

TEACHING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION TO ENGINEERING STUDENTS – PROBLEMS & PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

Adequate English communication skills are extremely important for Engineering students. After graduating with a B.Tech degree from the best institutes they often find themselves without a job only because they are not proficient in speaking and writing fluently in English. The communicative English faculty has to make use of innovative and modern approaches involving computer aided methods to develop the English communication skills of engineering students, especially of those coming from vernacular school background.

Key words: Engineering Students, Communication in English, Problems, Proficiency, New Methodology

India is a unique country of as far as languages are concerned. There are 23 officially recognized languages but English holds a supreme position by virtue of being the de-facto link language and also the language of all official and administrative work in India. The language of higher education, law, science and technology is also English. Naturally proficiency in English has become an imperative for engineering students in India. The ability to communicate in English effectively has a direct bearing on the employability of the B.Tech. student. Organizations only recruit engineering graduates who are fluent in English as they would be expected to interact with pan-Indian or international clients where the language of communication is almost exclusively in English. However the problem arises from the fact that a large number of engineering students today are from vernacular medium schools who even after twelve years of school education have not learnt to communicate in English correctly. After completion of B.tech many of them remain similarly handicapped thereby affecting their career opportunities.

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Problems:

The English language teacher has the task of increasing the proficiency level of the engineering students in English, both verbal and written. This involves i) increasing speaking skills ii) increasing writing skills iii) increasing listening comprehension skills . However the difficulty is in making the students of rural and suburban backgrounds with vernacular schooling to take part in the learning process. The shyness and fear of being ridiculed by classmates at their inability in communicating in English makes them non-participative and hence they tend to loose interest and remain aloof or are absent in the language laboratory classes after the first few sessions.

Many engineering colleges lack in having the proper infrastructure to hold interactive language learning sessions. The dry as dust top down approach or one way communication between teacher and student is followed which makes these sessions dull and boring for the students.

Time constraints in the language lab sessions prevents the teacher from following up individually with the weaker students. As approximately 60students attend a language class of a three hours duration it is not possible to pay individual attention to the students who are not proficient in communication skills in Englishas compared to the others who are more fluent in the language.

English language laboratory classes are a part of the B.tech. syllabus in the 1st semester of 1st year and the3rd & 4th semesters in 2nd year i.e after a long gap. The monitoringof the progress of students with respect to English language Communication skills becomes difficult due to this long gap.

The faculty teaching communication has to perform under these constraints and upgrade the communication skills of the engineering students especially those from rural and suburban areas with inadequate knowledge of English.

Perspectives on improving communication skills:

Increasing Oral communication skills: The biggest problem faced by vernacular school background students is the lack of ability to speak fluently and correctly in English.It involves being able to pronounce words correctly, using appropriate vocabulary and clear diction and developing a good acumen in sentence construction. Inherent shyness and fear of ridicule hinders these students in participating in oral communication exercises in the language laboratory classes. Instead of question answer type sessions on one to one basis it would be more fruitful if the faculty at the outset determines and segregates these students in small groups distinct from the students with English medium background. While strategies such as reading from selected books, imitation and repetition, substitution, question-answer dialogues, day-to-day expressions, eliciting, guess and speak, directed dialogues, descriptions,

group-discussions and role-play can be adopted to improve speaking skills in the laboratory for students in general, these small groups should be given a different standard of practice sessions at the beginning which would be more suitable to their lower level of knowledge in English. Gradually, the level of learning materials may be increased as the communication capabilities of these students start improving.

Roy Chowdhury and Banerjee cite some activities as examples of oral communicative tasks or activities which would enhance speaking skills of students.

a) Dialogues: While one method is to practice functions of language like greetings, agreeing, disagreeing, asking for information, suggestions etc. the other method is to give clues to students to improvise appropriate dialogues for example for places like a friend's house, restaurant, cinema hall etc.(Nagaraj 117).

b)Role Play: To teach speaking skills this technique is effective. There are two kinds of Role Play, one is 'Clued' where linguistic and content clues are provided (Nagaraj 118),for instance specific details like places, people and the kind of role play. The other kind is 'Free' Role play where only the roles of characters are given and the students have to develop the situation and exchange of conversation appropriate to it (Nagaraj 118). For example 'The Good Samaritan' or 'The Angry Neighbor'.

c) Questions and answers: This method helps the students to both answer and ask questions in mock interview sessions, surveys and personal conversation on various topics. This can also be a group activity where a number of students interact with one another in a given situation such as a birthday party or meeting.

d)Opinions, expressions, dreams , ideas, suggestions: Opinions asked on various issues, narration of experiences, encouraging students to share their dreams and ambitions in an open ended manner, giving ideas and topics for discussion- all these activities can help students to learn to communicate better.

