



ENGLISH COMPETENCY: THE NEED OF THE HOUR FOR PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

English language competency is a significant aspect of an engineering student's academic life and prospective career. Employers give considerable value to graduates acquiring a diverse set of skills in different work environment. Besides analytical and problem solving skills, subject specific knowledge, research and improved decision making ability, management skills, understanding of other culture, confidence and competence to work in international environment are considered the most essential qualities for engineers. However, at the bottom of these lies an effective communication skill. If students fail to see the broader scenario of the corporate world and ignore the communication skills, it can endanger a shallow level of understanding. It is because the main mode of communication used and most of the teaching contents and the sources for information are in English. The present paper deals with the importance of English language competence in every walk of the professional life of an engineer for his bright future and how the teachers and students need to make integrated efforts build their competency in English skills that would enable students successful in studies, campus interviews, and their corporate life.

INTRODUCTION

The IT revolution and globalization of business have brought technical communication to the forefront of academia and industry. With the whole world becoming the global market and businesses becoming diverse and result oriented, professionals and technocrats are facing new challenges in communications every day. The growing importance on oral communication skills by employers has been echoed internationally in these two three decades. Knowledge and technical knowhow are clearly important, but these require to be presented with excellence. Effective communication re-enforce positive impression of the engineer. Lack of serviceable communication skills contributes to the low profile of engineering in general public. Hence proficiency in communicative English is very essential



for an efficient engineer who has sound technical background to interpret the technical facts in the universal language which everyone in any corner of the world can understand.

Communication is fundamental to all relationships. Poor communication is the most frequently cited cause of discontent within organizations and it would be reasonable to expect that most employers are seeking to appoint people with good communication skills. It is no surprise, then, that people often cite “excellent communication skills” as one of their key qualities on their CV. Communication is an important facet of life. Communication skills are essential in all spheres of life. Be it an interview or dealing with the project leader or working out a solution with a team or writing a report, getting across the point effectively is what matters. As Thomas N. Huckin and Leslie A. Olsen, state: “Scientists and engineers may be technically brilliant and creative, but unless they can convince co-workers, clients, and supervisors of their worth, their technical skills will be unnoticed, unappreciated, and unused. In a word, if technical people cannot communicate to others what they are doing and why it is important, it is they and their excellent technical skills that will be superfluous. From this perspective, communication skills are not just handy; they are critical tools for success, even survival, in “real world” environments”(p,3). The success of professionals greatly depends on their ability to communicate effectively in today’s fast paced life. In such a scenario effective communication holds the key. Effectively communication centers round the usage of words, speed of delivery of words, pitch modulation and body language. Using the right tools to communicate the right messages at the right time can salvage a crisis and motivate people to work towards success. In the existing globalization scenario, most of the I.T Enabled Services, multi-national Companies and public and private sector jobs are in search for a right and suitable fresher with better English skills.

People in organizations usually spend 75 percent of their daily time on communication through writing, reading, listening, speaking, inter-debate etc. Effective communication is an essential component for organization success, whether it is in the interpersonal intra group organization or external levels. A survey report says that out of every hundred interviews, only five qualify for recruitment. It is not that they lacked in technical skills, but they lacked in communication skills. A Times of India (Education Times section) report dated 21 February 2008, states that, “As India rode the liberalization wave, the Indian youth, equipped with their inherent resourcefulness, intelligence, ambition and enterprise, were lapped up by Indian Inc and money spinning MNCs... However, the past couple of years have witnessed a growing concern over the gradual erosion of the impeccable reputation of the Indian student... They are lacking in good communication skills and are deficient in analytical and process orientation skills.” In 2007, MeritTrac, a Bangalore based skills assessment firm, conducted a study that found only 23 percent of MBA students from tier two colleges were employable. Earlier that year, in another study, it had concluded that a staggering 74 percent of all engineering graduates were unemployable. Madan Padaki, Founder and CEO of Merit Trac says that, “A lot of our curriculum has been designed for rote learning, and hence, there



is no scope for thinking.” In addition, at a gathering of vice-chancellors during the 82nd annual meeting of the Association of Indian Universities, former President of India, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, asserted that only 25 per cent of graduating students were employable, and that students were lacking in areas such as technical knowledge, English proficiency and critical thinking. Communication skills are as important as technical qualifications for youngsters aiming at a bright career. Communications hold the key. Poor communication skills, low confidence levels and improper body language have bad results in the job race. The person recruited will have to deal with the global clients directly. The command over the language and accent neutralization also plays a vital role in the recruitment process.

