Abstract

The pursuit of University education at the tertiary (undergraduate) level in India has the provision for multiple options for the students in terms of academic and vocational oriented courses. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has particularly introduced a number of vocational courses at this level to enable the development of capabilities required for self-employment, for diversifying the informal sector and for preparing graduates for the diverse employment options. The courses have also provision for on - the -job training and entrepreneurial development. Vocationalisation of the degree level courses has also been extended to languages like English, Hindi and Sanskrit. English studies have thus taken a new dimension in India with its entry into vocational education. Singh (1999) shows that the focus of the course is in providing further opportunity to review and improve the basic communication skills. However, many of the employment opportunities in India require graduates with higher order professional level language proficiency and communication skills.

The paper reports the findings of a preliminary survey conducted to find out the relevance and usefulness of the course to help students get practical communication skills training through on-the-job training for the world of work. The paper addresses how such courses initiate the need for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) in order to standardize the preparatory learning for work purposes. The study explores the scope of teaching/learning transferable (generic skills) in relation to the discipline and the workplace (Barnett et al.2000) to cater to the growing demand for multi-skilled employees in India.

Introduction

India has one of the largest systems of higher education in the world, which has expanded over the past five decades. There are more than 250 Universities and over 800 colleges that offer regular courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The main question therefore is to see to what extent do these courses enable effective employable skills for the students.

The pursuit of general education by undergraduate students in India has generally been for acquiring a degree. The higher education programmes were generally designed to provide academic knowledge and to stimulate research interests. Students have the option of choosing academic, professional or vocational courses at the entry level of a degree course. However these streams are not interchangeable. These academic oriented courses are often not in tune with the requirements of the world of work. The current scenario in the workplace necessitates that employees have a multi-skilled approach to work. Added to this, is the growing need to constantly update one’s awareness of use of technology, discipline-specific knowledge and
transferable/generic skills. In the context of a general dissatisfaction with the practical usefulness of the courses offered in the colleges and Universities coupled with the increase in unemployment among graduates, the University Grants Commission introduced a number of programs for promoting “usable knowledge and skills” among University students.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) implemented the scheme of Vocationalisation of education at the first-degree level in 1994. Work based education with emphasis on vocational training and development and the development of professional competence appeared to be a practical solution to bridge the gap existing between the world of learning and work. The objective of the vocational subjects was thus to prepare the first-degree graduates for gainful employment. This primary objective was elaborately planned out to “enable the development of capabilities required for self employment, for diversifying the informal sector and for upgrading the productivity of household occupations”. (Report of the Committee on Vocationalisation of First Degree Education, 1993). There is also an attempt to provide vertical mobility to +2 vocational stream students (higher secondary level).

The highlights of the vocational programme at the tertiary level in India can be summarised as follows:

- Vocational subjects were introduced in institutions where the three-year degree courses are available.
- Basic structure and form of the degree courses are retained.
- Students are required to select only one vocational subject along with two to three non-vocational subjects as per the University/College regulations.
- 39 vocational courses in five discipline areas were introduced – in science, engineering and technology, arts, humanities and social sciences; economics and management and subjects relevant to rural, hilly and tribal areas.
- Practice work to be done under joint supervision with other institutions and establishments that have laboratory and workshop facilities.
- Provision for the ongoing modification of subject content to accommodate new skills.
- Evaluation of the students’ performance is to be in the same pattern as other subjects.
- A certificate of competency is given by the training institutions based on the actual testing of skills that a student has acquired. Institutions should verify the claims that the requisite standards of vocational skills are met.
On-the-job training and entrepreneurial development are compulsory papers for all vocational subjects.

The main aim of the on-the-job training, which is the “most significant aspect of the vocationalisation of undergraduate education” (UGC, 1999), is to familiarize students with the world of work. The component attempts to provide students with the opportunity for upgradation of knowledge and skills. The On-the-job training includes different stages of:

- Application of the theoretical content of the vocational subject through laboratory practicals, workshop practice and field trips.
- Visits to enterprises for familiarization with equipment, materials, services and work processes through observation and discussion with supervisory personnel.
- Learning to handle equipment and materials and actual production of goods and services.
- Preparation of project report
- Performance evaluation.

