

Teaching English for Communication in Professional and Technical Education

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ABSTRACT

English has the status of an associate language in India, but in fact it has become the most important language. English in India is used not only for communicating with the outside world, but also for inter-state and intra-state communication. English is very important in some systems – legal, financial, educational and business. English symbolizes in Indians' minds better education, better culture and higher intellect. However, most Indians who know English often intersperse it with Indian languages in their conversation. It is also usual among Indians to speak fluently in English abruptly in the middle of their conversation. The paper deals with the importance of communicative English language competence in every walk of the professional life of an engineer for his bright future and how teachers and students need to make integrated efforts to build their competency in English, skills that would enable students to be successful in studies, campus interviews and their corporate life.

Keywords: Communication skills in English; professional communication; technical communication.

Introduction

English symbolizes in the minds of Indians better education, better culture and higher intellect. Indians who know English often intersperse it with regional languages in their conversation. English also serves as a means of communication among Indians who speak different regional languages. Until many years ago, English movies in India were not translated or dubbed in regional Indian languages, but were broadcast in English and were meant only

for English speakers. The reason Indians give such importance to English is related to the fact that India was a British colony.

The English language came to India in the 17th century, with the East India Company. It was formed to conduct trade with India and other countries in the east. Initially, the British tried to learn Indian languages to communicate with Indians. They started special colleges for this purpose. They also took the help of translators. But when their political powers increased, they created the

British Indian provinces like Bengal, Madras and Bombay. So the English traders gave more importance to English than to Indian languages. Some missionary institutions taught English to Indians. The East India Company took over the responsibility of educating the Indians. Indians were also realising the importance of the English language. They realised that English was the language required for a secure future in a government job. Private schools offering this service were already doing good business, particularly in the then Calcutta. The state was set for the first 'big moment'.

History of English Language Teaching in India

Meanwhile, a movement was started by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to introduce western scientific education through English. Lord Macaulay was the chairman of a committee. He advocated English as the medium of instruction in place of the vernacular languages. He wanted to make the people Indian in blood and colour but English in taste and opinion. He thought the members of this class would increase their knowledge through English. Macaulay's purpose was to create the dominance of British culture over the Indians and to have control over the minds of the Indian people through English and to train Indians and make them fit for employment. The British Government gave jobs to those who had knowledge of English. Many new colleges and universities were formed. The system of English education founded on English literature continued till independence.

India got independence and the Indian government had to decide its policy towards English. They decided to make Hindi the official language. Regional languages were given the status of national languages. Certain states insisted on making English the associate official language. Universities and schools were increasing rapidly in India. Many people from the neglected sections of the society also came forward to learn English. English was not limited to a few elite schools and colleges any more. But there were complaints about the standard of English. The government appointed many commissions to improve the standard of English in schools and colleges. Several Commissions reaffirmed the importance of English. For instance, University Education Commission says: "English, however, must continue to be studied. It is a language which is rich in literature – humanistic, scientific and technical, if under sentimental urges we should give up English."

The present position of India in the international sphere is partly due to the command that educated Indians have acquired over English. Many eminent educationists and scientists have, therefore, expressed the opinion that under no circumstances should we sacrifice the many advantages that we have gained by the study of English.

As a result, various courses are developed for teaching spoken English. The use of Language Laboratory and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has created new changes in the teaching of English. Audio cassettes and CDs were

being used on a large scale to learn the spoken language. Various types of software for teaching English have been developed and used by a growing number of people. There are many private institutions that run courses in spoken English. Especially in big cities, language trainers are helping learners to acquire the required proficiency in communicative skills in general and the speaking skill in particular. Now, television channels are also working towards improving spoken English. NDTV Imagine is running a programme 'Angrezi Mein Kehte Hain'. All of them cannot be termed cheap. Gupta rightly says: "The irony of the situation is that while academicians label these learning centres 'shops' or 'commercial institutes', it is these establishments that are a major influence behind the changing face of the ELT paradigm in India."

Teaching English as a tool for communicating values has a long history. Missionaries learnt its usefulness as a tool for this purpose. Secular humanism found its way in many lands through the learning of English language and literature. Its "ennobling" characteristic as a tool and purveyor of culture, the scientific knowledge it opens up for those who learn it, the ease with which one could transact business using it, have been realized and appreciated over the decades. Ethical and moral values reflected in literature were interpreted as emerging from universal humanism. Many nations have embarked upon a process of contextualizing textbooks when it comes to teaching English. Pieces of writing by native speakers of English are sought to be

replaced by the writings of people who are masters of English prose and poetry in the respective nations. In their creative writing, metaphors, idioms, and set phrases from the national languages, which imply local culture and religion, are more freely used. Translations from the local tales are more frequently substituted for tales from Europe. Nations and individuals want to appropriate English as a language minus the culture and milieu it represents and communicates.

Even as the goals of English teaching and learning are being continually redefined, we should remember that English need not be taught solely by native speakers of English.

