

English for Academic Preparation Program: An Experiential Expedition

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Abstract

This case study delineated on such challenges faced whilst designing and teaching English for Academic Preparation Module to a multi-lingual beginner level English group of students at Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) covering various phases over this thrash about, firstly, the pedagogical underpinnings for the English Language course design and learning goals for the course were highlighted as interact effectively in myriad contexts and with many different speakers, learners needed to develop a repertoire of practical situation-dependent communicative choices. The paper used the reflective artifacts to review the paradigmatic issues in an English immersion program. It presented detailed considerations for teachers designing a communicative language course, documented the encountered problems, issues in restructuring the curricula and how the existing course changed through the thorough reflections and collaboration on the teaching practices, teachers' perspectives and the needs of the learners. Corresponding teaching methods and class activities were also revisited.

Keywords: Immersion, EAP, ESP, University Preparation, CLT, FCCU

1. Introduction

The role of English language teacher is ever more critical and challenging when it comes to developing the desired level of language communication skills among the nonnative speaking students. Communication skills aim to foster critical thinking skills, analytical reasoning, public speaking, verbal and nonverbal skills that help the learners survive in a higher education institute. Many students seeking to secure entrance to a university program where English is the medium of instructions do not have adequate language skills primarily to comprehend instructions, listening to lectures, figure out textbooks, take part in discussions, and able to produce coherent written work that ultimately result in being depreciate towards their studies leading them to be added in the ever-increasing list of dropout students. For these reasons, some universities offer foundation or pre-university programs to help students improve their language skills; however, students need support in more than just language skills because in the university environment they are expected to think, to reason, to communicate, and to continue their learning outside the classroom. In actuality, Troudi (2005, p.8) states, "English is now a gatekeeper to better jobs and professional opportunities in places where it was just a foreign language fewer than two decades ago."

It's a well known fact that to succeed in the higher education programs, even going farther to succeed professionally, the learners need to have strong command over English language that requires the cohesive as well as inclusive effort, a committed engagement of the management, educationists and practitioners to revisit the programs, policies and practices with the critical viewpoint. Such a language program is the result of efforts, through a scrupulous analysis at FCC. Therein it evaluates the English language program that aims at extending adequate help to those who are struggling to learn L2 i.e. English.

This article will choke out certain prominent phases of the FC College and now a Chartered University's all inclusive efforts to revise its language curricula thoroughly and how it refurbishes methodically and systemizes the whole effort through the proper channel to execute their IEAP (Intensive English for Academic Preparation) Program through the faculty efforts with extensive collaboration, to quip prospective university students' syllabi, to design planners in a systemic that includes activities, assessment patterns, objectives, rubrics and benchmarks that coach and train students in a way that fulfills their academic English language skills criteria leads to university success (Cunningsworth,1995).

2. Background of FCC Mission and Vision

FC College was founded in 1864 by Dr. Charles W. Forman, a Presbyterian missionary from the USA. The college was initially known as the Lahore Mission School, but in 1894 the name was officially changed to Forman Christian College in the honour of the founder. The mission of Forman Christian College is to prepare students for ethical and responsible leadership in Pakistan (see website <http://www.fccollege.edu.pk>); and the

wider world who exemplify the FCC motto, “*BY LOVE, SERVE ONE ANOTHER.*” The educational programs and the faculty approach to teaching are designed to graduate:

‘Empowered, informed and responsible learners with strong written, oral and quantitative skills that they can use to evaluate a constant flood of information, can think independently, can participate in the decision making process and are fluent in both their native language and English’.

Forman Christian College, (A Chartered University) is a culturally diverse university in Lahore, Pakistan hosting over six thousand students, half of the contingent represent students from various parts of the country especially far-flung areas of Pakistan. FCC’s mission is to nurture leaders across all disciplines through interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary education coupled with a unique liberal arts program covering a range of courses, and medium of instruction is English. The bachelor program is unique as it is based on American education style and students are placed as per their language proficiency and command over English language. Since the students at FCC hail from numerous cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds, and have been educated in diverse educational streams, sometimes they meet the required proficiency level, and sometimes they are placed cautiously in the IEAP program that aims to sharpen and strengthen their proficiency in all four skills of English language skills along with critical thinking and analytical skills. Mounting language proficiency in a second or third language is a complex phenomenon. In the process, one’s whole person is affected in the struggle to reach beyond the confines of a first language and into a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling, and acting. Total commitment, total involvement, and a total physical, intellectual and emotional response is necessary to successfully send and receive messages in a second language. Differences among second language learners in the speed of language acquisition and the levels of language proficiency attained can be attributed to such individual differences as motivation, personality, attitude, socio-cultural traditions, and age as well as to contextual factors such as amount, type, and quality of instruction, opportunities for positive interactions with proficient users, and school or community characteristics. Maintaining such standards, FCC has witnessed several curricula changes over the passage of time; learning from their experiences, reflecting upon their practices, delineating on their role as an institution, planning and policing the language curricula, upholding the standardized instructions in English were some of the challenges.

