Collaborative Learning: Integrating English Language, Communication Skills and Soft Skills for Job Placements at Engineering Level

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ABSTRACT

Today's engineer should be a combination of adequate technical competence, verbal proficiency, emotional intelligence, and communicative ability before he/she opts for campus placements. In this era of globalization, engineering graduates lack the required qualities either in terms of technical expertise, communication or English language skills. English language and communication skills, in particular, have resulted as barriers in the personal as well as professional development of an engineering graduate. English is cited as the major language of international business, diplomacy, science and the professions. However, most of the graduates fail to impress the employers. According to NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Services Company) President Karnik, only 25 percent of technical graduates are suitable for employment in the outsourcing industry because of their lack of abilities to speak or write well in English. (Karnik, 2007 as cited in P'Rayan 2008:1). Most students are not 'industry ready' because they lack communication skills. (Infosys, 2008). This paper focuses on the orientation and collaborative learning required from the first year of engineering course for improving English language and communication skills apart from the prescribed syllabus to prepare the students specifically for campus placements.

Key words: Collaborative learning, Communication skills, Job placements, Integrating English language, Soft skills.

Introduction

To be successful in any interview process, different MNC's adopt a basic procedure to filter the aspiring students from recruitment. Aptitude skills are basically tested through a written test that covers quantitative ability, logical analysis, reasoning, and verbal ability. After clearing the written test, the student faces the technical round that emphasizes technical competency. The HR round focuses on the candidate's communication skills, soft skills, personality development and emotional intelligence.

This paper concentrates on the importance of acquiring English language skills, communication skills and soft skills for graduates to be successful in job

recruitments. The main focus is on the orientation and collaborative learning required from the first year of engineering course for improving English language and communication skills apart from the prescribed syllabus to prepare the students specifically for campus placements.

The English language, once considered as a subject to increase percentage of marks, has now become an essential skill to be victorious in career and professional development. Jensen (2000) states that employers want a number of new competencies, with an emphasis on an increased ability to communicate.

There is a tremendous change in the recruitment procedure over the last decade. The association between the corporate world and educational institutions has resulted in on- and off-campus placements. The trend of companies coming to institutions and vice versa, and conducting campus drives is a welcom trend to establish firm academia-industry relations. Students ought to utilize this opportunity and face the recruitment process with great competitive spirit. However, most of the graduates fail to impress the employers. The major reason for their failure to impress the recruiters is the lack of good verbal and communication skills in spite of excellent aptitude and technical skills. English language and communication skills, in particular, have become barriers in the personal as well as professional development of an engineering graduate.

The attempt to make the students ready for placements is encouraging as most of the institutions have set up a separate Training and Placement wing. In Andhra Pradesh, almost all the engineering colleges and many universities have established a T&P wing to cater to the students' needs. The students are trained in all the required skills. However, an attempt should be made to inculcate and integrate such training programs from the first year engineering course.

The situation in Andhra Pradesh specifically requires attention where English as a subject is taught just before the commencement of final exams. During these two years, a student may be exposed to English language for two or three months. The student passes the exam or scores good marks for increasing the percentage at this level. No exposure to individual assessment in LSRW skills is noticed. The student fails completely in acquiring effective English language and communication skills at this stage. At the engineering level, the student is exposed to industry requirements at the end of the third year or in the final year, and within the stipulated time, he/she fails to meet the expectations. Hence an integrated approach should be planned from the first year onwards along with the prescribed syllabus to make the student industry-ready.

The integrated programme

The integrated programme should be designed keeping in view all the required

inputs for facing the campus drives successfully. The programme should concentrate on verbal ability, communication skills and soft skills. A rigorous training with experts from in-house faculty and industry should be planned so that the students can be exposed to industry expectations, extend a good rapport as well as develop excellent communicative ability.

Verbal ability

The major components that are focused during the written test while testing verbal ability are:

a. Error correction: The student ought to identify the grammatically correct sentence, choosing the best alternative, identifying incorrect sentences, inappropriate usage, etc.

b. Antonyms: Identifying parts of speech – verb, noun, adjective of a specific word, identifying the root of the word and meaning and knowledge of prefixes and suffixes is tested.

c. Synonyms: Identifying words with identical or similar meaning.

d. Fill in the blanks: Paragraph filling or sentence filling with correct article, preposition, verb, suitable word, etc.

e. Sentence re-arrangement: A set of three to five sentences should be arranged meaningfully.

f. Analogies: Ability to recognize relationships between words or ideas and

identifying if the relationships are parallel or not.

g. Idioms and Phrases: Certain social traits, habits, human experiences or traditions are reflected in idioms and phrases.

Reading comprehension

The student is given short or long passages. The following strategies are observed while doing reading comprehension:

- Understanding the vocabulary using contextual clues
- Identifying the main ideas and supporting details
- Understanding the structure and organization of a passage
- Identifying the author's purpose and tone
- Identifying facts, opinions and inferences
- Evaluating the arguments/ideas of the author

Communication Skills

a. Group Discussion: GD's are conducted to identify:
- Leadership skills
- Logical thinking
- Team spirit
- Ability to initiate
- Keeping abreast of current affairs

b. Debate: Debates are conducted to identify the ability to:
- Show emotional balance and stability
- Maintain poise in a given situation
- Cope with arguments and disagreements

c. **JAM**: The parameters that are tested during JAM are:
- Organizing and sequencing information
- Using general knowledge
- Thinking on one's feet
- Listening and speaking accurately
- Sharpening vocabulary
- Extempore speaking skills

d. Personal Interview Skills:
- Body language
- Confidence level
- Dress code
- Eye contact
- Positive attitude
- Personal grooming, etc.

Soft skills:
- Basic and conversational English
- Character building
- Communication etiquette
- Goal setting
- Human values
- Motivation
- Positive thinking
- Time management

The Big Question???

In the present decade there is a lot of talk about technology-enhanced teaching and learning, synchronous and asynchronous communication, web-based curriculum, learning through iPads, iPods, etc. The big question is whether the students and faculty miss the minimum prerequisites in the medley of learning and teaching innovative methods of improving English language, communication and soft skills. The best example is the horrifying results at the recruitment drives with more than 75% of candidates being unsuccessful. The topics seem to be simple and easy and are part of the curriculum from the lower level. Nevertheless, only 25% of the aspiring students are being grabbed by the industry for job placements.

Conclusion

Students should be aware of the need to acquire the English language, communication and soft skills for better career prospects. Educational institutions should also recognize the importance of teaching all the above skills effectively at the initial stages to improve the success rate of placing engineering graduates.

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