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***NEW VISTAS IN ELT:
EMPOWERING ENGINEERS FOR EMPLOYMENT***

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**English Language Learning Skills for
Undergraduate Engineering Students**

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the need to teach English language as a skill-based subject. The fact is that brilliant students with excellent academic scores are unsuccessful in the international examinations. Their poor performance is strange but true. So it is pertinent that English teachers of engineering students should equip them with extra language skills so that

lacunae can be filled and that would help the engineering students to become world class citizens.

Key words: speaking, listening reading, writing, skill-based subject, engineering students

Introduction

Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW) Skills must be acquired in the process of learning a language. LSRW skills are interwoven and each one complements the other. The purpose of English language teaching is to foster the LSRW skills and aim at ultimately leading the students to critical thinking and appropriate expression with potential to produce research inputs in every field of study. This alone fulfils the aim of English language teaching; otherwise, it becomes merely a mechanical endeavour for statistical purposes.

The Need for Effective English Laboratory Training for Engineering Students

To train engineering students, English laboratories are using platforms such as K-Van solutions or Globarena, which is loaded into computers. Exposure to these platforms enhances their listening skills. In spite of this, most of the students of engineering colleges are not getting the desired grades in international examinations such as IELTS, TOEFL, and GRE. Hence, it is pertinent here that engineering students should be exposed to listening exercises and evaluated through credit system to make them accountable. The whole exercise should be performed to improve their comprehensive skills in the English language.

Skill Based English Language Teaching to Engineering Students

Listening Skill to Familiarize with Speaker's Attitude/Intonation

Listening, which is an auditory activity, is the sensory activity through auditory organs. Listening Skill is an important area of testing in all the international tests. For instance, in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), listening material is four to six lectures, and each piece of passage is three to five minutes duration and each one varies from five hundred to eight hundred words per passage. The number of questions per lecture is six and the time duration is sixty to ninety minutes. The ETS Official Guide suggests the Listening section measures your ability to understand spoken English from North America

and other English-speaking countries of the world. In academic environments you need to listen to lectures and conversations. Listening materials in the new test include academic lectures; the speech sounds very natural. You can take notes on any listening material throughout the entire test.¹ (ETS: The Official Guide to the New TOEFL IBT (2007)).The TOEFL IBT test in listening skills can be successfully attempted, when the Indian students study English language as a skill-based subject.

In India, English language, as L2, is taught by Indian English teachers. Most of these teachers are not trained in teaching or testing listening as a skill. The listening skill is tested to assess the students' achievement in terms of the college degree requirements and to assess whether students have mastered the sub-skills of listening. The gravitation is towards identifying the voice tones and other cues and the speaker's perception of the spoken topic. Hence, it is relevant to train teachers to make the students to sit before an audio system in colleges to make them listen to educational programmes. This type of frequent listening exercises/sessions enhances the confidence of the students.

Kamala Nanda, an English trainer of comprehension, enumerates the processes involved in listening. John Erwin and Marjorie Rosenberger have identified four steps in the listening Process (1) hearing 2) understanding (3) evaluating and (4) responding ² (Kamala Nanda,1989).

Thus, teaching the listening skill and ear-training from the I year to the IV year will help the students gain the advancement to go for further studies.

Speaking Skill to Enhance Communication

Language is, by far, the distinguishing feature of human beings. Second Language learning is the instinctive nature of a human being, and an involuntary action. Though Listening begins more or less at the same time for all students, Speaking begins at different time periods for different students depending on the intensity of exposure to the language. Speaking is an articulation skill, which will not get consolidated from the mere stages of uttering technical jargon in engineering courses.

Thus, the teaching of English as L2 should ideally be started from the I Year to the IV year for the engineering students.

Of the four skills required to acquire proficiency in a language, the first two skills for example, Listening and Speaking should start at the I Year, making use of the potentiality of the students to pick up a language quickly. In this context English must be introduced from the I Year, and students should be exposed to both Listening and Speaking environs in all the colleges, irrespective of their prior medium of study. Speech is a process of social activity, and its improvement depends on the training in listening and practice in expression.

At college level, if priority is given to Speaking, it helps develop proper communication; the very purpose of teaching English should be to use it for everyday communication as a link language within the nation, particularly in a multilingual and multicultural society such as India; and, for the students, as a library or auxiliary language with the important purpose of learning the language. This involves presenting communication contents to inculcate receptive understanding. There may be grades of presentation and grades of reception depending on knowledge, skill and command of the language on the part of the teacher and the student.

Being highly creative, language cannot be learnt by a student just becoming well versed in the rules of grammar. The very assiduity of a language is thoughtful and communicative. This communication is bound to be active in terms of Speaking and Listening with social functions fastened on to them. Hence, the teacher at college must provide the needed exposure to English and make the students comfortable in communicating through English. Therefore, teachers cannot afford to be lackadaisical in their teaching methodology and in imparting the LSRW skills, which are basic ingredients to acquire an ability to use a language. They must be innovative in introducing the language so that the students develop a zeal for learning it. The college environment should be replenished with the environs conducive to speaking in English. The moment the students enter an engineering college, they should be exposed to higher language items such as vocabulary, grammar, Reading and Writing, connecting them to use and usage.

The problem with the second language arises with the sound system of that language. No two languages are identical in their sound systems. Part of the role of the teacher is to help students perceive the right sounds. Learners have a tendency to equate the sounds of the second language to the sounds of their native language. In this context Joanne Ken Worthy observes in his book *Teaching English Pronunciation* suggests that some sounds of English do not occur in other languages. Sometimes learners will be able to imitate the new sound, but if they cannot, then the teacher needs to be able to give some hints which may help them to make the new sound(s)³(Joanne Ken Worthy, 1987).

