UNIT 1 ENGLISH FOR PRACTICAL PURPOSES: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

1.0   OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are: i) to discuss the rationale for preparing a course on English for special purposes and ii) to expose you to certain characteristics of Scientific and Technical Writing.

1.1   INTRODUCTION

Among current developments in the learning and teaching of languages, the change which appears to be moving at the fastest rate and which brings in its train the greatest consequences for learners and teachers alike, is the trend towards the learning of languages for specific rather than for general purposes.

The definition of special-purpose teaching will be sometimes obvious, sometimes arbitrary. The following general criteria apply in defining Special Purpose Language Teaching (SP-LT).

i.   In SP-LT, the language-using purposes of the learner are paramount.

ii.   The contents of SP-LT language courses are thereby determined in some or all of the following ways: a) restriction: only the four basic skills viz., Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening are included; b) selection: only those terms of vocabulary, patterns of grammar, functions of language are included which are required by the learner; c) themes and topics: only those themes, topics, situations, etc. are included which are required by the learner's language-using purposes; d) communication needs: only the communication needs (i.e. the means of interacting appropriately through language with other human beings, singly or in groups) are included. Special-purpose language-teaching is becoming fashionable. Nevertheless, it can confer major benefits upon learners. It is because of the benefits, not simply because it is fashionable, that SP-LT deserves the attention of teachers as well as learners.

Moreover, the *English for Special Purposes* (ESP) course is both educational and occupational in nature. That is, it can be undertaken by the learners because of language requirements in their studies or/and in their jobs.

ESP ⟨→ Educational
→ Occupational
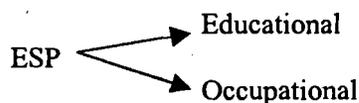
As the course on ESP envisaged by the faculty at IGNOU is mainly to equip the learners with the necessary information for using in practical situations, we have decided to call this course 'English for Practical Purposes'.

1.2   RATIONALE FOR AN ESP COURSE

The objective of language teaching is to turn-out people who possess sufficient skill in, and knowledge of, the target language for their special needs or purposes. In so far as English is taught as a second or a third language in India, it is learnt by most people to start with at the school stage itself, before the learners have any clear idea of what their future careers will be and, as a consequence, what special purposes they will have for the language. The result has been a great deal of haphazard planning and subjective decision making in our professional educational institutions. There is no gainsaying the fact that even in higher colleges of engineering, medicine and agriculture in India, the teaching of English has been subjected to the pressures of various kinds of politics. The problem in India is further compounded, if not complicated, by the multiplicity and variety of languages and widely differing levels of learners' achievement in using English for Technical/Business Communication In other words there has been no uniform 'model' to teach English for technical students all over India. No wonder, then, Halliday, Strevens and Mc Intosh suggested (1964) that a 'deliberate' selection of some local dialect as a model in countries like India and West Africa should be made since it is more efficient for communication purposes, for example, to select a dialect which is the predominant form in the region, as the frequency of interaction between members of the community is greater than that between members and people·outside—foreigners. However, we in India have been 'brought up' for some generations now on the prescriptive model of the British English and therefore tend to regard the so-called Indian English model, as an 'inferior' one.

Aside from the lack of firm administrative commitment and the frequently changing political attitudes about the status of English in India and the academic allergies in our temples of learning, there are perhaps several causes for the peculiar failure of our teachers in adopting, adapting and teaching the ESP Courses in our colleges of Sciences, Engineering, and Business Administration, some of which may be mentioned here: inadequate preparation of teachers for the task of teaching the ESP courses; lack of adequate expert guidance in terms of indigenous research in *Teaching of English as a Second Language* (TESL); lack of facilities for professional communication and interaction; lack of 'freedom' for the class room teacher to change or frame the syllabus in our Universities; lack of resources for doing research or even experimental teaching; absence of agreed objectives or a planned programme; uncertainties of teaching methods; absence and/or inadequacy of teaching materials; and lack of understanding and common agreement among administrators about the problems of language teaching.