English in Education

English is also the state language of two states in Eastern India—Meghalaya and Nagaland. It is the main medium of instruction at the post-graduate level, and it is taught as a second language at every stage of education in all states of India. In India, as in other linguistically and culturally pluralistic societies, the position of English is determined by various political, cultural and social considerations (Kachru 1986: 15; 11-30), which primarily involve three questions, which continue to be discussed. The first question concerns the position of English in early and in higher education. The second question deals with the respective roles of the regional languages, Hindi and English. The third question deals with the model of English presented to Indian learners, and how that model can be presented uniformly and effectively.

The government of India has primarily been concerned with the first two questions, which are directly related to language planning at both the national and state levels. There are, as yet, no acceptable answers to any of those questions (ibid.). The three-language formula was developed for the educational load to be fairer, to promote national integration, and to provide wider language choice in the school curriculum (Srivastava 1990: 37-53); people from non-Hindi areas study their regional language, Hindi and English and another language. Although the formula sounds fine in theory, practically it has proved to be a failure in India as a whole, since it has not been followed in practice. Hindi states did not enforce the curriculum, and the anti-Hindi movements removed all teaching of Hindi from schools in those parts of the country.

Teaching English in Rural Areas

There is a lot of difference between urban and rural students learning English. Urban students somehow manage to learn and use English quite well in real life contexts. They are third-generation learners having the cooperation of parents and the environment, but rural students are first-generation learners who take English as a foster language and throughout their life are not able to cope with it in spite of their best efforts. They might be able to write as per exam requirements but speaking remains out of their range. They learn without knowing what they are learning. Most students find it difficult to understand the prescribed literary selection. The typical

method of teaching consists of the teachers reading the text, explaining its meaning, allusions and figures of speech in simplified English or in regional languages, and an occasional discussion of grammar points with a question thrown in. Teaching is rarely student-centred and most students have neither the chance nor the motivation to participate actively. English is taught as an academic subject, not as a medium or mode of active, constructive communicational intellectualization.

Rural students are also deprived of technology as enjoyed by urban or university students. Lack of technology, books and other infrastructure becomes an obstacle to their learning process. In urban colleges there are language labs, computers, LCD projectors, CD players, tape recorders, microphones and many more instruments that create an atmosphere of learning, but in rural areas they lack even classrooms for proper teaching and the proper supply of electricity. If some rural colleges manage to get these facilities, they do not have the staff for maintenance and handling of the equipment. Moreover, teachers are not competent to handle these devices as they do not have any training.

Most schools have only chalk and blackboards and follow a century-old method of teaching. With big classes of 100 to 150 students, teachers feel handicapped. The government has started EDUSET with Soft Skill programme to provide an atmosphere of learning English and communication skills but all these efforts are fruitless unless something innovative

is done in classroom teaching. Rural students do not get the opportunity to interact with peer groups; the other reason is that other subjects are taught in Hindi or in vernacular languages. So, students see English as a subject and not a language. The problem is not at the tertiary level but at the primary and secondary school level. A teacher has to use the regional language to make the students understand English. A language teacher is well aware that their students bring to the language classroom a variety of attitudes, experiences and strategies as well as a variety of beliefs. They also feel helpless without proper teaching aids.

The influence of the mother tongue can also be seen in the students from rural areas because they are not given proper pronunciation skills from the primary level. So when they speak, the vernacular effect can be observed very easily and at the tertiary level, it's difficult to correct these errors. For e.g., School—/sku:l/; Book—/bu:k/; Student—/setu:dent/; and so on.

The study of a language has four aspects. They are Semantic, Phonetic, Graphic and the Phonetic-Cum-Graphic aspects. The Semantic aspect deals with 'Comprehension'. It is the understanding of the meaning. The Phonetic aspect deals with the spelling and pronunciation of words. The Graphic aspect is the written form of a language. The Phonetic-Cum-Graphic aspect is the Reading of the language. All these aspects of the language work in coordination with each other. The four general aims in teaching English are:

- To enable the pupils to understand English when spoken.
- To enable them to speak English.
- To enable them to read English.
- To enable them to write in English.

These aims correspond to the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading are passive or receptive skills and speaking and writing are active or productive skills.

These four skills are the foundation on which language learning is built. If this foundation is strong, then the structure erected on this will be safe and useful. But the curriculum at the tertiary level in India does not develop these skills. In classroom teaching, the emphasis is on writing, as our evaluation system is writing-based. Our classroom teaching only enhances our students' listening ability as maximum time is spent in lectures and the students' participation is almost nil.

Besides the general aims of teaching communicative English, the teacher should have definite, clear-cut objectives for teaching each lesson. These should be clear, precise and expressive. For example, at the end of Grade VIII, a pupil should be able to:

1. Understand statements, questions, short talks and passages read out to him on a subject within his experience (within the scope of the syllabus), when read at a careful conversational speed.
2. Ask and answer questions in speech

relating to his experience and to what he has read (within the range of the syllabus).

