Teachers' Perspectives on the English Language Needs for Employability of Engineering Students: An Analysis

Nitika Gulati, *Sanjay Arora*, *and Preeti Bhatt*

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a study conducted to analyse the English language and communication needs of engineering students in India, from the perspectives of teachers of English, in order to develop or revise content and pedagogy catering to the specific employability needs of students. A survey questionnaire was administered online to 50 teachers from engineering institutes in India. The results from this study provide significant insights into the challenges faced by the teachers, the instructional and assessment methods adopted by them, and specific language areas requiring attention. In addition, it provides recommendations on overcoming the challenges faced by the teachers. These results can be helpful in improving the language curriculum in engineering institutes to make the students job-ready in a globalised world where English is an important employability skill.

Keywords: English Language Teaching; Needs Analysis; Engineering Students and Employability.

Introduction

Till the early 1980s, English Language Teaching in India was dominated by traditional methods like the Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), which focused on reading and writing and entirely neglected listening and speaking, and was ultimately inadequate in fulfilling the communicative needs of learners (Kalia 2017, p. 60). As Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was introduced in the 1980s, the importance of all the four skills of language was recognised (Behra 2013, p. 2). However, a major impediment to its successful implementation was outdated curriculum and ineffective pedagogy, as a result of which CLT has continued to be taught like GTM. With the onset of globalisation, English emerged as a global language, and with the entry of multinationals in India, the need for communicative competence was felt. The emphasis shifted from accuracy to fluency in language and proficiency in English emerged as an important employability skill, especially for engineering students.

It is imperative that students achieve optimum language competence and communicative ability in English during the course of their study if they want to be market-ready and considered for jobs. Although English forms a part of the curriculum in engineering degree courses, language teaching and learning often face challenges that must be overcome for

fulfilling the employability needs of students. In 2013, Aspiring Minds conducted a study in which an employability assessment of 118 engineering campuses in India was done to analyse the current skill levels and training requirements of students. According to the recommendations in the report, students must be trained for employability from the first year and their skills must be tested every year to monitor their improvement and measure their newly acquired skills (Amcat 2013). On the basis of monitoring, they should be given feedback, both by peers and teachers.

An important step in this direction is to conduct a language needs analysis of learners. Based on its results, courses must be developed or revised, materials and practices be adopted or modified, and learning outcomes be set, so that "rather than fitting students to courses, courses should be designed to fit students" (Nunan 1999, p. 148). Besides taking the learners' own perspectives on their specific language needs, the perspectives of teachers having experience in English Language Teaching must also be considered. Such an analysis should take into account the challenges faced by them in the classroom, the specific skills and areas that demand attention, the instructional and assessment methodology to be adopted, the utility of language labs, their suggestions on overcoming these challenges, and relevant content in order to enhance the employability of their learners. The results, coupled with the learners' own perspectives on their English language needs, can be useful for framing an employability-centric curriculum. One such study was conducted as a part of a research project on developing English skills for employability of engineering students.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study was to analyse the English language and communication needs of engineering students, from the perspectives of teachers who have experience in English Language Teaching, to develop or revise curriculum, catering to the employability needs of students.

Methodology

Sample

For the purpose of the study, a sample of 50 faculty members involved in English Language Teaching at engineering institutes across India was taken, using non-probability purposive sampling. About 98% of them taught at the undergraduate level, and 96% were involved in teaching first year students. Their teaching experience varied and ranged from one to 40 years, with the mean teaching experience being 9.9 years. The courses taught by them included Communication Skills, Language Through Literature, English for Science and Technology, English for Professional Communication, Dynamics of Communication, Technical Communication, Technical Writing, Business Communication, Spoken English, General English, Soft Skills, Linguistics, Translation, Personality Development, International Language Competence, Communication and Discourse Strategies, and so on. On an average, they got 2.5 hours per week per batch to teach the theoretical components of the course, and two hours to teach the practical components.

Research Instrument

A survey questionnaire consisting of three sections was prepared after a review of literature. It was titled 'Questionnaire for Faculty/Subject Experts'. The first section comprised six items, in which demographic information and general information related to their teaching experience was covered. The next section included 14 items pertaining to the respondents' teaching of the English language or communication skills course. The last section comprised two items, asking for their suggestions on developing course content focused on enhancing employability skills of students.

The instrument is attached in the appendix.