The paper reports the findings of a preliminary survey conducted to find out the relevance and usefulness of the course to help students get practical communication skills training through on-the-job training for the world of work. This is part of a larger survey that is being conducted in West Bengal, India to assess the usefulness of the vocation-oriented Functional English course.

**Literature review**

Training in communication skills is one of the crucial aspects that link the world of learning to the world of work. In India, vocationalisation of education has now extended to languages like English, Hindi and Sanskrit. These languages are addressed as both a vocational subject as well as a tool. The increased proficiency in the use of the language is believed to enhance the ability of the participant to perform more effectively in the workplace.

Singh (1999) study reveals that the Functional English Course offered at the undergraduate level as a vocational subject attempts to focus on the communication skills training of the students. The study however shows that communication skills are restricted to a very basic level of proficiency in the language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The on-the-job training offered in diverse areas of English language use for the students as part of the vocational course attempts to address the minimal communication needs of the students and the requirement of the workplace. Any such intervention through the course however becomes useful on when it is linked meaningfully to the workplace requirements.
The academic world can be linked with the world of work through general and specific skills Barnett (1994). If these two worlds are represented across two superimposed axes, we find the discipline specific skills under the academic specific area and the cross disciplinary skills under the general academic area. Profession specific skills would then feature under the specific area related to the work of work where the learner is undergoing training and the personal transferable skills is linked to the general area of the world of work. This then means that the transferable skills can cut across workplaces in terms of application. Barnett (2000) takes this framework a step further by fine-tuning these areas into disciplinary knowledge, disciplinary skills, workplace awareness, workplace experience and generic skills. This model takes into account the procedural and propositional aspects of knowledge (Ryle, 1949) which are seen as distinct yet interdependent in vocational education/training.

**Fig 1: Skills development model: Barnett etal 2000**

Anderson and Marshal (1996) identifies six skill areas on three levels or stages. The stages are linked and the acquisition of the skill at the lower level is necessary for the development of the skills at the next stage.
Chettam and Chivers (1996) attempts to evolve a holistic model for professional competence. The model classifies competences into three levels. There are four interlinked 'core components' of professional competence:

a. Functional - the ability to perform a range of work-based tasks effectively to produce specific outcomes.

b. Knowledge/ cognitive - the possession of appropriate work related knowledge and the ability to put this into effective use.

c. Personal/ behavioural - the ability to adopt appropriate behaviour in work-related situations.

d. Values/ ethical - personal/professional values and ability to make sound judgments.

These core skills comprise of a number of subgroups of individual competencies that are categorised as meta-competencies. According to them, these metacompetencies which include communication, self-development, creativity and problem solving, enable the enhancement or mediation of competence in the core components. There is to be a networking of the core competencies along with its constituents to ensure employment appropriate outcomes.

**Transfer of skills**: One of the preliminary questions that need to be addressed is whether skills can be easily transferred from the educational setting to the context of the workplace. It is generally believed that it is possible to identify and transfer core skills (or generic skills) across educational
and workplace contexts. It is also believed that such transfer of skills will improve the learner's ability to be flexible, adaptable and autonomous in the workplace and vocational education and training are geared towards making it happen.

Perkins and Salomon (1994) shows that anticipated transfer from learning experiences to new situations do not always occur. According to them, this to a large extent depends on the theoretical orientation to skills and knowledge development. When learning is viewed as a cognitive process, knowledge and skills are seen as been acquired internally by the learner. The focus is then on the mode of instruction and conditions related to it to ensure that there is a smooth transfer of abilities from the internal to varied external contexts, including the workplace.

