Teaching English in Engineering Institutions in India

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ABSTRACT

English plays an important role as it has emerged as the lingua franca for all types of transactions around the globe. It is the language of education, science, technology, business, industry, commerce, law, etc. It acts as the link language in the multicultural and multilingual social setting of a country like India and also has a strong association with higher education, career enhancement and global employability. The teaching of English to learners from different social and cultural backgrounds in engineering institutions is a potent challenge for the language teachers. These include problems like mother tongue interference, lack of motivation to learn and other sociolinguistic factors. This paper focuses on the prominent problems that interfere with obtaining the desired results in the language classrooms and the techniques that can be adopted to overcome them.

Keywords: Teaching English in India; Teaching English to engineering students.

Introduction

English has received prime attention in academic and professional settings in the past fifty years and is an asset for those who need to strengthen their skills in interpersonal communication in the international arena for growth in their career. It has emerged as a global language and the youth pursuing professional courses in the present era have to gain competence in the language to ensure a successful career and a bright future ahead.

The socio-cultural explanation looks at the way people all over the world, in many walks of life, have come to depend on English for their economic and social well being. The English language has penetrated deeply into the international domains of political life, business, safety, communication, the media, entertainment, and education (Crystal, 2003, pp. 29-30). Thus, English has emerged as a language which is necessary to strengthen global human relations and foster growth in the international arena.

English in the Socio-Cultural Context

The learners of English can understand and appreciate the multicultural view of the language and interpret it in relation to their own culture, which promotes wider learning. "Culture is a set of beliefs and values about what is desirable in a community of people and a set of formal or informal practices to support the values" (Javidan & House, 2001, p. 292). Language learning is a social phenomenon and exposes the learner to the culture of the foreign language and also helps in identifying the uniqueness of the home culture where it is learnt. This approach to learning can also create global learners who

have a better understanding of the world around and can also adapt to the multicultural environment of the language classroom and appreciate differences in the culture with a new perspective.

When a language is learnt, there must be an underlying purpose for which it is learned. The language must have some internal social function in the community. In multilingual states, people who do not share a common mother tongue may use another language for communication. This orientation places the second language in a clearly specified social context or situation. The social context subsumes in it socio-historical factors responsible for the adoption of a foreign language for internal communication in a country (Kuchdekar, 2002, pp. 37-38). In the Indian context, academics as well as researchers need to be proficient in the language to excel on the global front by bringing in technological advancements and innovations through scholarly papers and research projects.

The Current Scene of Engineering Institutions

Communication is a multidisciplinary activity and acquiring competency in the English language involves mastering the four skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The engineering students need to master these four skills to enhance their employability and also perform well in their academic programmes. The current scene is not good, as the employers feel that the upcoming engineers lack this crucial skill, i.e. English language proficiency, which is a hurdle not only in securing placements but also in career growth. It has been found that

engineers also lack public speaking skills, debating, group discussion skills, analytical skills and interview skills due to their inefficiency in the language.

Acquiring a language is 'picking it up', i.e. developing the ability in a language for use in natural communicative situations. Language learning is "knowing the rules, having a conscious knowledge of the grammar" (Kudchedkar, 2002, p. 96). The learners are unable to grasp the language and adopt it in their daily interactions, which is one of the prominent problems faced by engineering students in India. This is due to myriad reasons including socio-cultural factors, lack of motivation, ineffective learning and teaching methodology, and the attitude towards the language. Although the number of engineers produced is large, their employability is low due to poor quality. Therefore, there is a need to focus on the professional competency of the learners by integrating hard and soft skills into the academic curriculum and inspiring the learners to improve their language proficiency with a positive attitude.

It is also noted that students from vernacular medium schools have limited proficiency in the English language. The teachers in these schools resort to code switching while teaching and also provide simplified notes and handouts to the students, i.e. the material to pass the exams with no real learning. The learning in such schools is at the factual level and hence such students are unable to express themselves in English in the written as well as spoken form due to their inefficiency to carry their thought process in the target language. When such students enter

institutions of higher learning, they are incapable of dealing with the multicultural environment, where they are disadvantaged due to their inefficiency in English discourse. Engineering colleges in India face a major problem in this regard.

These language learners need intensive support in learning English. The learners need a great amount of visual and contextual exposure and an interactive learning environment where they can make errors, which are an integral part of learning. Their peers with higher proficiency levels and different socio-cultural backgrounds can also act as a medium to clarify the ideas and instructions, which in itself is an element of motivation in learning the language.

Cultural Factors Influencing Language Learning

The adult learners in engineering colleges want to learn English mainly for economic reasons, i.e. to secure a good job and also to attain success in their chosen professional sphere, as English exposes them to the world around and also helps in securing better opportunities. A learner may find it difficult to deal with the stress and anxiety when they come from a different culture with different values, which happens when a person from a rural background moves to an urban area and is exposed to the widespread use of English language and its implications in attaining success in their career. Such students may feel awkward in learning a foreign language with its cultural implications and different values. They need to understand that working in an international environment requires patience and tolerance, and the students need to adapt to the multicultural milieu respecting the values from a wider perspective, which will facilitate the learning of the foreign language.

