

THE NEED OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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Abstract

Enhancing the communication skills in English is the need for everyone in order to cope with the age of globalization. In his book “English as a Global Language”, David Crystal observes that 85 % of the world’s international organizations use English as their official language in transnational communication and above 90 % of academic articles is written in English. The multinational corporates and the IT companies keep communicative skills of candidates in English as a yard stick for their selection process. Proficiency in English is considered one of the skills for employability in the highly competitive society. This article attempts to highlight the significance of communication skills for students of professional education in general and the problems, strategies and the professional prospects connected with engineering studies in particular.

Key Words: Communication skills, acquisition, grammatical templates, competence, productive and receptive skills, linguistics.

Introduction

The students of present generation need only a functional or working knowledge of English to read and understand books written in the language and to express themselves in a flawless language. When a student moves from a school to a college or university, his greatest difficulty is the acquisition of the second language as communication skills in English as it is a Corresponding author mikumaran@yahoo.com pre-requisite for personal and professional growth of everyone. The so called varsities develop the communication skills of the professional students especially engineering students through various activities such as role play, oral presentation, group discussion.

Communication is the way to vent to one’s images of mind and experience gained. When proper communication fails, there will be a communication gap and desired goals could not be reached.

According to eminent linguists like Noam Chomsky and Ferdinand de Saussure

“language is artificial as it is manmade, restricted to a particular experience or idea; abstract because meanings get associated with symbols and keep interpreting the meanings; arbitrary keeps changing inclusive of new concepts and words, creative as innumerable words are added to the list of words every year, repetitive/redundant this may either improve or impede effective communication, recursive capable of generating new sentence based on grammatical templates.”

One succeeds in mastering the nuances of English communicative skills, he will be considered knowledgeable, suitable and adaptable.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence pertains to the use of a language appropriately in social situations. To become a successful speaker of the language, one is expected to possess the linguistic competence i.e. to know how, when, and where to apply the rules of the language in order to make and use grammatically correct sentences appropriately which includes mastery of pronunciation of grammar and of vocabulary.

When one says “Will you open the door? Certain idea is communicated as per the situation demands. At the same time if he says, “Would you mind opening the door for me?” it proves that the speaker possesses both communication and competence.

The sociolinguistic competence knowledge of how to begin and how to end conversation, how to be polite and how to address people and strategy competence the knowledge of how to convey ideas in an effective manner so as to create desirable impact without any difficulty are clubbed at ease.

Communication Skills for Professional Students

Professionals in general and engineers in particular need communication skills not only to procure a decent job but also to sustain in that. The main aim of imparting English to professionals is to enable the professional students use English at ease as their sole aim is to get a better job. The method of teaching given to the students in the educational institutions is not always effective for the employees. Many even lose their jobs purely because of lack of communication skills. They can acquire competence with the help of good teaching methods coupled with suitable teaching aids.

The Need of Communicative Competence for Engineering Students

Communicative competence in general refers to the concept of using a language effectively and appropriately adhering to the situations. Be it engineering science, commerce or humanities, mere subject knowledge will neither fetch a good job nor will it allow anybody excel in the workplace.

Communication skills have been made a part of the curriculum almost in all universities with an aim to promote communicative competence. The so called varsities develop the communication skills of the engineering students through various activities such as

- a. Oral Presentation
- b. Group Discussion
- c. Mock Interview

- d. Role Plays
- e. Word Games

Productive and Receptive Skills of Engineering Students

Receptive skills pertain to listening and reading whereas productive skills involve speaking and writing activities. Competence in communication is a prerequisite one to have a strong footing. Engineers are expected to be well versed both in receptive and productive skills if they want to be successful.

Communication skills alone do not fetch better prospects for an engineer who needs to be competent in communication to have a strong footing. For example, there are different forms of communication as cited below:

Verbal forms of Communication

- face to face conversations
- telephone conversations
- meetings
- conferences
- seminars
- dictations
- instructions
- presentations
- group discussions
- interviews [employment press]
- video conferences
- voice conferences

Written forms of communication

- memos
- letters
- E-mails
- faxes
- notices
- circulars
- newsletters
- reports
- proposals
- research papers
- bulletins
- brochures
- manuals
- in-house journals

(Rama, Meenakshi and Sharma, Sangeetha “Technical Communication Principles and Practice” [2000] New Delhi OUP p-19)

At this juncture, communication alone does not support an engineer for his successful survival in the profession. The saddening fact is that though the engineering professionals are

aware of the importance of the communications, they are least bothered to develop and sharpen their skills of competence. The higher the position, the greater is the need of communication.

Communication skills can be developed by collecting and organizing information by the way of analyzing facts contrasting the difference between facts and inferences and there by being competent .

Any firm, institution or an organization becomes an organized one because of its communication. The smooth flow of one to one communication enables the workers to work together and enhances better understanding. It is the tool the management uses to achieve its target. Without proper communication, the activities concerned will come to a standstill position. Even while drafting a report, giving instruction or preparing manual, the process of communication plays an inevitable role. It is a measurable yardstick for the success of any institution.

The Engineering Students of Rural and Urban Background

The rural students are much affected by the deceased ELT system. There is a great mismatch between the rural and urban students. The urban students somehow manage to learn English quite well in the context in which the language is used in India in spite of the deconstructing ELT. They are the third generation learners enjoying cooperation from parents, environment and atmosphere.

