DEVELOPING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF ENGINEERING LEARNERS – A PROCEDURAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Learning outcomes are statements that describe significant and essential learning that learners have achieved, and can reliably demonstrate at the end of a course. This is to identify what the learner will know and be able to do by the end of the course.
Key Words: *Procedural Approach, ESP, MNC*

INTRODUCTION

Possessing effective communication skills has become the prime necessity for the undergraduate learners pursuing an ESP course. The engineering learners too, who generally wish to join an MNC or visit abroad for further studies should be equipped with good communication skills. This paper analyses the importance of adopting a procedural approach while enabling the learners develop their communication skills. As their facilitators and mentors, we first help them conquer their inhibitions of talking to an "English teacher" in English and make them speak in English atleast in the English class. They then start talking in English with their peer group members, participate in group discussions, debates etc., and finally face a group of audience. This is a gradual process and hence importance of appropriacy, accuracy and fluency is stressed in this paper while developing their skills.

Of the four language skills, speaking is more complex because of two reasons: first it is a productive skill and hence needs to be executed with care as there is every chance of misconception during the communicating process. Secondly, the feedback would be

immediate as the conversations would be face to face. This paves a way to form an opinion about the person who is speaking, which can be either positive or negative depending on various factors like the language used, the situation, use of non-verbal communication, enunciation of the language and behaviour of the person who is speaking.

While enabling the learners to develop professional skills in an ESP context, it is advisable to adapt a procedural approach because any skill can be mastered gradually. We generally stress the importance of fluency and accuracy while teaching speaking skills, but tend to overlook the third aspect which is very vital in social context, that is, appropriacy. One should know what to speak when and how.

The (future) engineers are not generally accustommed to speaking in English because till +2 the assessment is based on written examinations. Hence, though the learners have good knowledge of the language, at the graduation level it is not very easy for the teacher to help them break their shell of fear and speak with confidence. They can be gradually motivated and trained to make them master the communication skills. The researcher recommends the following procedure to help the learners devolop their speaking skills and then their communication skills.

Details of the Study

No. of learners: 30
Venue: English language laboratory.

No. of sessions:

- Role play – 2 Hrs.
- Debate- 2 Hrs.
- Group Discussions (2 + 2+2 = 6 Hrs.)
- Team Presentations (2 + 2 +2= 6 Hrs.)
- Interview Skills (2 + 2 = 4 Hrs.)

Stage 1: **Motivating the Learners to Speak**:

The teacher can provide various oppurtunities to help them conquer their stage fear first. The learners are encouraged to talk to the peer group members first and share their hobbies, interests, etc., they are asked to share the common interests being one among the group. They are not asked to stand on the stage or even at their place during this first stage. Instead, they are encouraged to sit at their place and respond.

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The question that could be raised at this point is whether code switching and code mixing can be encouraged during the initial activities of speaking. In EFL situations code switching/mixing has become a natural outcome even when the communication is between educated Indian bilinguals. As the class consists of learners from vernacular medium till their +2, code mixing can be encouraged only at this initial stage.

Stage 2: Pairing and Grouping Students

Advantages of Pairwork and Groupwork

- It dramatically increases the amount of speaking time any one student gets in the class
- It allows students work and interact without necessary guidance from the teacher of the teacher thus promoting learner independence.
- As in other speaking tasks, a conversation requires the speaker to face temporal constraints and the social pressures of face-to-face-interaction (Chafe, page 16). So the learners also learn behavioral skills.
- It allows the teacher to focus on individual learners and motivate them accordingly.
- The students learn sharing the resposibility.
- It creates an amiable atmosphere and promotes brainstorming of ideas.
- The slow learners get motivated to speak when they are allowed to interact with peer group members.
- It promotes learner autonomy by allowing students to make their own decisions.

(Adapted from Jermy Harmer)

Pairwork

The learners are explained the difference between the formal and informal situations and the language phrases that could be used during those situations.

The Functional Aspect of English

Ordering: Telling someone to do something
                 Ex: Get away from her

Warning: Telling someone of the possible danger
                 Ex: Look out!

Cautioning: Advising about the possible danger
                 Ex: Don't eat so fast or you'll be sick.

Inviting: Ex: Why don't you come and dine with me?

                Ex: Please take my seat/ Would you like to have a cup of tea?
Suggesting: Ex: Let's go for a walk. / Shall I open the window?
Requesting: Ex: Open the window please.
Instructing: Telling someone how to do something
        Ex: First draw a straight line, then draw a line of equal length parallel to it.

Exhorting: Giving strong support and encouragement
        Ex: Come on Dhoni!
Prohibiting: Telling someone not to do something
               Ex: No smoking

The importance of using modal auxiliary verbs like can, could, will, would, may, shall is stressed at this point. They are made to listen to some sample conversations. They are then asked to enact informal role plays like introducing a new friend to the members of the family, convincing a friend to attend a birthday party etc., it has been observed by the researcher that the learners take interest in informal role-plays. They are then asked to role-play formal situations like requesting a teacher to explain a problem, selling a product to a customer etc., they are allowed to choose their partner at this stage.

Debates

They are now asked to participate in a debate. The importance of logical reasoning and negotiation/persuasion skills is stressed at this point. This time the learners are selected randomly. (Appendix A - Topics for Debate).

Groupwork

They are explained the importance of participating in a group discussion. The importance of group behaviour and team spirit is stressed at this point. They are then given some topics for both informal and formal group discussions. They would have developed some rapport with the peer group members and so they start speaking without any inhibitions. They are explained the importance of brainstorming and the difference between the three styles of communication, i.e., passive, aggressive and assertive communication:

Passive Communication

Passive communication is based on compliance and hopes to avoid confrontation at all costs. In this mode where one doesn't talk much, questions even less, and actually does very little. A

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passive communicator feels that it is safer not to react and better to disappear than to stand up and be noticed.