3. Initial Phase of English Language Curriculum

During the formative phase, as university status had been granted through the charter by the Government of Punjab to FCC in the Year 2004. The students by the end of their second year assessed in their competency over English language both in written and oral communication. The purpose of this requirement was to equip students with adequate linguistic knowledge to prepare them with communication and analytical skills, to help them to integrate knowledge that came from different disciplines, and to prepare them for a lifetime of self-directed learning. All students must have completed the designated number of credit hours allotted for the written communication; English 101---Writing and Grammar and English 103---Advanced Writing Skills (FCC Catalogue, 2005-2006).

Students who believed that they had the knowledge and skills necessary to pass the competency examinations in written English and/or spoken might take the competency examinations at the beginning of the freshman year. If they managed to pass the competency examination they would have been exempted from the relevant specific required course, instead, could take advanced courses in communication. For students entering the baccalaureate program with weak English skills, a special program had been put together. Students would enroll in from one to five special English courses designed to help such students succeed. The number of courses depended upon the students’ performance in the English Language Skills assessment at the time of the admission process. Such courses were counted for credit and so that students may require an additional semester or one or two summer semesters to get done with the entire graduation requirements (FCC Catalogue, 2006-2007). The special courses included the following:

- i. ENGL 001: Reading Comprehension
- ii. ENGL 002: Basic Writing Skills
- iii. ENGL 003: Introductory Phonics
- iv. ENGL 004: Vocabulary Skills
- v. ENGL 005: Speaking Skills

Later on, it was realized that Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) was seeking international accreditation and foreign linkages in accordance with the highest standards of excellence in education. The college had begun the process of with one of the six regional accrediting associations in the USA.

4. Students’ Needs Analysis

The first step when redesigning the course was to determine for what purpose these students needed English and that was unequivocally to do well in the university. So it administered a needs assessment to gather information on how the students like to learn, how they use English inside the classrooms, how they self-assess their

speaking and writing skills, what are their perceptions about mastering English language skills and their career paths. One of the main tenets of Critical Applied Linguistics is that teachers need to give priority to helping learners appropriate English for their own purposes: to accept, resist, and even push back to assert their own ownership of English. Moreover, while mastering the system of the English language, students should also appropriate the system to serve their interests on their own terms. Because the curriculum designer needed to create the course material beforehand, it was based on past experiences and taking and gathering several perspectives from the language instructors and course designers, market demands and international academic needs. It was however decided all across that it is needed to develop a curriculum that focused on critical writing, critical reading, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), similar to the intentions of the original designers. Furthermore, by creating a curriculum that focused on these skills, it would be serving the majority of students who chose this course because they wanted to acquire competent cognitive academic skills in English. Based on the original pre-university program evaluation, the planning meeting, and the student needs assessment, important changes, as described below, were made to the curriculum.

5. The Curricula Change

The goal was to help individuals achieve excellence in thought and conduct and maintain a world class touchstone in education. Language had to be taught in an integrated fashion. For students entering the baccalaureate program with deficit English skills, a special ‘immersion’ program had been developed. Accordingly courses had been designed to make learning more focused, prolific and fecund for the learners. It was decided to integrate these courses in their mainstream curricula and making these courses mandatory for all students entering to experience Forman. All students must have to complete; English 101 Writing and Grammar, English 103 Advanced Writing Skills and Mass Communication 100 Fundamentals of Speech (Catalogue FCC, 2010). If they had passed the competency examinations they would have been exempted from the relevant specific required course and they might, instead, take advanced courses in those areas. Through this immersion programs, learners at FCC were expected to develop functional proficiency in English to become effective users of the language for their personal communication needs in real life situations inside and outside of the university setting. All entering freshmen will be screened for English language competence using the online Accuplacer Test (FCC Catalogue, 2012-13). Based on the scores obtained on this test a student could be placed into two semesters of English language immersion; one semester of English language immersion; or allowed to move beyond immersion. The two semester immersion program is sequential; LANG 100 (semester 1) and LANG 110 (semester 2). Both courses meet for 2.5 hours each day, five days a week. Total credits earned will be 30 (15+15) and will count towards electives. The one semester immersion program only involves LANG 110 (semester 1). The course meets for 2.5 hours each day, five days a week. Total credits earned will be 15 and will count towards electives. This is to equip students with enough skills in the English language to manage the rigors of academic work at FC College.