Often, learners themselves cannot tell if they are pronouncing correctly and they may make inaccurate assumptions about the way English words are pronounced, because there is little coordination between phonology and orthography in English. The role of the English teacher is crucial at this stage. The teacher has to pronounce correctly and the pupils who listen to the teacher and learn the right way of speaking. Many recorded conversations are available if the teacher is not so skilled.

Reading Skill to Become Independent Readers

The next important skill is Reading. Students like play and the pedagogy can make a potential use of play for better results. This type of flair for reading should be cultivated during the college course. So, the textbooks which are prescribed form a base for the future social life of students.

At college level, the students are independent readers. It is essential that during engineering studies, in spite of heterogeneous students across the nation, the primordial purpose of studies is to make them to become independent readers. It is to be developed as a habit and a hobby rather than flogging the students to read. The teachers of the engineering course must prepare the students mentally to listen to the text or read the text. The interaction between the book and the students can be established through glossary and notes, besides other aides to comprehension. The subject English is studied for language and for communication skills. To refine the students' communication, it is natural to introduce group discussions, seminars, literary and quiz competitions. To provide command over the

language, the students must be exposed to vocabulary. With the Explanation Words and Transition Words the students tend to move towards Reading. Advanced and academic reading skills and vocabulary levels, and quizzes with target structures and language functions, give the target students an edge over others. At this point of time, both the intensive and extensive Reading skills should be cultivated. The students should be groomed in intensive reading to impart the skills that are needed to understand and interpret the text. The extensive reading should be regularly practiced. The contents should include simple reading material with gradual increase in difficult level both in vocabulary and structures.

Wilkins was the first linguist who proposed the maximum role to vocabulary either in the spoken or written form of expression. He says “explicitly without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (Lewis, M., 1993).

The hesitation of the students to speak in English or their frequent practice of “floor crossing” which they adopt during conversations in English, prove this statement. If vocabulary is not available to the speaker, it is impossible to convey anything. Stating the importance of vocabulary in general, H.G. Widdowson says: “The more one considers the matter, the more reasonable it seems to suppose that lexis is where we need to start from; the syntax needs to be put to the service of words and not the other way round.”⁵(Lewis, M., 1993)

Both the teachers and students are supposed to understand that reading texts have been arranged to have more “focus” on “learning” than on “teaching.” The teacher is the facilitator, but the student is at the doer of action, the learner of language. If the Reading is gripping, it will herald the effort to read independently. The savoury technique of self-study unfolds the attempt to encourage the student for developing independent Reading Skills.

As Reading is very important for learning English for the Second Language (ESL) students, the competitions conducted in school should reserve a chunk for testing reading abilities of the students. Co-curricular activities through English should be encouraged. These activities help the students to develop both language skills and their own ideas and opinions; this helps them in aptitude tests that are held for jobs later. Suitability of the

competition is graded according to the students' levels. These competitions develop their inherent talents and abilities. The conduct of competitions should take into account the students' abilities, aptitudes and talents so that, they could be nurtured intellectually from a tender age. When competitions are held, Reading Skill must be given considerable priority. When the students study English language in engineering courses, Reading should not intimidate them.

Hence, of all the four skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing - Reading skill must be encouraged in the L2 situation. While Listening and Speaking in English help social interaction, Reading and Writing help the individual to develop the intellectual capabilities as well as to serve the society in a progressive way. Between Reading and Writing Skills, Reading is more pervasive. It enhances imagination, enriches vocabulary and establishes the complex structures of the language in the reader's mind. It leads one to explore the knowledge about the unexplored world. It provides immense pleasure to the reader. Hence, more time should be spent profitably in teaching and testing the Reading abilities of students.

Writing Skill to Become an Independent Writer

A skilled independent reader has the potential to become an independent writer also. Writing is a thinking process, and it is much more than an exercise of transcription or copying. It involves three kinds of abilities.

- a. Penmanship that is the capability to shape the letters of the alphabet properly, also known as graphics;
- b. The ability to keep the letters in the right combination, that is spelling and the final ability; and,
- c. Ability to express himself /herself through the written word coherently.

Budding engineers are professionals and technical people. This need not essentially mean they are good technical writers. Dan Jones, a professor of English at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, offers technical writing workshops to engineering groups. He doesn't believe that technical people are good at technical writing. He believes that "any kind

of writing for that matter comes naturally to anyone,” he says. He also says “Some people are better writers than others, but their skills are typically acquired over a long period of time with much practice and hard work.”⁶

Hence it is pertinent here that the English teachers cannot be lackadaisical in classrooms which are their fertile research fields. They can use different innovative techniques such as Classroom assessment technique, Cooperative learning strategies, Case-study, and Conference style⁷ (Z. N. Patil, 2012) making the nascent engineers promising, potential and professional writers.

In addition to academic responsibility S. Pushpa Latha, English faculty of an engineering college remarks, “Written communication is vital for engineering students, since not only text, but also calculations, plots and figures which are to be communicated in documents such as laboratory reports, progress reports, user manuals, journal articles. **An engineer with well developed written communication skills will be successful in his/her career.**”⁸

Conclusion

Every individual has intelligence and imaginary layouts; but the practicality of bringing out the potential is different and difficult. English Language Skills create a progressive and productive independent thinking of the individual who will contribute to the development of the intellectual and social dimensions of the global community. Language Skills help them develop their aptitudes and attitudes which are needed for success in today’s competitive world to build a humane and just society.

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