Data Collection Procedure

The adequacy of the questionnaire was tested in a pilot study during which data was collected and analysed. The insights from the pilot study were used to give shape to the final instrument for data collection. A list of the names of faculty members teaching English at eminent engineering colleges and universities in India was compiled, along with their email addresses. Once finalised, the questionnaire was sent through email and administered online using Google Forms. In the email, the participants were introduced to the aim of the study and requested to fill out the questionnaire. Reminders were sent with an aim to achieve the desired number of responses.

Data Analysis

The data collected through the questionnaires was analysed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, after the count reached fifty.

Results and Discussion

Instructional and assessment methods: When asked about the instructional methods used for teaching English, almost all of the respondents said that they used classroom activities, including role plays, discussions and presentations, followed by assignments/projects and lectures. Several also mentioned making use of language lab software and Internet resources, flipped learning, and collaborating with a technical teacher. With respect to the assessment tools, class assignments and presentations were identified as the most common ones, followed by quizzes and home assignments. Other ways of assessing the students included mid-semester and end-semester exams, projects, group tasks, discussions, and class responses. Around 57% of the respondents said that they had prescribed textbook(s) in the syllabus, and 69.4% made use of language lab software in teaching. Most of the respondents felt that language labs were effective in enhancing the communication skills of students.

Barriers in teaching: The respondents were asked to identify the difficulties faced by them in teaching English. A majority perceived students' attitude and perception towards the language as a barrier. Many respondents agreed that students lack the motivation to learn English or do not pay attention because they do not ascribe enough importance to the language. They lack interest and creativity, and are unwilling to practise. The heterogeneity of the classroom also poses challenges, as the linguistic competency of learners varies because of their diverse backgrounds. Many students

lack a reasonable understanding of basic concepts and struggle with English as the medium of instruction. Sometimes, they experience a regional or cultural gap, or/and exhibit mother-tongue influence. Many have a fear of the language, are shy and lack confidence. Respondents further identified infrastructural or curricular barriers in teaching large classes and shortage of time. Sometimes, they do not have enough teaching resources, good curriculum, or useful language lab software. Two respondents said that they face no difficulty in teaching English.

Areas requiring attention: The respondents also identified the areas where their students required special attention to increase employability. With respect to the various LSRW skills, the respondents perceived speaking skills as a major problem, followed by writing, listening, and reading skills. In speaking, students particularly struggle with fluency and pronunciation. Grammar and vocabulary were also identified as important for employability. Students lack the knowledge of using idiomatic expressions and language in context. Organisation of thoughts to articulate ideas with coherence and cohesion was perceived as important. Other focus areas included non-verbal communication, presentation skills, and interpersonal skills. Further, their shyness, inhibition, and fear of the English language need to be countered, with more exposure and practice, to enhance their confidence. Specific suggestions from the respondents included: 'regular classroom exercises and increased immersion in language learning through showcasing films, reciting poetry, writing stories, and other creative pursuits',

splitting large classes into smaller groups for individual attention, promoting extensive practice and giving prompt feedback for improvement, and effectively addressing 'the ignorant and biased attitude' towards English language.

Suggestions for theory topics: The respondents were asked to give their suggestions for English language topics to be included in the course designed for enhancing employability. For the theoretical component, the majority of the respondents suggested the inclusion of grammar basics and functional grammar. Many of them suggested including concepts of linguistics, particularly focusing on phonetics for correct pronunciation. With respect to writing skills, suggestions included resume writing, email and letter writing, report writing, essay/academic writing, and creative writing. Other suggestions included reading comprehension, picture stories, case studies, discourse analysis, vocabulary building exercises, identification of common errors in English, and use of common idioms and phrases. Inclusion of short pieces of literature for language learning was also recommended. Some respondents believed that a background to English language must be provided to the students, such as stressing the importance of English in India and the history of the English language and culture.

Suggestions for lab topics: For the practical component, the majority of the respondents identified group discussions, phonetics, and soft skills, particularly presentation skills, as the most important inclusions in the language lab curriculum for enhancing students' employability skills. Other important topics

suggested were mock interviews, vocabulary building exercises, and speaking exercises such as role-plays based on situational conversations, extempore, debates, elocution, and story narration. More suggestions included listening and reading comprehension, and activities based on audio-visuals and short films.