Aggressive Communication

Aggressive communication always involves manipulation. We may attempt to make people do what we want by inducing guilt (hurt) or by using intimidation and control tactics (anger). Covert or overt, we simply want our needs met.

Assertive Communication

The most effective and healthiest form of communication is the assertive style. It's how we naturally express ourselves when our self-esteem is intact, giving us the confidence to communicate without games and manipulation.

When we are being assertive, we work hard to create mutually satisfying solutions. We communicate our needs clearly and forthrightly. We care about the relationship and strive for a win/win situation. We know our limits and refuse to be pushed beyond them just because someone else wants or needs something from us. Surprisingly, assertive is the style most people use least.

They are asked to listen to a group discussion (How to prepare for a Group Discussion and Interviews by Hari Mohan Prasad) and identify the candidates who are likely to be selected based on the style of communication they adopt. The learners identify the speakers who are assertive in their argument, the speakers who sound agressive and the candidates who don't prefer to share their views at all (passive). This helps the learners to understand the difference between the three styles of communication. They are then asked to watch a group discussion. This time they are explained the importance of positive body language during the discussion.

The learners are given some language phrases that could be used for initiating, intervening while discussing and concluding a group discussion.

Function	Language Phrases	Pronunciation	Gestures
Starting a Conversation	Let's get the ball rolling... Friends,we are given a very interesting topic... Good morning, everybody, it's time to start the discussion...		
Helping	I wonder if Sirish has something	Sterss Sirish and	Inviting,

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somebody to begin to speak	to speak about this... What is your opinion, Hari?	Hari Raises the voice at the end. (Question)	friendly smile, eyes wide open.
Supporting the previous speaker	I think Soumya has made a good point which is worth considering... I agree with Smitha..	Stress good and worth Raising the voice a little, after smitha	Eye contact with Soumya Pointing towards smitha or Soumya with the hand (palm) NOT FINGER.
Disagreeing withn the previous speaker	I'm sorry, but Ican't agree with you...	Stress the negative	Eye contact with the listener
Interrupting for obtaining more information	Could you explain further?	Rasing voice at further Stress on uncertain term	Leans forward
Concluding	Friends, it's time to sum up... So in conclusion we agree that...	Stress Sum up	Has eye contact with all the group members

(Appendix C – topics for group discussion)

Stage 3: Team Presentations

During this stage the students are asked to give team presentations. They are asked to give a presentation about a company pertaining to their branch. The importance of field work, division of labour and unity in diversity is stressed at this point.

The following sub headings are given to them to help them in collecting information about an industry or an MNC:

Intoduction
Location

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Finance/ Capital
Employee hierarchy:
Facilities Provided
Awards/Achievements

Conclusion – Future Prospects

- Finally they are explained the importance of interview skills. The importance of being spontaneous and confident is stressed at this point. They are given a set of interview questions and are asked to draft a convincing response for them.

In this manner, the learners can be tuned in a proper way to develop both their communication and professional skills.

Appendix A
Topics for Debate

1. Should morals be taught to engineering students?
2. Should there be a dress code for engineering students?
3. Is peer pressure always beneficial?
4. Should undergraduate students be required to take a physical education course?
5. Is the opening of global markets good for the average Indian?
6. The internet brings more harm than good.
7. It is sometimes right for the government to restrict freedom of speech.
8. Should colleges focus on core technical subjects exclude less fundamental subjects like art, music, and sports?
9. Is a technical course like engineering becoming a question of just obtaining a degree?
10. Is internet producing copy cats?

Appendix 2 - List of Group Discussion Topics

1. Which job you prefer? A lucrative private job or a secured Govt. Job?
2. Man or Machine?
3. City life Vs Rural life.
4. Are daughters are more caring than sons?
5. Money makes as well as mars many things.
6. Nuclear family Vs Joint family.
7. Love marriages Vs arranged marriages.
8. Is science a boon or a bane?
9. Is cricket eclipsing other sports in India?

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10. Is India a soft Nation?

Appendix C - Interview Questions

1. What are your strengths and weaknesses?
2. Tell me about yourself.
3. What are your team-player qualities? Give examples.
4. Of the courses you have had at college which courses have you enjoyed the most?
5. How have your educational and work experiences prepared you for this position?
6. What work experiences have been most valuable to you and why?
7. What have the experiences on your resume taught you about managing and working with people?
8. Of the hobbies and interests listed on your resume what is your favorite and tell me why?
9. Where do you see yourself in five years?
10. To what do you owe your present success?
11. Why should I hire you?
12. What is your most significant accomplishment to date?
13. Why do you want to work here?
14. Describe a leadership role of yours and tell why you committed your time to it.
15. In a particular leadership role you had, what was your greatest challenge?
16. Give me an example of a creative idea that has come to you and what you did with it?
17. Give me an example of a problem you solved and the process you used?
18. Give me an example of the most creative project that you have worked on.
19. Since attending college, what is the toughest decision that you have had to make?
20. Tell me about your most difficult decision and how did you go about making it?
21. What types of situations put you under pressure, and how do you deal with pressure?
22. If I asked the people who know you well to describe you, what three words would they use?
23. If I asked the people who know you for one reason why I shouldn't hire you what would they say?
24. When you take on a project do you like to attack the project in a group or individually?
25. Describe a situation where you had to work with someone who was difficult, how did you handle it?
26. Why did you choose this college and how did you arrive at this decision?
27. Since you have been at college, what is it that you are proudest of?
28. How have you changed personally since starting college?
29. If you could change a decision you made while at college what would you change andwhy?

30. Why did you choose the campus involvements you did? What did you gain? What did you contribute?

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