were asked, they were told, even if they did not exactly know them, the context could guide them. In attempting the question on comprehension, they were advised to be brief. It was also pointed out that they might find the question on Indirect Narration a bit difficult because, whereas they were used to narrating a monologue indirectly, the question required them to narrate a dialogue in that manner.

The students were, of course, informed of the objective of the test. They took the test under strict supervision. Two cases of copying were noticed. Their answer-books were appropriately marked and later cancelled. Apart from these two cases, the students behaved with a sense of responsibility.
A spirit of challenge was kindled also in these students with the revelation that the test material was a part of a question-paper in English for Pre-University Commerce students, that the same questions had been attempted by a group of Pre-University Commerce students and that the investigator believed the performance of the S. S. C. students would be as good as that of the Pre-University students - perhaps even better.

The Assessment:

In order to eliminate all chances of any prejudice for or against either of the groups tested, the following method was adopted for the assessment of their performance. There were 50 answer-books submitted by the Pre-University Commerce students. After the answer-books of copying students were weeded out, there remained 40 answer-books of the S. S. C. students. The part containing the name, Roll No., and the class of each of the sheets was first folded and then the answer-books were all mixed up so as to render it impossible to identify the group to which each answer-book belonged.

Questions carrying six out of ten marks on comprehension were multiple-choice questions. Those carrying the remaining four were the questions based on facts directly stated in the passage. In the questions on tenses, blanks
were to be filled with appropriate forms of the verbs given.
An indirect narration, which was expected in one of the
questions, is based on a set of rules. The assessment could
easily remain objective in the case of these questions.
Personal judgement had to be exercised in the case of only
one question - that on story/letter-writing.

Comparison of the Two Performances:

Table 10.1 shows the frequency distribution of the
achievement scores of the two groups. While the Pre-University
Commerce group consisted of 50 students, the S.S.C. group
consisted of 40.

TABLE 10.1 : FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF THE ACHIEVEMENT SCORES
OF THE PRE-UNIVERSITY COMMERCE AND S.S.C. STUDENTS
ON LANGUAGE QUESTIONS OF THE QUESTION-PAPER IN
ENGLISH OF 1972 FOR THE PRE-UNIVERSITY COMMERCE
LEVEL OF THE GUJARAT UNIVERSITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marks Obtained</th>
<th>Pre-Uni.Com.</th>
<th>S.S.C.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Out of 35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 to 7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 to 10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 to 16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 to 19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 to 22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 to 25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 to 28</td>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td>18.06</td>
<td>18.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The difference between the mean scores of the two groups is 0.39, the mean score of the S.S.C. students being higher. Statistically, the difference was found insignificant.

Implications of the Findings:

There are several theoretically possible implications of the findings of the experiment. The presence of the following factors can lead to such a poor language acquisition at a level: (i) An imperfect syllabus, (ii) Rather inefficient teaching, (iii) Low capacity of the learners, (iv) Sub-standard questions.

A combined effect of more than one of these factors cannot be ruled out. But, when a full-scale research on the whole aspect is not possible, one must think in terms of singling out the factor whose predominance is unquestionable.

The Pre-University Commerce group consisted of students who had been admitted to the college on the basis of their high percentage of marks in the S.S.C. examination. Their learning capacity was, therefore, beyond doubt. As for the efficiency of teaching, it could not be exceptionally bad since the Pre-University Commerce group belonged to a highly reputed college in Gujarat.
The elimination of either of the other two factors - an imperfect syllabus and an imperfect question-paper - is not as easy.

If one assumes that the syllabus is alright, the implication is that the question-paper deviated from it for substandard language questions. With an appropriate syllabus and a fair teaching of its items in the class, there should be an obvious improvement in the students' language proficiency. This is not borne out by the achievement scores of the two groups, in spite of the fact that the S.S.C. group was a little handicapped with regard to the nature of the question-paper as mentioned earlier.

The findings of the experiment reflect imperfections of the syllabus. Since the experiment was concerned with only the language section of the question-paper, its findings must be taken as ones reflecting imperfections in only the language items of the syllabus.

**SHORTCOMINGS OF THE SYLLABUS FOR PRE-UNIVERSITY COMMERCE**

The language-orientation of the syllabus of English for Pre-University Commerce of the Gujarat University is an important step towards the reforms necessary in the
field of English teaching, especially in Gujarat. The framers of this syllabus deserve compliments to have recognized the need for such orientation in the present context.