On the contrary, the rural students are the first generation learners with English as a foster language and not able to cope with the language throughout life in spite of the best efforts. However, they might be able to write as per requirements, speaking remains out of their range. They learn the language without knowing what they learn. Linguistic research says that because of this reason [learning a language without knowing] a feeling of backwardness itself embosses among these learners. As the teaching is surely student-centered, most students have neither the chance nor the motivation to actively participate in classroom activities. English is taught as an academic subject, as a medium or mode of active, constructive and communicative intellectualization.

Among all the states in India, Haryana tops the list in imparting English as it has started EDUSAT with soft skills programme to provide an atmosphere of learning English and communication skills.

In an article entitled, ‘What Drives Your Engineering Pursuits’ Siva Kumar Palaniappan says,

“A big fallacy in our education system is scoring high marks in core subjects such as Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics (CPM) is the only qualification for a student to pursue engineering. In reality this is a misconception. In truth, the qualification for becoming a real engineer is truly much more than just academic marks.”

He further adds the role of an engineer as follows:

- Ability to understand and comprehend scientific principles
- Aptitude for asking pertinent questions
- Eagerness to experiment
- Inclination towards problem-solving
- Logical thinking, capacity to imagine and visualize
- Ability to conceptualize and find solutions
- Passion for engineering and technology

- Willingness to focus and work for long hours

“Joining an engineering college might seem to be easy, but becoming an engineer is not so. It involves hard work, sincerity, commitment and above all, a sound knowledge in English, both spoken and written”. (The Hindu, Monday, July7, 2014 . Education Plus pg. 14)

There are five strategies evolved by Kruse (1979) for enhancing the written language especially employing the right choice of words.

1. Word elements such as prefixes, suffixes and infixes

Recognizing the component parts of words and word families are of great value because it is one of the most significant vocabulary skills the students need. It also decreases the number of new words they are likely to encounter and increases their control of the English lexicon.

2. Pictures, Diagrams, Charts

Students may relate the illustration to the item that is difficult to understand.

3. Clues of Definition

Students need to be taught to notice many types of useful definition clues like parentheses, synonyms and antonyms .

4. Inference Clues from Discourse

Students can benefit from example clues, summary clues and experience.

5. General Aids

This includes the function of the words such as noun, adjective, etc.

Impediments to English

Since Independence, English enjoys the status of being the medium of instruction in most of the schools. Owing to the lacuna of clear aim, incompetent teaching, disagreeable policy, sub-standard teaching materials, old and obsolete system of examinations, crowded classes, outdated methodology of teaching, lack of supplementary reading, sub-standard text books, reduction in the number of periods, lack of supervision, the desired results could not be achieved in the current scenario.

Among the several reasons behind the deprived condition for the less acquisition of L2 learning are poor classroom conditions, shortage of audio visual aids, lack of qualified teachers, faulty methods of teaching, dissimilarity of English syllabi, inappropriateness of text books, undesired systems of education, substandard evaluation procedures, ill-equipped guidance, meaningless corrections etc. The system of evaluation promotes students to get higher degrees and not real life skills. The student-teacher ratio prevalent in Indian classrooms does not substantiate proper teaching-learning process. The old method of teaching was form based and not meaning based. The fact that English is not taught as a life skill or survival skill in most schools and colleges raises a question whether teachers of English are really competent and whether they have had proper training to teach the language effectively. The books prescribed cater to develop only writing and reading skills and not to the other skills of listening and speaking. The present system of education is not conducive for teaching English as a life skill. The teachers prepare students to focus much on their impending examinations as bouquets or brickbats for them depend on the results produced. It's high time that the impediments which pose a serious threat for the development of communication skills were checked. To list a few:

1. There is a gap between the target situation [employment market] and the existing proficiency of learners.

2. Listening and speaking skills are not given adequate importance.
3. The absence of skills-oriented teaching results in ineffective learning.

Most of the courses designed for developing the English language do not reflect the present and future language needs of the students.

Remedial Measures

The followings are the remedial measures for the above cited issues so as to improve the communicative competence in English which is a vital source of survival in the present scenario:

- English language courses should be based on the principles of globalism.
- The courses should be innovative in content.
- An innovative approach that focuses on creativity, critical thinking skills, group skills should be imparted.
- Interpersonal skills, functional competence, intercultural competence should be promoted.
- Effective measures must be taken to shift from the basic language skills to a wide range of skills required at work.
- The English language courses should include activities that foster learners' critical thinking and group skills.
- The courses should develop learners' autonomy through language labs and web based learning.
- Corporates should be involved in the design of the course.
- English language courses should be evaluated and modified on a regular basis.
- Innovative communication activities, oral presentation, group discussion, and mock interview should be drilled in the classrooms.
- Project based activities should be given to learners to develop their language skills in a meaningful manner.
- The increasing focus on the tests and exams should be stopped.

[Prayan, Albert, English for survival [article in The Hindu, dated Dec 2nd 2013]

Conclusion

It is high time that policy makers and teachers of English understood the cruciality of the situation. Let English be taught in schools as a language and not as a subject. The entire English teaching fraternity have to come forward to analyze the seriousness of the situation and make the students realize that proper communicative skills in English is a passport to the prosperous future. Without communication, all teaching and learning is at stake and progress of human civilization is blocked. The need of the hour is to take appropriate measures to enable teachers grow professionally which is the process of empowering the learners especially the future engineers. Undue importance is given to examination-oriented coaching and as a result the English language ceases to be creative. It is disheartening to note that most private engineering colleges seem to focus only on achieving higher pass percentage every year at the cost of compromising quality rather than making learners competent in the language.

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