Looking ahead, one may say that despite the seemingly formidable list of problems mentioned above, the prospects for the successful implementation of the ESP Courses in India are quite promising in the context of the new teaching 'strategies', described by June K. Phillips "Individualization and personalization", *Responding to New Realities*, Ed. by Gilbert A. Jarvis. Illinois: 1974. A synthesis of the work of Attman and Gougher (Jarvis: p.221) identifies the following characteristics of individualised insruction', which seems to be quite appropriate in the Indian situation:

1.   The student is allowed to progress at his optimum rate.
2.   Learning for mastery is emphasized; this implies sequential learning, performance objectives, criterion-referenced testing.
3.   The learners' interests, abilities, and needs determine the kind of curriculum.

   a.   Instruction is tailored to the student's readiness.
   b.   Work may be done independently or in a small group.
   c.   Provision is made for individual learning styles.
   d.   If personalization is lacking, the individualization may be insensitive to the student's needs.

4.   Credit is awarded on an individual basis for completed work.
5.   Criteria for evaluating the success of the individualised program seek to assess student attitudes towards the learning, the language, and the culture.
6.   The student's learning 'how to learn' becomes a factor.

Regarding the ESP courses in our Technical/Business Schools/Colleges, Widdowson (1975) describes scientific discourse as 'the verbal and non-verbal realization of the communicative system of science'. The three assumptions in Widdowson's plea for the exploitation of the practical aspects of ESP in our courses bear repetition in this connection: (1) learner's knowledge of the specific subject (2) his awareness of the functioning of his language and (3) the present state of his knowledge of his language use in the TESL situation

In applying Widdowson's three principles to the Indian situation, A.T. Bhatia's summing up at a Seminar in Delhi (1977) merits our consideration:

   Our School instruction in science does not draw the learners' attention to the characteristics of scientific writing. In fact, language teaching is totally unrelated to a control of language elements for use in communication settings. In the case of the second language-informal and social channels are not readily available to the learners. The emphasis in ESP courses in science, therefore, should be on a proper exploitation of the first assumption: that the learners are familiar with their specific subject.

                                                            (Forum, April 1979)

In as much as Widdowson's second and third principles may not be applicable in the Indian situation because of the multiplicity of languages and other political and administrative problems beyond purview of the English language teachers, it is probably pragmatic to adopt his first principle in respect of curriculum planning and syllabus framing, so that the learner's proficiency is increased in General English as well

1.2   SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL WRITING: CERTAIN CHARACTERISTICS

When we speak our speech is naturally full of excessive wordiness, needless repetition, loose and imprecise statements, ambiguities, faulty diction, interruptions, digressions, interpolations, shifts (in person and tense), defective logic, omission of connectives or use of a wrong one, poor sequence of ideas, use of colloquial expressions or non-standard vocabulary, failure to structure material to emphasize or sub-ordinate ideas, and use of gestural expressions (eye/body/hands movement). But when we write, we cannot afford to be wordy, repetitive, ambiguous, or defective in sentence organisation, nor do we have the advantage of movement of hands or eyes to say something for which an exact word is not coming to the mind.

Writing as a form of intelligent communication among the educated persons is not an automatic, mechanical or indifferent process, but it is a creative process, requiring

different skills. Technical or professional writing is a way of writing rather than writing on this or that subject. It is a complex function comprising three kinds of competence:

1.   Technical or subject competence
2.   Logical or organisational competence and
3.   Linguistic competence

Good technical writing is an expert and authoritative presentation of significant information about a subject. It demonstrates logical sequencing and patterning of thought in such a way to have the intended impact on the reader. It is chiefly concerned with facts, and communicates them objectively and unambiguously within a suitable format. It employs the linguistic and organisational strategies necessary to achieve a pre-determined purpose.

We cannot say that in professional writing considerations of grammar, style and organisation are extraneous elements; these are rather vitally important. In writing a technical text you are expected to be accurate, precise, impersonal and objective; you should place due emphasis on the "logic of the situation" or the nature of the subject matter. For example, in describing a process or giving instructions, you should strictly follow the actual order of the steps in the process, and not begin in the middle or mix up the stages, as a story-writer or poet may do.

