

English for Engineering College Students in Tamilnadu

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Abstract

This article discusses in general terms the conditions of teaching and learning English in the engineering colleges of Tamilnadu State, India. A Picture of Diversity in Enrollment is noticed. About one hundred thousand students seem to enroll for their bachelor's degrees in engineering and technology in Tamilnadu. There are more than 500 engineering colleges in the State of Tamilnadu. Students from other Indian states and other nations also seek to study engineering subjects in these Tamilnadu colleges. Most students seem to have difficulty in achieving mastery of English which would help them to do better in their courses and enable them to get jobs. The paper argues in favor of undertaking some collaborative projects by the faculty members of the departments of engineering subjects and the department of English. The teachers of English in engineering colleges need to get oriented toward using and teaching non-literary styles of English. Collaboration between the English faculty and Engineering faculty will be seen readily as mutually beneficial. At the same time, there may be conflicts, misunderstanding, assumptions of superiority, etc. But with suitable team building processes and application of conflict resolution steps, both the faculty members will stand to gain.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, joint projects of English and Engineering Faculty

A Picture of Diversity in Enrollment

About one hundred thousand students seem to enroll for their bachelor's degrees in engineering and technology in Tamilnadu. There are more than 500 engineering colleges in the State of Tamilnadu. Students from other Indian states and other nations also seek to study engineering subjects in these Tamilnadu colleges.

Girls represent a good part of students enrolled in these engineering and technology colleges. Majority of the students seems to come from rural parts of Tamilnadu, although the state is more highly urbanized than most other states in India according to Government of India statistics. Yet, the dominant number of students comes from rural parts and from families not much exposed to collegiate education or to the use of English in and around them.

First Generation Learners

First generation learners represent a significant portion of students enrolled in engineering colleges. Even though the college entrants may have opted English as the medium of instruction in their high school and higher secondary classes, their competence in English even for purposes of classroom instruction and learning is not impressive, to say the least.

Skills of English Language Teachers

But, unfortunately, the English language teachers also lack skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing. The teachers of engineering and science related subjects seem to focus more on the transmission of content than on the skills in English. Analysis of the content and the presentation of the analysis, which would demand some competence in the language of learning and instruction, English, do not seem to be a strong point in their performance.

Engineering Studies through Tamil – Not Yet Popular

Despite incentives offered by the Government of Tamilnadu to study engineering subjects through Tamil medium, student enrollment in this sector is practically negligible. Reasons are many and varied, but our focus in this series of articles is not on the failure to adopt Tamil as the medium, but on the ways to improve performance of both teachers and students in the mastery and use of English to achieve better competence and skills in the engineering subjects.

Teachers of Engineering Subjects and English as a Second or Foreign Language

By “teachers” we mean both teachers of English and teachers of engineering subjects. There needs to be better co-ordination between these two categories, since English is used in

teaching and learning the engineering subjects and in the preparation and presentation of required reports, etc.

Any Co-ordination between Them?

Do we see any co-ordination these days? Was there any co-ordination in the past? For both the questions, we have to answer NO. What kinds of co-ordination we should have, to encourage and develop skills on a daily basis?

Understanding Engineering Subjects by English Language Teachers

English teachers must have some understanding of how engineering subjects are communicated using English. There are nuances specific to English usage here. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tried and try to build a bridge in some manner. However, ESP was not adopted and is somewhat relegated to the background for various reasons, including the reason that models and theories seem to change after a few years.

Focus Has Been on Literary Subjects, Genres, etc.

M.A. and M.Phil. degrees offered by English departments used to have a dominant focus on Commonwealth Literature, African and African American Literature, American Literature, Diaspora Literature, Indian Writing in English, etc. The graduates of these departments usually do not have much focus on or formal understanding of teaching English in India, teaching English in Tamilnadu. Thus their preparation in their Masters level does not fully meet the requirements needed to teach English as a second or foreign language in the engineering colleges.

Urgent Need to Bridge the Hiatus

This hiatus must be bridged as quickly as possible and for this, suitable refresher training must be conducted periodically. Are there experienced teachers of engineering and technology subjects included in the list of experts who would prepare, revise and modify syllabus suitably for the courses in English for engineering students? The syllabus needs updating with some participation of teachers of engineering subjects.

Need for Interdepartmental Committees of Consultants

Every engineering college must have an interdepartmental committee of consultants who would jointly undertake projects to identify the entry level skills of their students in English.

Joint Projects

Secondly, it will be very useful if an engineering subject faculty could list the fundamental and most frequently used terms in that subject for the particular year and make the list available to the English language faculty members. Spelling and pronunciation may be clearly specified.

Even though most terms may be nouns, there are also verbs, adverbs, adjectives, abstract nouns along with prepositions, etc. Identification of these for every subject will give us a comprehensive list of terms that the students of a particular year need to recognize, understand and use appropriately.

Identification of types of sentences actually used in engineering textbooks and used frequently in lab work should also be undertaken.

English Language Teachers will Learn and Benefit

Engineering faculty members and the English language faculty members should join hands and accomplish such projects. In this process, English language faculty members will get acquainted with the complexity of language use in engineering subject and will work on strategies to teach the terms and help students to use them appropriately.

Spelling and grammatical categories are very important here.

Sentence Types

Even though we all assume that science uses only or mostly passive sentences, the reality of the matter is that when comprehension and clarity are sought after, simple constructions are frequently used. Personal angles are avoided, no doubt. The place for emotion and attitude is rather very narrow and limited.

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In subsequent articles, we plan to deal with specifics of grammar, style, spelling, lexical choice, style sheet, writing research reports, and so on.

Collaboration Is Mutually Beneficial

Once again collaboration between the English faculty and Engineering faculty will be seen readily as mutually beneficial. At the same time, there may be conflicts, misunderstanding, assumptions of superiority, etc. But with suitable team building processes and application of conflict resolution steps, both the faculty members will stand to gain.

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