English for Academic Purpose (EAP): A Neglected but Crucial Aspect in Higher Education

Mohammad Rukanuddin

ENGLISH is the medium of instructions in most of our universities as well as in almost all the developed countries where our students go for higher studies. Hence, students need to learn English so that they can understand what their teachers say, what they read in their texts, and in order to reproduce what they have read or listened to. For this reason, students need a variety of skills in English ranging from understanding general English to advanced language skills e.g. reading critically, writing coherently and formally, and even writing narrative, descriptive, cause and effect, and argumentative essays. Eventually, they may need to conduct a research and write the report on the findings.

In order to equip the learners who are non-native speakers of English, with the language skills, universities arrange for English courses. In English speaking countries where there is an onrush of overseas non-native speaker students, the universities arrange appropriate courses of English which the students have to undergo rigorously and earn an excellent proficiency in English with which they can confidently and comfortably perform in the studies of the subject of their choice.

However, what is going on in this sector in our country is deeply deplorable and disappointing. Here I would like to compare and contrast what is going on in the field of teaching English language in our universities versus what it ought to be. Teaching general English or English of day to day use is quite different from teaching English for Academic Purpose (EAP). For the former, teachers teach the learners English so that they can attain a general competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. These general skills help the learners do well in day to day situations like shopping, traveling, chatting, communicating with doctors, or other professionals etc. On the other hand, EAP teachers teach the learners, who have already stepped in university education, how to predict the content of a piece of writing, skim, scan, read intensively and extensively, to identify main message, topic sentence, to explain meaning from texts, to identify purpose and audience, to recognize fact and speculate the writer's intention, to write formal and informal communications like letters, memos, reports, and to use internet and emails, to interpret graphs and charts in understanding statistical representation of data, to write composition from notes, to conduct research, to explain process, to describe a place, person, device, to narrate events and incidents, and to edit their own work and so on.

One more important aspect of EAP is to teach the tertiary level students how to learn lessons or how to grasp and attain textual knowledge in order to achieve good results in the examinations. The strategies to impart include how to improve vocabulary, how to use dictionaries, how to avoid repetition smf redundancies, how to build new words by adding suffixes and prefixes, how to find out and use synonyms, antonyms, how to credit sources in essays and reports, how to find out useful information quickly by referring to indexes and internet search engines, how to use encyclopedias including online ones. Each of these items has various aspects that can be elaborated separately.

In the name of teaching English language what some of the tertiary educational institutions are doing is really objectionable and deplorable. Instead of teaching the required EAP (English for Academic Purpose), some universities have one or two nominal courses of English in their syllabi which are not tailored according to the requirements of the learners. I have seen universities where they teach some grammatical items like active and passive voice, direct and reported speech, phrases and idioms, translation, writing précis, personal letters, some paragraphs, letters of application etc. which the students have already done in their secondary level education.

As to the method of teaching, it is all the more disappointing because many of the teachers in the plea of teaching speaking skills, they overemphasis spoken English avoiding the challenging part of EAP which is writing skill. They spend time in the class speaking only English without caring whether the learners understand or not. They argue that if they use only English in the class room and make the students use the same, their speaking skills will develop and that will help them in life. They hardly engage the students in writing activities for fear of being burdened with preparing question-papers and checking scripts. Whereas, in academic English composition of various kinds should be given utmost importance since a student's success in examinations mostly depends on his writing skills. For this, each and every student should be assigned with a different kinds of topic and they should be instructed to compose a write up and submit it to the instructor within a deadline.