

The Teaching of English Literature in Indian Universities: A Review

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ABSTRACT

The increase in demand for English in the twenty-first century can be credited to globalization and the emergence of IT industry. To meet this ever-growing demand, the syllabi of English in the Indian universities are undergoing a sea change. In the conventional degree programme B.A., Indian universities offer an elective course, ‘Special English’, known by different names - *English (Honours)*, *English (Major)*, *Principal English*, *English (Special)* and *Special English*. Indian students opt for B.A. (Special English) course not for the love of literature but due to the job market demand for communicative English. Nevertheless, the B.A. (Special English) course, by and large, remains a course in literary studies. Comparing the B.A. (Special English) courses offered in Indian universities with the B.A. (Hons) programmes in English offered in universities abroad, this paper sets the scene for revamping the existing syllabi of the B.A. (Special English) courses in India.

KEYWORDS

BA (Special English); Indian Universities; Special papers.

Introduction

In conventional degree programmes, the courses in English offered by Indian universities at the undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) levels are Compulsory English, Optional English, Additional English, and Special English. An elective course offered at the UG level only to the students from Faculty of Arts is known by different names - *English (Honours)*, *English (Major)*, *Principal English*, *English (Special)* and *Special English*. The term *Special English* has been used here as used by Gokak (1964-65) and the Curriculum Development Centre in English (1989).

The present paper is an attempt to review the Special English courses, from 2007-08 to 2010-11, offered in the following five state universities from Maharashtra.

1. University of Mumbai (UoM)
2. University of Pune (UoP)
3. Shivaji University, Kolhapur (SUK)
4. North Maharashtra University, Jalgaon (NMU)
5. Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik (YCMOU)

Henceforward in this paper, the abbreviations given in the brackets will be used to refer to these universities.

The papers offered in the BA (Special English) course

The B.A. (Special English) course varies from one university to another. For instance, in SUK *English (Special)* can be studied as the only major; in the UoM *English (Major)* can be opted for as one major along with one other major while in the UoP *English Special* is one of many subjects to be studied. The papers offered in Indian universities are mainly of two categories – papers related to literary studies and papers on language studies. Besides, allied papers exist.

A) Papers related to Literary Studies can be sub-divided into following categories.

- 1) *Genre-wise papers* form the major component of papers related to literary studies. The UoP and SUK introduce 'Minor forms of literature' to the first year students. YCMOU offers a separate paper on short story.
- 2) *Period-wise papers*, which used to focus only on British literature, are offered by some of the universities. The trend seems to have changed now as the paper like '20th Century Literature in English' (UoM) is now introduced.
- 3) In *papers on Non-British literatures*, 'Indian Writing in English' (IWE) is offered by almost all the universities (except the UoP) while a separate optional paper on 'American Literature' is offered only by the UoM.
- 4) *Papers on Translation Studies* - Only the UoM offers two papers in translation studies, out of which 'Theory and Practice of Translation' is an optional paper.
- 5) *Paper on Women's Writings* is offered only by the UoM.
- 6) *Papers on Literary Criticism* - Almost all the universities have a core paper on literary criticism. The UoM offers a half paper in literary criticism whereas

there is no separate and full paper on criticism in YCMOU.

B) Papers on Language Studies can be sub-divided into following categories.

- 1) *Papers on Language Studies* - These papers are introduced in the final (third) year by the UoP, SUK, and YCMOU. The UoM offers a half paper in language studies in combination with literary criticism (Paper -V). It also has an optional paper entitled 'Rhetoric, Composition and Applied Language Skills'. NMU introduces phonology in First Year BA (FYBA), language in Second Year BA (SYBA), both through half papers and includes a full paper on language in Third Year BA (TYBA).
- 2) *Papers on Communication Skills* - These papers are also offered for TYBA students. YCMOU has a paper on 'Communication Skills'. The UoP has replaced a paper on literary studies by a paper 'Enriching Oral and Written Communication' from the academic year 2010-11.

C) Allied Papers - The UoM is the only university to introduce separate theme-based optional papers like 'Film and Literature', 'Popular Culture' and 'Post-colonial Perspectives on Texts' in the third year. In the UoM, the core papers are devoted to literary studies while the papers of applied nature are optional.

This overview gives a glimpse of the Special English courses in Indian universities.

B.A. (Hons.) Programmes Abroad

The early B.A. syllabi in the Indian universities were imitations of what prevailed in British universities (Paranjape 1993: 52 and 57). Therefore, it will be worth to turn towards the B.A. (English) programmes in other English as Second Language (ESL)/ English as Foreign Language (EFL) countries. B.A. in *Contemporary English Studies* offered

by Lingnan College, Hong Kong is considered here as an example (Refer Table 1).

Table 1- Papers offered in B.A. in *Contemporary English Studies* at Lingnan College, Hong Kong

FYBA	SYBA and TYBA		
Introductory Papers	Core Papers	Electives (Any one Group to be selected)	
		Group (A) Contemporary Literature	Group (B) Applied Linguistics
Introduction to Language Practical Phonetics	Language and Society	Group (A) Contemporary Literature	Group (B) Applied Linguistics
Introduction to English Grammar	Contemporary Literature in English	Asian Voices in English	Psycholinguistics
Literary Analysis	Academic Writing and Research Skills	Studies in Literary Genres	Intercultural Communication
Models of Speech and Writing	Advanced Professional Communication Skills	Introduction to Literary Theory	Language and Power

(Boyle 1998: 468 as referred in Cherian 2001: 79-80)

There are in all twelve papers to be studied by the students for their B.A. degree in *Contemporary English Studies*. Out of nine core papers, two papers (23%) are in literary studies whereas seven papers (77%) are related to language studies. In the electives, there are three papers of each category. Thus, in the B.A. (Hons.) programmes in English offered in Lingnan College, Hong Kong the emphasis is on language rather than on literature. The reverse is true in case of Indian universities.