1.3.1   Technical Competence

Technical competence means: you should not only know your subject but also be able to analyse information into intelligible segments of ideas or events for efficient presentation and easy comprehension. You should logically order it, viz., inductive ordering (proceeding from the specific to the general), deductive ordering (proceeding from the general to the specific), chronological or historical ordering, etc. In rhetoric, a text is categorised as descriptive, narrative, argumentative, or explanatory according to the type of predominant logical ordering it exhibits. Good technical writing facilitates the reader's understanding and makes its logic transparent.

1.3.2   Organisational Competence

If you know your technical subject well, then you should be able to present your information in several paragraphs, each paragraph representing a major idea or an important point in the development of an argument. The paragraphs are interdependent, each aiding the other in making the whole a closely knit exposition.

Good paragraphing is a pre-requisites for a well-developed, coherent piece of discourse. The topic or controlling idea, contained in the topic sentence is the nucleus of the paragraph. It is supported by several satellite sentences which are well-connected to make a unified structure.

You have also to demonstrate intellectual integrity, authorial accountability, and professional etiquette in your organisation of matter. For example, there are primary discourse, and secondary discourse: Primary discourse comprises the central argument, or thesis of the paper and the writer's own ideas of experimental results directly supporting that argument. Acknowledgements, quotation, references, bibliography, footnotes, appendices etc. contribute the secondary discourse. You should be clear and explicit, besides being factual in incorporating these features that indicate your professional integrity and accountability.

1.3.3   Linguistic Competence

Technical writing is probably more conservative, more the slave of the rules and conventions, than is the style of popular fiction. Though it shares much of the

'common' English vocabulary, there are two fundamental differences: one, psychological, and the other, linguistic.

The psychological difference lies in the writer's attitude towards his subject. It should be predominantly an attitude of objectivity and formality. In technical reports you must avoid exaggeration and literary style.

The linguistic aspect is as follows: it uses a specialised vocabulary. There is a set of terminology unique to a discipline just as there are words of general vocabulary with semi-technical meaning. There may be too many nominalisations (noun made from a verb), as in the following sentences:

"Failure to affix a signature to the form will result in disallowance of the claims."

"In examination of crystals of minerals or chemical substances, measurement of interfacial angles and a study of the symmetry may provide diagnostic information about the substance" and too many passive constructions, and avoidance of the use of personal pronouns in order to be impersonal in tone and style: "Technical assistance will be provided by the staff for developing information to complete Table1."

Some of the factors that make a technical piece difficult to understand are:

a.   The ideas are not in order;
b.   The ideas are not grasped together into distinct paragraphs;
c.   The writer does not begin his piece with an introduction that starts the reader in the right direction;
d.   The writer does not end his composition with a conclusion that sums up the point he wants to make;
e.   The relation between the ideas is not clear because the writer has not used terms words like 'although', 'for example', 'on the other hand', and so on;
f.   The writer's attitude is not clear; is he, for example, describing, suggesting, or criticising something? What is his purpose?
g.   The piece contains ideas that are not relevant to what the writer wants to express;
h.   The sentences do not have clear punctuation; there are commas and full stops without any reason;
i.   Sometimes complete sentences are not written; rather sentence fragments are written.

Please remember the following golden rules:

A)   Principles:

a)   Technical writing is chiefly writing, and only secondly technical;
b)   The basic function of technical writing is to inform;
c)   The form and tone of technical writing depend on its purpose and audience;
d)   Accuracy is the technical writer's first responsibility and the beginning of effective writing;
e)   The essential qualities of technical writing are clarity, coherence, and conciseness - in that order.
f)   Technical writing describes objects and explain processes, theories, and policies - usually in combination

B)   Words:

a)   Use specific words in description for maximum clarity and power;
b)   Know the meaning of each word used and consider its possible impact on the reader;

c) Use an adjective or an adverb only if it adds precious or dimension to the word it modifies;
d) Do not use a long word when a short one will do the job;
e) Avoid cliches, Euphimishs and jargon; the first one lifeless; the second deception; the third obscure
f) Use a dictionary to ensure accuracy, a thesaurus to increase vocabulary.

