

Constraints of Teaching English in Engineering Colleges

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Abstract

The language that holds a dominant position in the world is the English Language. It has a speedy role in all fields, particularly in the department of education, customer service and human resource. The demand for English is also visible in other domains like politics, international relations, media, communication, and travel. The advancements in Science and Technology have resulted in adding thousands of words to the English dictionary every year. As these innovations are imported from the English-speaking countries, learning English is essential for those who wish to update their knowledge. In the field of Technical Education, all the sources are available only in the English Language. This has forced the learners to learn the language compulsorily. Anna University, Chennai has realized the significance of learning English and has framed the syllabus of Technical English-I and II with specific objectives. These two subjects are taught in the first year engineering program. Various researches have been done on the vitality of the syllabus and on the exact necessity of the students. Many researchers have an opinion that there is no logic in the prescribed contents of the syllabus since they don't help much towards the achievement of the objectives of the syllabus. Apart of from this, the teachers also face many challenges in teaching English for several reasons. This paper makes a study on the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching English in the engineering colleges and concludes with possible solutions.

Keywords: Technical Education, Technical English, Engineering Colleges, Communication, Objectives of Syllabus

Introduction

The English language is unanimously accepted as a global language and it is indispensable for all the countries to teach and learn English. If not, it would be difficult to cope with the speedy developments that are taking place in the world. English has become a world language because the number of the people who use English as a means of communication is higher than the number of the people who speak it as their mother tongue. In the case of English in India, the country has been experiencing the influence of the language for more than two centuries. “English holds a place of status in our country, even after more than six decades since the British left India. No indigenous language, however, has come up to replace English, either as a medium of communication or as an official language in India under the influence of nationalistic feeling and emotional hostility English began to reassert its position.” (Dr. Vijay Baburao Pande, 2013)

The language has become indispensable in all the fields, such as education, science and technology, research, and business. Books and sources related to all domains of knowledge are available only in the English Language. However, in India, there is no single language to unite the whole country since the country is known for its multifarious culture, values, beliefs and languages. The non-availability of one common language has forced India to rely on a common language. As the English language is globally accredited, India has also adopted the language in all its endeavors.

English in Engineering Colleges

Multinational Corporations (MNCs) and Information Technology (IT) companies in India recruit engineering candidates who have good English communication skills and so students of engineering courses are forced to a condition that their communication skills in English and other soft skills should match with the expectations of the job givers. Mere technical knowledge in the chosen field of engineering without employability skills will not bring them a good job or help them excel in the workplace. Proficiency in English is considered as one of the important employability skills.

Technical English in Anna University

Anna University, Chennai, has introduced Technical English I and II in the first year program of B.E/B.Tech. The syllabus for those subjects is framed with the following objectives.

- To make learners acquire listening and speaking skills in both formal and informal contexts.
- To help them develop their reading skills by familiarizing them with different types of reading strategies.
- To equip them with writing skills needed for academic as well as workplace contexts.
- To make them acquire language skills at their own pace by using e-materials and language lab components.

Aim of the Technical English Courses

The aim of the courses is to enable the students of engineering to learn certain micro and macro skills in the English Language and use them effectively. However, most students who have undergone the courses are not able to communicate effectively in the language. The reasons are many. Prakasam.V. (2011) explains the problems of learning English in India: “In India it is not the language of our being or identity. It has come to be the language of doing, language of academics and the language of recognition. It is learnt, not really ‘acquired’ from ‘the days of being in the womb’. English is heard everyday all around us, but English does not help us ‘socialize’ or ‘mature’ within our ‘experience’. It helps us ‘grow’ outside our ‘inner circle’. In spite of all our efforts, we cannot really get many ‘coordinate bilinguals’ with our academic or professional exposure to English. The point of reference will always be a native variety of English. That’s why I call English National Foreign Language”. This paper counts the reasons from the teachers’ perspective.