Alternatively, another prevalent view is that of the situated learning perspective. The main argument is that learning is usually specific to the situation in which it is learned. In other words, the background in which knowledge and skills are acquired will determine to a great extent whether these can be transferred to other contexts (Claxton, 1996). Here, learning is very closely linked to the situation. This naturally demands a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, linguistic and technical context in which learning occurs in order to ensure the identification, development and transfer of appropriate skills to other situations. The focus is then on how learning and performance in a learning context helps one to learn the rules, habits, knowledge and skills needed in a new setting (Resnick and Collins, 1994). This perspective is clearly applicable for the on-the-job training schemes incorporated in vocational education and training programmes.

The generic/transferable skills acquired through the courses help to prepare an individual for an occupation in general, immediately or after some specific training. Vocational courses with an orientation for generic skills training are a decisive step towards improving the relevance and quality of general education and for preparing employees for the emerging technology oriented society (Verma, 2005:39).

### National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) in India:

A National Vocational Qualification means a qualification based on occupational standards or competence identified at the national level. It describes the essential knowledge, understanding and skills a person should achieve to be fully competent (Sacheti and Mehrotra, 2002:14). India is currently evolving a NVQ that will be beneficial to both the employer and the employee. It will also be useful for the implementation of on-the-job training component of vocational courses. It can aid in recognition of competencies, improved career progression, retooling of competencies and transferability of skills, improved employability, multi-skills development leading to increased job security and life-long learning and training leading to better employability (ibid:23).

In this background, the study is now presented for discussion.
Research method:
The main research method used was survey. Calcutta University, West Bengal, India has 14 colleges offering the Functional English course – distributed between the city and the suburban colleges. This preliminary survey was conducted in three colleges in the city – Loreto College (Missionary governed-regular college), Jog Maya College (Govt. sponsored Morning college) and Gokhale Memorial Girls’ College (Day College). All three are exclusive women’s colleges. A sample of 53 students and 10 teachers responded to a questionnaire and a structured interview. Special focus was given to the modules on On-the-job training, Project Work and Entrepreneurship development since they give the vocational edge to the course. Information was sought on the motivation to join the course, the communication/language skills one expected to develop, the job projections after the course and skills, competencies and disciplinary knowledge to be acquired by the students. The informants also expressed views on the self-sufficiency levels of the on-the-job training imparted and the suggestions for improving the vocational aspect of the course.

Findings

- The motivating factor to join the vocational Functional English course is mainly to improve the overall language skills (66%). Taking up a job related to the media (57%) seem to be another important reason to join the course. Some of the students want to start a business on their own (11%), to start a Spoken English Institute (11%) or to become a receptionist in a reputed firm(11%).

In general, it is seen that the majority of the students restrict their ambitions for the future to middle level jobs where the proficiency in skills and competencies are minimal. It is not clear whether the syllabus content has influenced them as they get some practical training in areas related to the media during the course.

- With reference to communication skills training, students show a clear interest to develop all the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) (68%) and presentation skills (66%). Among these language skills the order of preference is for Speaking (38%), Writing (28%) and listening (23%). Reading and Interpersonal skills are given equal importance by the students on an average (21%).

- There seem to be a great deal of importance given to the integrated development of skills, presentation skills and speaking since these are needed for interaction in real life situations-both in the workplace and in ones personal environment. The content of the skills
development tasks do not always relate to the workplace situations, for which the students want more practice sessions.

- The teachers state that the syllabus does not envisage elaborate practice sessions on workplace oriented skills enhancement though the students have the opportunity to do project work and on-the-job training for four weeks in the second and third year.

Students were asked their preference for skills development for specific jobs through the course.