Teaching English in the Multicultural Language Class

The multicultural ESL classroom poses a potential challenge to the language teacher and as he/she nurtures and deals with this diversity there is a need to integrate action and provide ample practical exposure to the learners. The first challenge is the language itself, which is other than the native language or mother tongue, and so the teacher needs to deal with this cultural shock and adapt to this and also motivate the learners to adjust.

"The spread of English has two sides. One represents those who use English as their first language, and the other represents those who use it as an additional language. A significant proportion uses English as its other tongue… Such use varies, from broken English to almost native or ambi-lingual competence . . ." (Kachru, 1992, pp. 2-3). Such use of the language poses a real challenge to teaching English as a second language. The multicultural milieu of the classroom and the diversified competencies of the learners in English are other hurdles, as the teacher has to keep in mind the different proficiency levels of the learners.

The language teacher has also to deal with the different accents and pronunciations caused due to mother tongue influences, which are deeply ingrained in the learners and difficult to correct. The tone, accent, speed, pronunciation and pitch of the teacher can also at times be a challenge for learners and thus, the teacher needs to be careful considering all these factors while

conducting the English class. The teacher has to adopt a bilingual teaching methodology to connect to the learners from different backgrounds that relate well to their mother tongue and are also motivated by the use of their language to understand English. Sometimes, students are frustrated while adapting to the language as they undergo the challenges of accuracy, fluency, adequate vocabulary and correct pronunciation, which leads to stress and tension, and dissuades them from learning English.

Sometimes, the content learnt can itself be a challenge as the cultural implications may not fit into the native culture and create confusion in the mind of the learner as stereotypes and values of learners differ according to their cultural background and pose a serious threat in imbibing a foreign language.

Thus, the language teachers also need guidance on how to use the course books in the classrooms in engineering institutions so as to fulfill the purpose for which they are intended so that the students learn with a positive attitude. The teachers should focus on the enhancement of four skills, i.e. LSRW, through different techniques and appropriate use of technology. The students should be motivated to develop the habit of reading newspapers, which can be followed by quiz and discussions on general topics. This will also help in consolidating their skills in the language. Adequate listening and speaking practice sessions should be conducted in the class and students should be made familiar with the phonetics of English sounds to improve their pronunciation skills. The weaker students should be included in such discussions and their spoken skills should be improved through healthy interactions to remove inhibitions created due to cultural backgrounds. Students can discuss everyday situations in classrooms to gain clarity and fluency, which will arouse their interest in the language.

Teachers in professional institutions focus on English for professional purpose and can provide intensive practice in letter writing, report writing, preparing documents, making presentations, email writing, etc. They also practically train the students in interview skills and group discussions to improve their employability. Such training removes their hesitations and even the weak learners come forward and participate as they develop the urge to learn in a motivating environment. The use of technology can further improve the situation as the colleges provide ample exposure to English in well-equipped language labs, which offer extensive training in LSRW skills through latest software for this purpose.

Thus, the language learners in engineering colleges can be oriented to overcome the cultural inhibitions and hesitations in adopting a foreign language, which is a key to professional success. A positive attitude, a comfortable and motivating classroom environment, and an integration of technology can aid learning. The teachers can promote universal values in the multicultural environment and may employ varied teaching techniques in the language class to enhance learning and inculcate interest in the learners, which will improve the quality of the future professionals.

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Some useful web tools for speaking skills

English Central (http://www.englishcentral.com/)
English Central is a video site bringing voice to learners. It makes use of both speech recognition and text-to-speech facilities for language learning.

Online Voice Recording Tools
Audiopal (http://www.audiopal.com)
Vocaroo (http://vocaroo.com/)

Both Audiopal and Vocaroo are very simple voice recording tools. You don't need to sign up in these sites. You can record your speech and download it as an mp3 file from these sites. You can preview your recording and can email it to anyone right from these sites. Additionally, Audiopal offers some more facilities. You can record your speech by making phone calls to the numbers given in Audiopal.

Podcasting Tools
Podomatic (http://www.podomatic.com)
Spreaker (http://www.spreaker.com)
Audioboom (https://audioboom.com)

A podcast is an audio broadcast over the web. It is broken up into parts or episodes. Most podcasts are similar to news radio programs and deliver information on a regular basis, but they can also be comedy shows, special music broadcasts or talks. You as a teacher can set up a podcasting channel in Podomatic, Spreaker, or Audioboom.

Voki (http://www.voki.com)
Voki lets you create customized speaking characters. Voki can be an effective tool to practise speaking skills in literature classes. It encourages creativity and interactivity in your classes.

WhatsApp groups
Whatsapp offers another opportunity for language learners to practise their speaking skills. Teachers can create a WhatsApp group for their classes. Learners can record their speeches (up to 1 minute) and can share them in the group. This allows interactivity and peer support in your speaking skills class.

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