3. Read with fluency (both oral and silent reading) and understand simple passages within the vocabulary and structural range of the syllabus.
4. Express himself clearly in writing with reasonable accuracy, within the linguistic range of the syllabus, on subjects within his experience.

Similarly, at the end of Grade X, a student should be able to:

1. Understand a passage read out to him from the prescribed materials or a talk of the same linguistic level on a subject of general interest within his experience.
2. Ask sensible questions and reply intelligibly to questions based on the above.
3. Carry on a sensible conversation with clarity of expression on passages from the prescribed materials on a topic of the same linguistic level within his experience.
4. Arrange and present his ideas intelligently on a topic selected by him.

One cannot fail to notice that the advantages of, and the power inherent in, English literacy are enjoyed primarily by the urban middle and upper classes and remain inaccessible to those who are educationally disadvantaged because of their economic situation. Urban students may have the

same syllabus, methods of teaching and evaluation system as those of the students in rural areas, but they manage through parental support, extra classes and help from their peer group. However, rural students are not able to cope and thus remain educationally backward.

A learner-centred approach facilitates learning through techniques involving activities. A learner has to be given mind-engaging tasks. This allows greater peer interaction, which promotes the ability to manipulate language in a social context, which is an important feature of communicative competence. English teachers cannot confine themselves to outdated methods or textbooks. They have to be creative by adopting a situational method of teaching. We can ask them to work in groups and list the words related to a classroom, a hospital, a post office, a bank, a kitchen, and so on.

Instead of explaining meanings word by word in a literary text prescribed in the textbook, teachers can involve learners in certain activities related to them. Dividing the class into four groups, one group may be asked to collect information about the writer, the second to collect information about the period in which the text was written, the third to write a summary, and the last group to compile the research of the other three groups and present it in class. While teaching stories, teachers can write the difficult words on the blackboard and use them in context. Later on, the teacher can ask the learners to narrate the same story using the past or the future

tense. The teacher may also test the students from time to time in all the four skills and as a project, a reciting competition, or a spelling competition.

Teaching English should be skill-based and not knowledge-based. The English language teacher has to be innovative and be receptive to new technology or method to make the teaching process effective. The computer cannot supplant the language teacher but the role of the language teacher has changed and they have to transform themselves to meet the challenges at the global level.

Soft Skills in Today's India

According to a recent report by an employability assessment company called Aspiring Minds, 56% of the engineering graduates in India lack soft skills and cognitive skills. Non-technical aspects of engineering such as communication, relationships, temperament, emotional intelligence and risk management make a difference between success and failure.

“Engineering is the application of hard sciences to solve real problems but what they rarely teach in colleges is that engineering, in addition to being a technical activity, is an economic activity and, most importantly, a human activity. As companies become more global, soft communicative skills are highly desirable and required in more positions now than ten or even five years ago. You may have an excellent knowledge base in engineering or technology, perhaps even a PhD, and maybe bilingual, but if you have not developed good skills in communicating, interacting and

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people resource management, you have already limited your opportunities and chance of success. Soft skills are applied to emotional intelligence and as such, they are very important. As engineers, we are taught to think and apply the logic of maths and science. However, we are being ruled by emotions.”

Soft skills are essential for personal and professional development of individuals. “In today's economy, it is even more important considering a significant portion of Indian GDP comes from services sector. To support this growth in services sector, organizations require talents who possess greater soft skills along with hard skills. Technical skills may take you to the doorstep but it is your soft skills that will open up the door for you. Increasing possibility of interactions with global peers, customers, virtual teams and cross-cultural discussions mandate employers to look out for fine-tuned, polished workforce. Soft skills facilitate efficiency and effectiveness at work.”

While flawless technical expertise is the primary necessity, soft skills are imperative to ensure high-quality contribution and delivery. Soft skills are as important as communicative or technical skills due to two main factors. One is that employees are being sent on projects to international locations, where they need to articulate their thoughts and actions to become productive. Second, with enhanced globalization, virtual communication has taken a front seat in today's organizations. An engineer is rewarded for his ability to make decisions, manage risks and

creativity. Therefore, soft skills are vital for an individual to get employed and grow in an organization.

Conclusion

Language competence is a significant aspect of an engineering student's academic life and prospective career. Employers give considerable value to graduates having a diverse set of skills in different work environments. Besides analytical and problem-solving skills, subject-specific knowledge, research and improved decision making ability, management skills, understanding of other cultures, confidence and competence to work in international environments are considered to be some of the most important qualities of engineers. If students fail to see the broader scenario of the corporate world and neglect communication skills, it can lead to failure in the job market. This article has discussed the importance of language competence in every walk of the professional life of an engineer for his bright future and how teachers and students need to make an integrated effort to build students' competence in English language skills that would enable students to be successful in studies, campus interviews, and their corporate life. Acquisition of language is not like learning other subjects such as mathematics, sociology, history, economics, anatomy or electronic engineering.

Language is a marker of identity and a tool for representing values and culture. There is an urgent need, particularly among the younger generation, to identify with the global world culture.

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