Lack of Motivation

Teaching of English in India has always been a difficult task. This is because of the cultural and social diversities and the lack of human resources. Moreover, individual commitment of the learners in acquiring the language skills is widely lacking, as they lose their flexibility in both body and mind at the age of eighteen at the time of joining colleges. They are distracted in so many ways which drag them away from academics. They run behind the fun and

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folly and prepare for exams only at the eleventh hour; as a result, they don't learn anything worthy, apart from getting some aggregates and certificates.

Moreover, when they switch over from schools to colleges, they continue the same style of learning. In schools, the contents are memorized and repeated in the examinations. After coming to college, they should at least try to change their learning style. But, this is not happening since even in colleges, the English language is taught as a subject. This also demotivates the students and develops hatred towards learning. According to Sharma. R : “English language teaching in India, you will agree with me, has suffered a lot so much that our students who pass intermediate or degree examinations with English either as a compulsory or as an elective subject can neither speak nor write correct English, may be because the emphasis in our schools and colleges has always been on the conceptual content and the stylistic content has been neglected so far”. This is the reason that the professionals are still lagging behind in accurate speaking and writing.

The Syllabus, Communicative Skills and Students' Need

In a professional institution, courses that are prescribed for the students should be realistic and relevant to their career expectations. By being professional students, they always want to find a space in the corporate sectors which demand communication skills a mandatory skill for their enrollment. There is the question often asked: “Will this Technical English I and II help the students achieve communicative skills that are demanded by the corporate sectors? The teachers teach the contents only to help the students score marks in their semester examinations. A professional institution should produce professionals, but they produce only students with aggregates. Prakasam. V. (2011) speaks about the nature of the contents like “Adult learners learn better, if what they are presented is related to their experience and if they get the feeling that they are co-creators of knowledge along with the teacher and the book.”

Other Medium Students

Many students were exposed only to their mother tongues in their schools. They did not get adequate opportunities either to listen or speak in English. They listened to English only in the English class. Other subjects were taught in their regional languages as the medium of

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instruction. Because of the social and economic backgrounds, they did not get enough exposure to English. When such students come to Engineering colleges, they have a tough time in their studies and with the teachers as well. Whatever the teacher attempts to say, they do not understand at the first attempt and so the teachers have to repeat again and again till they see some signs of understanding from them. However, most of the time their understanding is short lived. When they come back to the class again, the previous day's lessons are gone from their minds. Their knowledge of English needs to be strengthened through appropriate activities. Their passion to learn through the English medium needs to be strengthened. Teachers need to equip themselves to meet the demands of students who studied through the regional language medium in higher secondary schools.

Heterogeneous Classrooms

The English language classroom offers heterogeneous background: English medium students and non-English medium students bringing in a variety of factors into the classroom. Teachers should not ignore or neglect any part of their class. They should not cater to the needs of any one particular section of their class. So, they teach only in general tone and expressions. Focusing on one group of students will disturb the other set of students, which might result in developing complexes and jealousies among them.

Wrong Conception of the Placement Process

Students always have a feeling that their placement comes only in the final year and so they do not find any immediate need for English. Especially students of Civil and Mechanical Engineering majors have a strong conviction that the English language is not essential for them as they are going to work with machines and construction workers. Even in the Anna University exam schedule, English Examination comes as the last exam and the students are not given any gap for preparation as is given to other subjects. This directly or indirectly conveys that English is an easy subject and does not need any extra efforts to pass the examination. This also is based on possible assumption that the contents in the syllabus are not challenging for the students and so they can come to the exam hall without any practice or preparation. The evaluation system is also responsible for this misconception. Attempting all questions and filling in the pages bring

them at least the pass marks. That is how the percentage of passes in the English Papers is higher when compared to the other subjects.

Conclusion

Teaching and learning the English Language take place with enormous materials and methods, but mastery of English communicative skills seems to depend more on the curiosity and commitment of the learners. Teachers face a difficult task when many students are not wholly motivated to master English. Teachers face challenges such as irrelevant syllabus, heterogeneous media of instruction backgrounds of students, varying levels of English language competition, lack of motivation. Teachers also need to continuously improve their communicative skills in English. Best slogan for all of us could be: “Don’t stop with teaching alone, create a compulsory English speaking environment for the students so that instilling communication skills in the English Language becomes feasible.”

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