But the language-orientation is deficient in not having a scientific basis.

The most glaring shortcoming of this syllabus is a lack of specific details regarding its items. Only a cursory look at the syllabus highlights this shortcoming.

The syllabus runs as follows:

(a) questions on texts 35 marks
(b) Language 35 marks

There will be no essay question at Pre-University level.

(i) Comprehension will be tested by objective questions but the answers can be either in the regional language or English 10 marks

(ii) A question on reported speech based on texts 5 marks

(iii) A question testing candidates' ability to frame sentences using English verbs in the following tenses (with question and confirmative and negative sentences) 10 marks
The following are the investigator's comments on the items included in the syllabus.

**Comprehension:**

In what way does the inclusion of the item of comprehension in the syllabus differ from that in the syllabus/es for earlier level/es? What should be the area from which a passage should be selected for comprehension? What should be its difficulty level in terms of vocabulary and structures? Would it do, even at this stage, if all the objective questions asked be directly related to the facts contained in the passage? In the opinion of this investigator, the syllabus must be specific enough to answer these questions as far as the item of comprehension is concerned.
Tenses: 

What is the specific anticipated terminal behaviour of a Pre-University Commerce student as expressed through 'sentences using verbs in the ... tenses' stated in the syllabus? The objective implicitly stated is too general to guide either the teacher or the paper-setter.

Tenses have already been taught to the school-leaver. Teaching them again at this level could be only remedial. In the remedial teaching of tenses, there has to be some selection. The basic selection should be in terms of the form and the uses of the tenses. The teaching items can be specified in terms of particular uses of the tenses, agreement between the verb and the subject, particular forms of verbs, uses of the auxiliaries, and so on.

Composition:

Subjects on which a paragraph can be written are innumerable. For a purposeful teaching of the item, it should be considered necessary to suggest specific areas from which to select subjects. The areas can be spelt out, for example, as activities in which the students are likely to have participated, activities and ideas they are likely to be familiar with and, perhaps, emotions.
they can identify, and so on. Such specification could be of immense value to the teachers; it can inspire confidence in the learner that the challenge is within his reach; it can also mark out areas which the paper-setter can be instructed not to cross.

A selection of subjects for paragraph-writing is possible also from another point of view. Paragraphs could be descriptive, narrative, reflective, imaginative and so on. A demarcation, also in this respect, could lead to a purposeful teaching of the item and an appropriate testing of the item learnt.

Reported Speech:

The syllabus does not make it clear whether the item implies the teaching of reporting indirectly a monologue or a dialogue or both.

THE IMPACT OF THE IMPERFECT SYLLABUS

With a very broad frame of reference in the syllabus, the teachers as well as the paper-setters are likely to follow a safer course of teaching and testing relatively simple aspects of the items prescribed. As far as teaching is concerned, the investigator did not attempt
to collect any evidence to prove that it treads the safer course. As regards paper-setting, the language section of the question-paper of 1972, which was used as the test material for the experiment, is an evidence. The language-oriented syllabus was introduced in 1969 and ever since there has been a discernible trend in the question-papers in English for the level to test relatively simple aspects of the items on this syllabus.

How do the imperfections of the syllabus affect the students' performance in a simple language test? After all, the questions, by and large, test nothing more than the students' linguistic proficiency attained at school. Should not the teaching at college, which is at least fair in quality, have reinforced the teaching of these items at school, so as to further strengthen their knowledge of these items and enable them to score better than the S.S.C. students in a linguistic test based on them?

Learning is a complex process, which is shaped by a number of factors. As per the gestalt theory, one of the important conditions of learning is that the learner must clearly perceive the whole of which what he is learning at a given moment is a part. The
syllabus discussed above includes areas of learning which are too wide. It is necessary to specify selected language aspects related to the respective areas. The goal is not perceptible to the learner and therefore, a substantial learning does not take place. The students of the Pre-University Commerce group, who took the test, seem, at best, to have retained whatever proficiency they had acquired in these areas at school.

All the language-oriented courses in English at the different levels of the Commerce and Science faculties of Universities in Gujarat need a scrutiny from the point of view developed and explained in this Chapter.