Importance of Enhancing Communication Skills among Young Graduates and How to make them Career-ready & Life-ready?

M. Sarpparaje, M.A., M.Phil.

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Abstract

The art of communication is the language of leadership. Being able to communicate effectively is the most important of all life skills. Presently, businesses are hiring fewer people and expecting them to do more and hence, employers have increased their expectations for potential employees. The employers do, however, continue to seek employees with commendable communication skills. According to a 2010 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), communication skills are ranked first among a job candidate's 'must have' skills and qualities. It is an art that comes with regular practice. As proven, practice makes perfect; one has to keep practicing dedicatedly till he reaches perfection. Often, students do not realize the value of possessing these dynamic skills, and they assume that mere knowledge acquisition within their discipline is enough to get through that all-important Recruitment Process. In this crucial stage, faculty members must willingly accept their changing roles as facilitators and importantly, 'practice educators' to assist students in a positive way and reinforce what business executives expect in students who are going out into their workforce. Encouraging the students to participate in debate, discussions and presentations or seminars are some of the ways by which teachers can actually help their students to enhance and sharpen their oral communication skills. Written communication skills can be promoted by giving more assignments to the students that require their own thinking and writing skills. Further, a better and excellent way to impress the young learners can be achieved with the use of technological support that enhances both their written and oral communication skills under the sound guidance of their teachers. Thus, the intended paper aims at suggesting methods for making engineers employable through enhancing their communication skills.

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Key Words: Communication Skills, English writing skills, English speaking skills, engineering students, technological support,

Introduction

Globalization in the 21st century has interconnected the world in every aspect, be it social, political or cultural, and also opened unmatched opportunities in every sphere, and the English language plays a pivotal role of the lingua franca in this uniting process. According to *The Economist* (2001), in today's world, fluency in English has been termed as a basic skill of modern life. Further, the modern trend in the business world is global interaction and this has acted as a stimulant for proficiency in English communication across borders, thereby making the language a universal tongue. Skapinker (2007) is of the view that it is not just that Microsoft, Google and Vodafone conduct their business in English, but it is also the language in which Chinese speak to Brazilians and Germans to Indonesians. Due to the fact that many companies are seeking expansion multi-nationally, English has been elevated to the position of a common corporate language in order to bring about an economic integration and a closer networking in the global business environment. Thus, a good English proficiency would give them a good grasp on the current usage of technical language which will undoubtedly open up vistas and pave the way for graduate employability and will turn them into culturally informative and socially responsible engineers.

While communication skills are commonly recognized as vital to success in business, students still often underestimate how essential some of these skills may be to their careers. They focus instead, on the technical skills more of which are indeed, needed to perform specific tasks, but employers are seeking applicants with more language skills. They want employees who can continue to learn and adapt, read, write and compute competently; listen and communicate effectively, think creatively, solve problems independently; manage themselves at work, interact with co-workers, work in teams or groups; handle basic technology, lead effectively as well as follow supervision. Therefore, English for Science and Technology programs in Engineering colleges should be revamped to suit the requirements of the evolving curriculum and the world

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of work outside college. The professional profile of a modern qualified engineer should include well-developed communication skills and high English language proficiency to help him achieve success in the modern, competitive global work arena. To provide credence for this argument, this article is designed to emphasize the importance of communication, the role of the study of communication in contemporary life and ways these skills can be recognized and attained. It is also an attempt to find out how language skills along with life-skills can be learnt effectively by engineering students for proper utilization by them in real life situations.

Communication Skills – Existing Scenario

The ability to communicate information accurately, clearly and as intended, is an imperative employability skill and something that should not be overlooked. In the Indian context, an engineering student's success in the on-campus recruitment is mainly based on their demonstration of communication skills (Karnik, 2007, as cited in P. Rayan 2008:1). Still, according to many, learners graduating from colleges and universities often lack these skills that are considered obligatory in the world of work. According to the National Association of Software and Services Company (NASSCOM) former president Kiran 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. This will undoubtedly lead to the complication of an already existing problem that the placements of undergraduates, whose proficiency in English is low, will be seriously affected.