LANG 100: Language Skills I aim to develop BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) in English with enough practice so as to make the transition to the next level course easier. Daily practice in the use of all four language skills will be provided and varied materials will be used to improve vocabulary and comprehension.

LANG 110: Language Skills II intend to focus on making the students attain BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) in English with advanced levels of practice. Varied materials will be used to improve all the skills for better comprehension along with fluency and competence.

6. Developing a Systematic Approach in Designing Language Curricula

Teacher reflection is one of the components of critical pedagogy. Billig, (2000, as cited in Starfield, 2004, p. 138) states:

‘Those of us that see ourselves as operating within a critical paradigm have a responsibility to continually challenge received orthodoxies, be they in the so-called mainstream, uncritical paradigms or within research and teaching that situates itself within a critical frame. Therefore, teachers need a perpetual vigilance in our practices to guard against complacency’.

The FEAT (Forman Entrance Admission Test) is required to be taken by all students applying for university admission to the baccalaureate program. It consists of three tests; ESL Language Use (grammar), ESL Reading Skills and Arithmetic. Satisfactory performance on the FEAT is necessary for admission because it is thought to have these skills before entering the university. The course namely; UNIV 100: Foundations of University Education:

- a. Prerequisite exemption from or completion of the IEAP.
- b. All entering students must take UNIV 100 during their first semester or after they have finished the IEAP program.

The Intensive English Academic Preparation (IEAP) Program exists to provide a framework for

aspiring FCC baccalaureate students to improve their English skills to a university level of competency (FCC Catalogue, 2013-14). The curriculum focuses on training skills in academic reading, writing, listening, and speaking, through authentic interaction with the language. This program provides students the opportunity to build the foundational English skills which enable them fully benefit from their future courses of study. This year long program was run on the philosophy of not letting the learners quit and not even released to enroll in any other FC university courses until promoted through the IEAP program.

The Intensive English for Academic Preparation (IEAP) program is primarily for FCC applicants to transition into the Baccalaureate program. Applicants unable to pass the English component of the Forman Entrance Admission Test (FEAT) can join the IEAP to improve their language skills through a structured and comprehensive program which covers reading, writing, listening and speaking. Completing the IEAP program not only gives students the opportunity to significantly improve their academic English, it also helps them succeed during their Baccalaureate studies and in their future careers. The IEAP program is also open to current Baccalaureate students who feel their performance in university would benefit from additional English language skills. In IEAP students are trained in; academic reading, essay writing, understanding lectures in English, public speaking, communicative English (interpersonal and intrapersonal), critical thinking, study skills, vocabulary and computational skills (Nunan, 1989).

Five sessions each year and each session lasts seven weeks. This program's fees are paid by session. Different levels progressing from 1 to 5; each level has a Reading/Writing component and a Listening/Speaking component. Students are placed in a Level based on their computerized placement tests. They must pass the Level exam to proceed to the next Level; certificates awarded on successful completion of each Level. After passing Level 5, students can sit again for the FEAT. Passing the FEAT with the required T-Score for a particular program admits a student into the relevant FCC Baccalaureate Honors program (Catalogue FCC, 2015).

Different English Language Skills Integrating in IEAP

Listening and speaking focuses on developing these skills through listening for syllable stress, recognizing word boundaries and reduced forms of speech, and listening for opinions. Speech is developed through role plays, targeted vocabulary, surveys, and asking '5-W' and follow-up questions. Reading, writing and study skills where students are trained in pre-reading and active reading skills such as questioning, predicting, sequencing, and cause and effect. Producing well developed sentences is the focus of writing, while paragraph writing is introduced.

Beginners listening and speaking help students gain listening skills such as listening for a speaker's attitude, word recognition, understanding directions, following sequences and understanding cause and effect, expressing opinions, participating in panel discussions, describing steps in a process, and making suggestions. Beginners reading, writing and study skills focuses on developing reading, writing, and study skills, as well as critical thinking skills such as analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating. Using context to understand unfamiliar words, making charts to organize information, summarizing skills, taking notes, and identifying author's purpose are skills taught to develop reading ability. Topic sentence writing, prewriting skills, and writing of paragraphs of different genres are the writing focus.