Conclusion and Future Direction

The results show that a majority of teachers suggest the use of interactive activities and a language lab for teaching English. They recommend assignments and presentations as prominent assessment tools. Major challenges faced in teaching the language include the learners' negative attitude and perception towards the language, their varying levels of competence, fear of the language, large class size, and insufficient time or resources. The speaking skills of the learners require the most attention. This must be taken into account while preparing or revising the curriculum, which however, should consider all the four skills of language, i.e. listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while integrating grammar and vocabulary exercises. Future directions for research may include adopting a multi-method approach, such as class observation and interviewing the teachers, and administering the questionnaire offline wherever possible. The results of the questionnaires must be coupled with learners' own perspectives on their specific needs for employability. The questionnaire could also be made more detailed, covering questions about particular language skills, to achieve a more wholesome idea about the learners' needs.

References

"Amcat" (2013). Aspiring minds: Employability quantified [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from https://www.teqip.in/docs/reports/AMCATREPORTS/complete_report.pdf. (Accessed 15 December, 2020).

Behra, A.K. (2013). ELT in India: An analysis. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature,* 1(1), 1-5.

Kalia, P. (2017). Comparative study of methods. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science,* 22 (5), 59-63.

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching and learning*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire for Faculty/Subject Experts

This survey is being conducted as a part of a research project aimed at improving English Proficiency/Communication Skills essential for employability of B. Tech. students. Please spare five minutes to share your perspective. Your details will be confidential and your responses will only be used for research purposes.

Section 1
Your name:

Institute currently working at:

Teaching experience (in years):

1. At what level do you teach?

2. If undergraduate, then which year(s) do

you teach?

    a. 1st year

    b. 2nd year

    c. 3rd year

    d. 4th year

3. Are you currently teaching or have you ever taught any course related to English Language or Communication Skills?

    a. Yes

    b. No

If yes, please mention the calendar year(s) of teaching (use hyphen/comma)

Section 2

Kindly answer these questions based on your teaching of English Language/ Communication Skills course:

4. At what level have you taught this course?

    a. B. Tech.

    b. M. Tech.

    c. Others

5. What courses related to English Language or Communication Skills do you teach/have you taught to UG students?

6. What courses related to English Language or Communication Skills do you teach/have you taught to PG students?

7. How many hours do you get per week per batch to teach the theoretical components of English Language/ Communication Skills course?

8. How many hours do you get per week per batch to teach the practical components (language lab) English Language/Communication Skills course?

9. What instructional methodology do you use for your classes? (Select all that apply)

    a. Lecture method

    b. Classroom activities

    c. Assignments/Projects

    d. Language lab software

    e. Internet resources

    f. Others

10. What difficulties do you face while teaching English Language or Communication Skills to your students?

11. In your opinion, what areas, in general, do students lack in, and require special attention, to increase their employability skills with respect to English Language/ Communication?

12. How do you assess the students?

    a. Class assignments

    b. Home assignments

    c. Quizzes

    d. Presentations

    e. Others

13. Are there any books prescribed in the syllabus?

    a. Yes

    b. No

14. If yes, please list the title(s) of the book(s), along with their author and year.

15. Do you use any Language Lab software in your teaching?

    a. Yes

    b. No

16. If yes, which software do you use?

17. In your opinion, how effective is the language lab in enhancing the communication skills of students?

    a. Very effective

    b. Effective

    c. Neutral

    d. Not effective

    e. Cannot say

Section 3

Please share your suggestions on the topics to be included in the syllabus of a new course on English Language and Communication skills to be designed for First Year B. Tech. students to enhance their employability:

18. Theory topics that should be included in the course:

19. Practical (lab) topics that should be included in the course:

Ms. Nitika Gulati, Assistant Professor of English, College of Technology & Engineering, MPUAT, Udaipur.
Email: nitikagulati93@gmail.com
Dr. Sanjay Arora, Associate Professor of English, Central University of Rajasthan, Ajmer.
Email: sanjayarora@curaj.ac.in
Dr. Preeti Bhatt, Associate Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Malaviya National Institute of Technology, Jaipur.
Email: pbhatt.hum@mnit.ac.in

AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

The General Body meeting is being postponed until next December in view of the prevailing pandemic and the resultant disruption in normality. Consequently, the present office-bearers of ELTAI will continue until the end of December 2021.

Members may access the current as well as some of the past issues of the journal on the Web by clicking on the relevant link given on the Home page of ELTAI's website: www.eltai.in.

They may also get to know their membership details by clicking on 'Member log in' on the Home page of ELTAI's website and entering their Membership ID. If required, they may send an email to: eltai_india@yahoo.co.in OR indiaeltai@gmail.com for relevant information.