First, there is a gap existing between the present English language syllabi in engineering colleges and students' academic and professional needs. Second, there is a need to modify and revise the present English language course as evident from one of the case studies conducted recently. The study involved 770 students and 63 teachers of 20 engineering colleges located in different regions of the state. The tools used for data collection comprised of questionnaire survey among students and teachers. After validating the validity and reliability of the research instruments, the questionnaire survey was conducted among students of 2nd, 4th and 6th semester Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech) course students and the teachers' survey was conducted at a workshop conducted by the Biju Patnaik University of Technology (BPUT).

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The data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Based on the study, the findings are as follows:

1. The goals and objectives of the present syllabus are only being partially fulfilled.

2. There is deficient acquisition of English language skills among students for proper application in the workplace context as well as in real- life situations, and hence necessary measures need to be taken.

3. Teachers are not getting adequate training in the latest language teaching methods, so that effective classroom teaching becomes a norm rather than an exception.

It is, therefore, crucial that a solution to this grave problem which can trigger a series of other difficult situations such as unemployment amongst graduates and the non-acceptance of local graduates into post-graduate programmes in foreign universities due to their lack of competency in English be found before it is too late. The onus, therefore, is on teachers of English and policy makers to recognize the challenges they are faced with in this rapidly changing scenario and equip themselves to face reality whereby they need to shape syllabi and course content in order that they can contribute to the producing of builders of the nation by enhancing the employability of young graduates.

Need for Needs-Based Approach – Changing Roles of Teachers

The selection of suitable methods of teaching, especially language teaching methodology has been baffling educators for a long time. Although researchers and educators agree that Indian engineering graduates are not proficient in English (Tickoo, 2004), few studies have been conducted to examine the procedures, measures and strategies of teaching and learning to improve engineering students' achievements in English. It's never too late to work on learners' communication skills and by doing so improve their quality of life. Learning environments require curricula and assessment systems that allow students to think creatively and collaborate. It is crucial to design curricula and assessment systems that emphasize authentic real world

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problems, engage students in inquiry and exploration and provide opportunities for students to apply what they know in meaningful ways.

Various methods have been included in modern teacher training to enhance the learning process of such skills as team-work, advanced communication, critical thinking and problem-solving. One is interactive teaching, through which instructors facilitate exercises that provide opportunities for experience, practice, reinforcement, and reflection. Larsen & Freeman (2000) classifies language teaching approaches into nine categories: Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Audio-Lingual Method, Silent Way, Total Physical Response, Community Language learning, Suggestopedia, Communicative Approach, and Natural Approach. No single method can be perfect by itself. The teacher has to amalgamate different approaches intelligently to suit local needs and to fulfill the desired goals of the learners, taking into account their proficiency levels.

Tasks and Activities for Better Involvement of Learners

There are a range of inclusive teaching strategies that can assist all students to develop good communication skills, and manage their study independently. 'Communicative activities' refer to the techniques which are employed in the communicative method in language teaching. Examples of such activities are games, exercises, practices and projects which make use of the target language. The language-using activities for communication are not restricted to conversation alone and may involve all the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing or an integration of two or more skills.

For example, there are a variety of opportunities and models for building fluency in oral communication. First year students may commence with an audio recording, and then move onto a video recording of an oral presentation to demonstrate the same learning outcome. Some may have difficulty expressing themselves due to language problems, social barriers or under-developed communication skills and may need assistance at various stages of their university experience. Performing in pairs can also build self-confidence. Group projects and presentations enhance the interpersonal skills of the student members and should be emphasized early in the

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education curricula. Students can then graduate to presenting their own oral with assurance and self-determination. The concept of tasks is similar to that of communicative events as defined by Munby (1978). By engaging the students directly in active learning, they learn by doing. It is important to create pseudo environments to simulate meetings with clients/developers/peers/and such, as this will also allow students to interact with different levels of technical intensity, as well as engaging in non-technical communications. They are significant for engineering students who are expected to perform real-world tasks.