C) Sentences:

a) A sentence is complete if it contains a subject and a predicate and makes sense;
b) Verbs should agree with their subjects; pronouns with their antecedents;
c) Replace static verb phrases with strong verbs for more direct, forceful antecedents;
d) Choose the active voice for clarity and force, the passive voice to shift emphasis or change the para;
e) Avoid sentence structure that distracts or destroys meaning;
f) Vary the length and structure of sentences to avoid monotony and make them more effective;
g) Use parallel structure to stress the similarity between like ideas, objects or processes;
h) Recast a sentence that seems weak or awkward; if it still falters, question its relevance;

D) Organisation:

a) To organise the material of a subject, first break it down into its component aspects;
b) To organise a report or paper, choose a suitable approach and make an outline that implements it;
c) The basic unit of organisation is the paragraph.

E) Punctuation:

a) The four main uses of punctuation are to end sentences and to introduce, separate, or enclose letters, words, phrases or clauses;
b) The comma separates, encloses and introduces; but its main use is to separate;
c) Do not confuse contractions with words that look alike or sound alike;
d) What follows the colon explain what precedes it.
e) The semicolon separates; do not confuse it with the colon which introduces;
f) The hyphen separates letters and words; the dash separates words and phrases and indicates emphasis or abruptness;
g) Use parentheses to enclose the writer's words, brackets to enclose the editor's
h) Place a comma or period of inside quote marks; a colon or semicolon outside.

F) Style:

a) Be selective: focus on the essential information, the significant detail;
b) Develop a lean, direct style; avoid inflated language and rambling sentences;
c) Write in the present tense whenever possible for simplicity and immediacy;
d) Use examples and comparisons to clarify descriptions and explanations;
e) Repeat words or phrases for clarity or emphasis, or to ease transitions, but avoid needless repetition;
f) Delete needless words and phrases, but avoid shortcuts that sacrifice meaning;
g) Choose clarity over style, if they conflict.

1.4   LET US SUM UP

Recent industrial and technological progress has not only opened up new vistas of human possibilities but also necessitated the conscious cultivation of certain communication skills in our scientists, technologists, and managers. Communication, being a dynamic and on-going process, is full of theoretical and applied knowledge from several disciplines such as Semiotics, Cybernetics, Semantics, Stylistics, and Business Management. Since the need and relevance of verbal communication can hardly be over-emphasized in a multi-lingual country, it is hoped that the students will use the present course in full measure and get benefited in practical life.

1.5   SUGGESTED READING

1.   Norman Coe, Robin, Rycroft, and Panline Ernest, **Writing Skills,** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 11983.

2.   S.J. Singh and T. Chacko, "The Structure of a Technical Tent and Is Pedagogical Implication", English Teaching Forum, Vol. XXIV. No.3, July 1986.

3.   Pit Cordor, **Introducing Applied Linguistics,** 1973.

4.   June K. Phillips, "Individualization and Personalization," **Responding to New Realities,** Ed. by Gilbert A. Jarvis, Illinois:1974.

5.   Simron Potter, **Language in the Modern World,** 1963.

6.   Evans, John **Beginner's Guide to Technical Writing** Newman Technical Boom; 1983.

7.   Trimble, Louis **English for Science and Technology: A Discourse Approach** Cambridge Language Teaching Library; 1990.

8.   Joseph A Alvarez, **The Elements of Technical Writing.** (Harcourt Brace Jovanovlch, publishers, Sydney, 1980) Sydney.

1.6.   QUESTIONS

1.   Why ESP should be taught?
2.   Discuss the salient features of Technical Writing.
3.   Write a note on vocabulary, syntax, and style w.r.t. technical writing.