At intermediate level, listening and speaking aims to develop skills through listening for intonation, phrases, distinguishing fact from opinion, and figurative expressions, the use of idioms, intonation to convey meaning, methods of introduction in a presentation, giving explanations using reasons, tag questions, and modals. Skills for gaining information from an academic lecture are introduced. At intermediate level reading, writing and study skills are increased through training in scanning, reading for gist, and utilizing headings, footnotes, photos and other extra-textual material for gaining understanding. Writing paragraphs of different genres is introduced and practiced. Beginning essay skills are introduced.

Advanced level listening and speaking focuses on developing listening and speaking skills. Specifically, students are trained in how to take notes in an academic lecture, using notes to prepare for tests, and what to listen for in informal classroom interviews. Participation in classroom discussions and formal presentation skills are also taught. At advanced level reading, writing and study skills, students learn how to read academic texts, how to think critically about what has been read, strategies for vocabulary development, techniques for note-taking, and test preparation methodologies. Essay writing is developed and practiced.

At proficient level, listening and speaking, focuses on developing listening and speaking skills through brainstorming, thinking critically about a topic and then stating your opinion, and participating in active classroom discussions. Listening for stressed words, vocal cues, opinions, and drawing inferences are taught. At proficient level, reading, writing and study skills, focuses on developing reading, writing, and study skills. Main reading skills presented are personalizing the text, skimming, increasing reading speed, and reading for details as well as main ideas. Writing skills include using passive voice, linking ideas in a text, and writing several genres of essay.

A computer language lab is available exclusively for IEAP students. Students can access listening files and internet-based enrichment lessons daily, in order to complement their classroom instruction. IEAP computer skills complement the IEAP coursework. These classes are available throughout the year at no extra charge for IEAP students; Typing I, Typing II, Word I, Word II, Excel I, Excel II and PowerPoint. IEAP students have access to a dedicated library where they can borrow books and DVDs to take home. Books are categorized according to Lexile measures so that students can select books appropriate to their reading levels. Watching films increases the students' exposure to spoken English and improves their familiarity with various English accents.

The IEAP is a pre-Baccalaureate program and IEAP credits cannot be transferred to a student's Baccalaureate degree. The IEAP program is intensive: four hours of instruction as well as lab hours for English proficiency skills. Students are also given daily assignments to complete at home. It is therefore not possible to give sufficient time and attention to the program if the student is also enrolled in a Baccalaureate course. After passing Level 5, students can again sit for the FEAT. Students must pass both the English and Math components of the FEAT to be admitted into the FCC Baccalaureate program.

7. Student-Teacher Perspectives on the New Curricula

Teachers welcomed the changes in the new curricula as they felt that the curricular changes helped to resolve many outstanding issues in language classrooms. The classroom is now student led instead of teacher centered. They felt that students are more prone towards the modes of tasks that invoke their analytical ability and critical thinking skills. While working in groups, they keep themselves fully and purposefully engaged. It also helped them in designing their planners, adapting the materials, developing the authentic tasks for their classes and reflecting on their practices. The participation of the students in the classroom was overwhelmingly encouraging and transforming. The students successfully entering into their university program on regular basis is certainly one aspect of looking at the success criterion of this program. The students throughout this module not only have been observed to be autonomous learners but also motivated to learn all these lifelong skills. According to Singer (1986), a climate of warmth and empathy "may be the single most important factor in determining how well your students learn" (32). "A large body of research shows that if a teacher is warm, caring, and enthusiastic, the students learn more" (Singer 1986, 33). The teachers were constantly praising and reinforcing the students, especially about the way they were meeting challenges and adjusting to the university curriculum. They are confident learners who don't hesitate to express their opinions with their fellows and teachers. These students excel in their respective fields. The students readily adapted to the critical thinking, enhancement, and writing classes.

8. Conclusion

In the evolution of such a dynamic English language program at FCCU, one needs to have the strategic insight into the students' needs, nature of the English as a Second Language programs, teachers' insights, curriculum engineers and taking a plunge to review, reflect, plan and evaluate the existing practices and feedback. This reflective piece of writing can be a roadmap for other universities to replicate their language program on the same taglines making it all-inclusive, holistic and engaging for the learners that help them prepare for their sound university base and the prospective program that caters to the diverse academic settings and their presumed professional roles.

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