The colleges and universities in the ESL countries abroad focus on equipping the students with knowledge as well as skills. For instance, the objective of the B.A. programme in Lingnan College, Hong Kong is “to produce graduates with a high level of knowledge and ability in English Language and Literature, and the ability to apply their knowledge to the English Communication needs of business, government and education in Hong Kong” (Boyle 1998:468 as cited in Cherian 2001: 79-80). In contrast, in India, the syllabuses of the Special English courses generally do not clearly specify objectives (CDC, 1989: 17). Even today neither the papers related to

literary studies offered in Indian universities specify the objectives nor do their titles indicate the focus.

Failure of the Literature-dominated courses

Four decades ago, Gokak (1964-65) had felt the need to revise the syllabuses of Special English and Optional English existed then at the U.G. and P.G. levels. He has noted, ‘We know that our graduates are not able to write even a few sentences correctly in English. This is unfortunately true even of many students who have taken up the Special English Course for study’ (1964-65:124). The linguistic competence of the students of the B.A. (Special English) in Indian universities today is not very different from what Gokak (1964-65) has already observed. In the syllabus document of MA English Part II (2004-05) in the section on ‘Teaching Methodology’ UoP mentions “Though a minimum linguistic ability is a prerequisite for doing any course at the PG level, it would be unrealistic to teach with the ideal students in mind. The fact remains that we have to teach students who are far away from the expected level of linguistic

attainment". Thus, the literature-dominated B.A. (Special English) courses have miserably failed to develop the linguistic competence of the students.

To sum up

The Indian students opt for UG and PG courses in English not only for the love of literature but also due to the job market demand for English. Taking into account the needs of the students some of the universities have taken initiatives to introduce innovative and need-based units/papers for BA and M.A. courses in English. This could be witnessed in the following instances.

- i. In its B.A. English Literature course Sant Gadage Baba Amravati University (SGBAU) has incorporated applied language skills like Journalistic Report Writing, Feature Writing, Writing

Advertisement Copy, Editorial Writing and Script Writing for film/radio/T.V.

- ii. The UoP has introduced a core paper entitled *Doing Research* (w.e.f. 2008-09) and optional papers like *Pragmatics* and *Multi-Cultural Discourse in Immigrant Fiction*.
- iii. The University of Madras (UnoM) has introduced innovative elective papers like *Copy editing, Technical Writing, Basics of Corporate Communication, New Areas of Knowledge Management, Travel, Tourism and Culture, Film Studies* and *English for Careers*.

These instances of the papers offered at the PG level in Indian universities indicate the winds of change. One may expect many more such changes in the years to come.

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APPENDIX - B.A. (Special English) courses in the Universities in Maharashtra

Table 2 – B.A. (Special English) course at the University of Mumbai (UoM) (w.e.f. 2007-08)

FYBA and SYBA		TYBA		
FYBA	SYBA	Core Papers	Optional Papers	
			VI (Any one paper is to be selected)	IX (Any one paper is to be selected)
English Ancillary I- Reading Fiction and Drama	P II- Reading Poetry	IV - British Literature (1550-1750)	(i) Rhetoric, Composition and Applied Language Skills	(i) Postcolonial Perspectives on Texts
	PIII - Indian Writing in English and Indian Literature in English Translation	V- English Language and Literary Criticism	ii) Theory and Practice of Translation	(ii) American Literature (1900-1990)
		VII- Literature in English (1750-1900)	(iii) Popular Culture	(iii) Film and Literature
		VIII - 20 th Century Literature in English		(iv) Literature and Gender

Table 3 – B.A. (Special English) course in other Universities from Maharashtra

University	FYBA	SYBA	TYBA
University of Pune (UoP) (w.e.f. 2008-09) (07Papers)	G-I - Introduction to Poetry and Minor Forms of Literature	G II - Understanding Fiction	G III - Enriching Oral and Written Communication
		S I - Understanding Drama	S III - Introduction to the Study of English Language
		S II-Understanding Poetry	S IV - Introduction to Literary Criticism and Critical Appreciation
Shivaji University, Kolhapur (SUK) (w.e.f. 2007-08) (08 Papers)	Opt I - Introduction to the Minor Forms of Literature	Opt II - Modern English Literature	P IV - Literary Criticism and Appreciation

		Opt III - Indian English Literature	P V - Understanding Poetry
			P VI - Understanding Drama
			P VII-Understanding Novel
			P VIII – Structure and Function of Modern English
North Maharashtra University, Jalgaon (NMU) (w.e.f. 2009) (07 Papers)	G I -Optional English	G II - Introduction to the Study of English Literature and Language	G III -The Study of English Language
		S I -16th and 17th Century English Literature	S III-20 th Century English Literature
		S II -18th and 19 th Century English Literature	S IV -Indian Writing in English & American Literature
Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, Nashik (w.e.f. 2002) (YCMOU) (08 Papers)	---	ENG 214- How to Read a Short Story	ENG 255 - Indian Writing in English
		ENG 215- How to Read a Novel	ENG 256 - Understanding Drama
			ENG 257- Understanding Prose
			ENG 258 - Understanding Poetry
			ENG 259-Communication Skills in English
		ENG 306 - Structure of Modern English	