- On-the-job training is the main module through which is imparted such job specific skills development.
- 72% students preferred skills related to the media (editing, scripting, interviewing, summarizing, extempore narrative, project presentation, compering, technical writing, custom relation skills),
- 17% related to teaching (presentation skills, interactive skills, communication skills), 13% to start an enterprise on their own (reference skills, managerial ability, team skills, negotiation skills).
- Interestingly, only 4% of the students has indicated interest to be self-employed. Perhaps, starting an enterprise is a more stable job description than self-employment.
- The teachers’ response show that more scope is available for media based skills development than for self-employment / entrepreneurship development. In general, many of the students seemed quite unsure about what jobs they could take up in future, but are aware of the options available to them.

Majority of the students (67%) do not think that the training offered by the Functional English course is sufficient to take up jobs.

- According to many of them, the other courses that they would like to pursue after the Functional English course and before taking up a job include job related courses like Mass Communication, Computer Awareness Course, Journalism, Foreign languages, Public relations, Advertising, Secretarial Course and Personal Grooming.
- Some of the students prefer to pursue higher studies after the vocational course in order to ensure greater chances of work mobility.
Based on what the students have identified as job areas through the study, there arises a need to develop abilities related to general job options. These abilities which are identified as training needs is categorised here into skills, competencies and discipline knowledge. The responses from the teachers also indicate the needs for such categorization to enable teaching/training of transferable/generic skills.

| Classification of abilities identified by the students for projected jobs of the future |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Skills**                      | **Competencies**                | **Disciplinary knowledge/skills** |
| • Reading                       | • Persuasive skills             | • Computer literacy             |
| • Body language use             | • Interviewing skills           | • Journalistic skills           |
| • Note taking                   | • Event management skills       | • Marketing skills              |
| • Information transfer          | • Presentation skills           | • General knowledge             |
| • Group interviews              | • Interaction with clients      | • Content of the specific subject |
| • Mock interview                | • Personality projection        | • Practical knowledge           |
| • Advanced writing              | • Alertness                     | • Use of multimedia             |
| • Listening                     | • Imagination                   | • Facing the camera             |
| • Filing                        | • Creativity                    | • Voice training                |
| • Organising                    | • Clarity of thought            |                                 |
| • Word processing               | • Confidence                    |                                 |
| • Short hand                    | • Fluency                       |                                 |
| • Accounting                    | • Smartness                     |                                 |
| • Language structure            | • Attitude                      |                                 |
| • Editing                       | • Project presentation skills   |                                 |
| • Scripting                     | • Entrepreneurial skills        |                                 |
| • Typing                        | • Personal style                |                                 |
| • Business correspondence       |                                 |                                 |
| • Business management           |                                 |                                 |

**Figure 1: Transferable/generic skills projected as training needs through the FE (Functional English) course.**

**Conclusion:**

It is clear that communication skills’ training is a vital link between the world of learning and the world of work. It is however not very evident from the study whether proficiency in the language
really improves the ability of the participants to perform better in work environments. However, this possibility is indicated by majority of the students who wish to develop their communication/language skills. The course based on the syllabus and classroom interaction is pitched at an intermediate level of proficiency. In Table 1, the course gives evidence of workplace awareness, disciplinary knowledge, disciplinary skills and workplace experience (through on-the-job training) interacting together to project the need to develop generic skills in the participants (Barnett et al. ,2000). The course content and its implementation patterns therefore need to have compatibility with the students’ projection of the course.

The syllabus attempts a stage wise development of skills (Chettam and Chivers,1996) using the English language as a tool. Discussion with the students and teachers show that the on-the-job training component is limited to a limited range of jobs. The provision for the development of ability to perform a range of work based tasks, the awareness of work related knowledge and its effective implementation, the ability to behave appropriately in work related situations and personal/professional values are to an extend given through the on-the-job training module. The entrepreneurship development module however needs to be revamped in terms of its implementation in order to make it more relevant for the aspiring entrepreneur.

The course in general and the on-the-job training and entrepreneurship development modules in particular, could be a starting point to developing multi-skilled graduates for the workplace. The findings from the study also points out the need to use NVQ as tool to standardize on-the-job training in such courses. This will facilitate focused as well as diversified training depending on the clientele requirements.

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**References**