Moreover the faculty has to motivate students to practice speaking in English with friends in social interactions and not use the vernacular language to the extent possible. Reading skills are also an important part of communication and reading skills can be developed gradually by giving students basic, intermediate and advanced reading matter in stages to students. Again it has to be remembered that appropriate levels of learning material has to be given to the groups of students who have been identified as having lesser communication skills in English.

Increasing written communication skills: In the world of industry written skills are as important as speaking skills as technical writing becomes an important part of the job content of engineering graduates. Hereagain there is a gap between students with English medium background and vernacular background. Writing grammatical English with proper use of tenses, cases adjectives and adverbs proves difficult for

students of non-English medium background. Small groups of students based on similar levels of communication skills may be formed and innovative writing exercises may be given to them which includes rewriting, paraphrasing, transliteration, editing etc. as contrasted with mechanical grammatical tasks which would be more difficult to them and make them non-responsive. Teaching grammar in the formal instruction-execution mode would not have the desired results.

Increasing Listening comprehension skills: In the language laboratory the primary purpose of students during the sessions is to repeat and to understand the study material given. In this aspect rather than a very formal verbal approach, using material with audio and video components which the students would find interesting and fun to listen to should be used. Audio and video clippings from films, cartoons, presentations on subjects of Science and technology may be shared. Listening to these gives students the opportunity to imitate and memorize words, idioms, sentence and compositions. It is in this area that the new technology available involving multi-media could be utilized to greater effect.

New Methodology and Technology: In today's world the student of communication cannot be taught solely by the traditional chalk and duster method. Novel methodology with the use of Multimedia tools is a must for making learning effective English communication skills interesting and stimulating for the students. Making use of the computer and relevant software defined as CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) has become imperative for creating an interactive environment where the student can enthusiastically participate in the language laboratory sessions (Gupta 9). CALL methods involve harnessing interactive software offered by various vendors such as the Kharagpur IIT developed ISILS or Interactive software Integrated Learning System. E- classrooms have to be set up enabling students to access the computer individually or in groups of two so that they are exposed to the real world of English communication by using the web to access information, news, read scientific & technical journals, and great literature of the world. The freedoms to use e-mail, chat, and low end video-conferencing also allows students to build up their communication skills in an open-ended manner. The faculty or instructor can make use of videos, pictures, written texts, PPT Presentations, Diagrams, to involve the students. On the other hand the students also have the opportunity to carry on their assignments outside the class on their laptops thereby increasing their effective hours of language learning. Using of computers enhances individual learning. Suitable study material conforming to their own level of proficiency and their interest areas can be selected by the students themselves and at their own pace. Using of computers helps in analyzing the areas of deficiency in each student and the teacher can address these areas accordingly.

“Students think materials are new and fresh, if they are presented on computers, and they are often interested even in routine tasks such as learning to type. They seem to be willing to spend more hours and do more exercises on a computer than by hand” (D. Healy, an extract from: *Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)* – www.Monografias.com)

However it has to be remembered that learning or acquiring superior English Communication skills can not only happen out of superior pedagogical methods or with better resources. Creating and maintaining an ‘environment of English’ at all times especially at home is necessary. Students must be encouraged to read books and magazines in English, watch English programs, especially news and talk shows on television and listen to BBC programs on the radio. They must also be encouraged to converse in English with friends, fellow students and even family members in English and not in the vernacular to the maximum extent.

The engineering students who join reputed engineering colleges after going through the joint entrance exams at the state or all India levels tend to concentrate on their core subjects and excel in their domain knowledge. They tend to think that getting a CGPA of 8.5 would be good enough to get them plum jobs. It is for the faculty who has to get across to the students especially those who have lesser levels of communication skills in English that without proficiency in speaking and writing in the language they would have little chance of making it through the selection process now being followed by all organizations. The clearing of the HR round which involves testing of communication and soft-skills is as important as clearing of the Technical round for landing that dream job that all engineering students aspire for.

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