Conventional Engineering curriculum is strongly focused on the development in students of technical knowledge and skills. However, in recent years, employers have increasingly acknowledged that this traditional preparation of Engineering students is inadequate, as graduates lack the wide range of written and spoken communication skills required to engage with members of other professional groups and with the broader community. Brookes remarks: “A report or paper must be written. Anyone engaged in scientific work who is incapable of making this kind of report is not a scientist but a technician, not an engineer, but a mechanic. Proficiency in his written and spoken dialect is a badge which cannot be counterfeit”(pp.115- 116). Recognition of the important role that communicative competence plays in professional success within the engineering industry has, as a result, led to a number of institutions developing curriculum to address these needs. English is a compulsory subject for all the first-year students of Engineering and Technology in almost all colleges across India. The English curriculum in engineering includes theory subject titles like English Communication Skills, Technical English, Professional Communication, Business communication in English and practical subjects like “Communication Practice Lab. Some technical universities in India also have introduced Communication and Interpersonal Skills for Corporate Readiness Lab to enhance the employability skills for the higher semester students.

The present day engineering students are not giving enough importance to English language and they give prior preference to their specialized subjects. So they lack basic language skills, in particular, vocabulary, spoken skills and usage of grammar. As a result, they are unable to satisfy the interviewers in job interviews. So, there is a need to develop their language through the most scientific methods of teaching especially through the newly advanced methods of using the multimedia and the Web. The English teachers of technical institutions face different and difficult problems either academically or non- academically. First of all, the time duration for the completion of the given tasks is not sufficient .The teacher finds the number of classes they get to complete the syllabus in a semester is much less than the number of classes prescribed in the syllabus. Secondly each class has a variety of levels of English proficiency, a variety of interests and a variety of paces of studying. So, it is impossible to make the lessons well understood to all the students. For these reasons, we need



to individualize the study of English in order to get more effective results. Further, in India, the language background of a student is based not just on their mother-tongue, but also on whether they attended an English medium school. Proficiency in English has never been a criterion for admission to engineering programs in India.

Engineering graduates in India face the prospect of substantial unemployment despite high corporate demand for their services. Despite the growth in the demand of engineers, India is facing a significant level of unemployment among its engineers. While statistics show high levels of unemployment among engineers, many large companies complain of difficulties in finding qualified candidates. This increasing unemployment of engineers in India has been attributed to their limited communication skills and consequently, the teaching of English in engineering education has been under the scanner. English language proficiency in India is an essential requisite for professionals; it is also a resource that can eventually open doors into the world of professional employment in India and abroad. Thus, English is immediately linked to employability. The English language courses at the tertiary level in India are excessively knowledge-based instead of being skill-based. Despite the focus on communication skills in some of the recent courses introduced in universities and colleges, the courses are handicapped because the objectives are not well defined, and consequently, the teaching methodology, testing and evaluation are sketchy.

In our country, majority students of the engineering are from rural areas and most of them came from regional language medium schools. Specialized English teachers with Diploma in ELT are quite few in number and hence a vicious circle is created in the teaching-learning process of English. As Gokak points out that “The foundational years for the teaching of English in schools are in the hands of teachers who neither know enough English nor are familiar with the latest and far- reaching developments in the pedagogy of English” (p.65). The students pass the secondary examination with English as a second language without getting real exposure to sound English teaching practices. As a result, even if they are able to cope with the engineering curriculum, their speaking and writing skills in English continue to remain inadequate. As pointed out by Tickoo (2004), the whole teaching-learning system could be stated to be at fault for this lack of English proficiency in our students, as they are taught by teachers who may not always be highly proficient in its use. The minimum qualification prescribed for English teachers by CBSE and ICSE and the Higher Secondary Boards of different states is a Post Graduate degree in the subject concerned, in addition to a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree. However, in many public schools in Orissa, Postgraduates without B.Ed. are teaching English in Higher Secondary classes, resulting in certain negative teaching outcomes, particularly in the language teaching process. No doubt when these students enter into the engineering colleges, they do possess intelligence and necessary qualification for higher education and bright future. But, lack competency in English skills which is going to play a pivotal role. These students lack the exposure to the English communication in the family, society as well as in the colleges. As a result even the



meritorious students fail to achieve success during personal interviews due to lack of communication skills, soft skills, interpersonal skills and a presentable personality. During their education lack of confidence in speaking English leads to an inferiority complex, as a result students keep themselves lonely and isolated.

Classroom contains students from different strata of the society who possess different grasping power and English communication competence. It is found that the English communication competence of the students whose parents are literate belongs to higher middle class is better than that of the students whose parents are illiterate and belong to lower middle class. The fact for this situation is the literate parents can provide more exposure to their child to English as they are aware of the importance of English competence. They consult the teacher about their progress and guide them at home to perform better. In fact it never happens with the second group as they lack parental supervision and guidance. The other important factor that affects English learning is lack of skillful teachers. Most of the teachers at all the learning levels are untrained and are not exposed to the current trends and advanced techniques of English Language teaching. The condition is same with the regional medium as well as the English medium schools in rural or semi urban areas. Again English teaching and learning process is much exam result oriented which tests the memory power alone. Even the parents are craving for the marks than skills or knowledge. So, teachers stress on students to remember by heart, as a result, they find it very tiresome. This fright remains in the mind till higher education because of lack of proper guidance. Again these exam oriented students give prior importance to their technical subjects than to the communication competence.