Effective Usage of Language Laboratory – An Attempt to Match Modern Learners' Demand

A language laboratory provides an assortment of resources for students wanting or needing to improve their language skills. The learning resources provided include relevant language learning materials or links to various language learning sites, access to newspapers and magazines, access to online libraries, interaction with language specialists and multimedia facilities. Mohanty (2011) states that students today are digitally literate and they live in a world immersed in visual literacy. Television, computer/video games, cell phones, social networking sites, emails, chat rooms and instant messaging are common forms of entertainment and communication among students of this generation. Thereby, students gain the exposure to learn from the visual media. Visual literacy has become extremely important today in both education and in the wider world of business and industry. Learning with technology fosters creativity in the learner as he/she is empowered to design individual representations of content using technology. In a survey, a lot of educators agreed that technology has enhanced student's writing skills. Technology has facilitated their personal expression and creativity. They can learn more and keep themselves engaged through sharing their work with a larger audience or beyond their classroom. Educators agree that there are many instances where it has shown that using technology in writing has actually developed critical thinking, imagination and analysis as well as vocabulary.

Outside of their classes, students most often encounter digital writing - that is, writing created or read on a computer or other Internet-connected device. Digital writing assignments "match the real world" and give students experience composing in a format what the people will

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actually find reader-friendly. The teacher, whenever present in the language lab may act as a facilitator, not as an instructor. They can also make use of technology for writing skill development among students by creating a text jointly, through shared documents or wikis, or they can take turns posting on a collective blog.

The following websites and apps can be explored by teachers who want to incorporate digital elements into their writing instruction.

- Animoto animoto.com
- Glogster edu.glogster.com
- Google Docs docs.google.com
- Wikispaces wikispaces.com
- Wallwisher wallwisher.com

They can also include assignments and activities that provide opportunities for problem-solving in realistic and fictional situations that would ultimately work towards improving their speaking skills. Cooperative learning can also take place effectively. Activity-oriented teaching using latest language learning technology is also possible. A Lab Assistant is needed to take care of the lab which is to be kept open from morning to late evenings so that students are not time-bound and are encouraged to learn outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Communication skills are critical in giving confidence, productivity and to unlock future potential in engineers. As suggested above, it is further reiterated that learners be involved more in interactive sessions in classrooms so that they are able to strengthen their communicative competence. Additionally, teaching technical and business communication and technology assisted language learning are areas that should be taken up on a priority basis while learning English for engineering purposes. Thus, designing tasks and activities accordingly would help achieve goals and objectives of the course. It is also recommended that teachers are given enough opportunity for professional development so that they gain knowledge on effective teaching strategies that can be implemented at the classroom level, in the engineering context.

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Training tasks should ensure there is a high level of communication skills imparted to complement employability skills they gain during Work Integrated Learning. The challenge is the identification and authenticity of the right kind of language activities for a student in the mixed-ability context. However, the management and faculty of engineering institutions have a special responsibility in imparting the communication skills training, which in turn has good effect on the placements, campus recruitment and career of the students. Besides raising awareness regarding the importance of these skills and encouraging students to improve their skills, it is advisable to include and impart communication skills training, along with hard skills right from the beginning of the academic course. As a positive side, the academic qualification will also become very resourceful, which in turn can increase employability of the Engineering students. Thus, the paper aims at developing students' communication skills in English so they can more effectively contribute to corporate criteria, which are pivotal for their sustenance and in turn become confident enough to be career-ready/life-ready.

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M. Sarpparaje, M.A., M.Phil.
Assistant Professor
Mepco Schlenk Engineering College
Sivakasi 626 005
Tamilnadu
India
asm.sarppa@gmail.com

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