The importance of technical communication for an individual of an organization cannot be overemphasized. The whole world has become a global market and the transfer of technical information is playing a key role in economic growth and transformation. Revolution in information technology has a profound impact on technical communication acquiring these skills are a challenge in the changed technological environment. These skills include ability to understand and explain complex technical information in a simple and familiar style, ability to understand and explain quantitative data, cultural awareness, capability, and ability to analyze and priorities information. Whether you are an executive working in a multinational company, an engineer working at the shop floor level, a scientist working in a premier scientific lab, or a technical student of a professional institution, you need effective technical communication skills in order to be successful. As the professional world becomes more diverse, competitive, and result-oriented, the importance of technical communication skills continues to increase.

The changes that have taken place in the field of science and technology reflect several developments in the way technical communication skills are viewed. In fact, there has been a shift in perspective, so that communication skills take priority over technical and professional



skills. There is no doubt that good writing and speaking skills are essential to job success. It is also true that some technical skills are as important as communication skills but knowledge of technical or professional skills will be useless if one does not know how to communicate the information and elicit that result from the use and application of these technical and professional skills.

The need of acquisition of good communication skills is international in nature. Therefore, the present English course in engineering syllabus needs to develop a set of generic skills along with technical skills forming the part of graduating engineers' academic and professional development (Bottino, p. 553). Engineering students need not only linguistic competence in English, but also certain life skills and technical skills related to language learning that need to be included into the syllabus to handle real-life situations on completion of their engineering course. One of the important goals of the English syllabus in engineering is to equip the students with proper communication skills for effective usage in everyday situations and also to manage future workplace situations. The students are expected to be exposed to workplace situations, at least through simulations if not in real terms and get initiated into the corporate culture. Assessment of the students with regard to their schooling background, previous language competency, language learning capability etc. should be taken up before the beginning of the course to facilitate extra attention to the students who are poor in English.

The basic language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing should be practiced in classrooms and teachers have to provide personal attention in developing these skills in a systematic way. This can be attempted in the lab classes where time constraints do not stand in the way. Therefore, appropriate measures should be taken to conduct soft-skills training for personality development, training in interview-skills, intra and interpersonal communication in lab classes. This would help them to develop their self-esteem and attend job interviews and communication tasks related to project training. English teachers can take the lead to provide these training. "The teachers should learn to be facilitators, not instructors and help learners take responsibility for their own learning." (Larsen and Freeman, p.53). English classes should include interesting tasks that involve technology related activities like emails, chats, online discussions, power point presentations, video conferencing, and use of internet.

English proficiency is recognized as the important element in the academic life and career of the engineering students. It requires use of integrated methods to facilitate advanced communication skills, which is the demand of industry as well as society. English syllabus includes tasks that reinforce the achievement of generic skills/life skills like leadership skills, teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities along with effective communication skills. To develop professional competence the awareness of social and cultural aspects related to the engineers' workplace can be exercised in the classroom by selecting authentic materials. The teachers of English can take the lead in organizing such interactive sessions

and work on it successfully in follow-up sessions. Such exercises are useful to strengthen the communicative competence of students. When they face real life situations in future, they would be able to handle it with ease. If the students are provided facilities and guidance in developing technical English skills with proper orientation and practice they can develop a broad perspective to face future workplace needs. Exposure to corporate culture, interaction with experts from business and industry, management experts, academicians specializing in various fields, scientists and technologists can empower engineering students to be better communicators in their workplaces. The teachers of English can take the lead in organizing such interactive sessions and work on it successfully and conduct follow-up sessions if necessary.

CONCLUSION

Facilitating engineering students the opportunity to develop adequate and comprehensive English language skills is increasingly becoming a necessity. Failure to do so is doing our students a disservice as they will need these skills in their studies as well as in their future profession. Students in lab classes should be encouraged to practice power point presentations, report writing, project report preparation individually and in groups. Software relating to corporate etiquettes, communication, documentation, presentations, and interview sessions should be made available in the language laboratories and students should be able to access it in their own time. Group discussions on different facets of corporate culture, current affairs, technical topics, debates, elocutions, extempore talks relating to corporate/business topics, slogan/poster writing competitions, write ups for commercial advertisements, simulated Board Meetings etc. can be organized by students so that they will be in touch with corporate environment. These activities would be of help in promoting oral communication and workplace communication skills. Offering our engineering students the opportunity to develop adequate and comprehensive English language skills is increasingly becoming a necessity. Failure to do so is doing our students a disservice as they will need these skills in their studies as well as in their future profession.

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