

Enhancing Skills and Employability through Soft-Skills – An ELT Approach

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Abstract

The paradigmatic change in the modern education system has witnessed the pressing need for skill-base education to suit the 21st century's demand. It has been measured that English is more, than just a language, for higher education, employment and social mobility. It is here, to adapt with the critical demand of the modern education, inculcating and revamping the needs of current employment and suiting best with the global scenario of migration for better prospects, a need of soft-skills came into existence.

The new approach in ELT observed congruence of English communication skills with Soft-skills to make a practically holistic study. It has been noted that the youth, today getting built up under the hood of higher education system, are going to face a world of tremendous opportunities with an economy driven by innovation and knowledge and be a part in the employment scenario of intense competition and constant renewal. It is thus, Soft-skills proves to be a fundamental need of actualizing the modern demand and challenges. The current paper glances at the present employment scenario, essential role of Soft-skills and implications of the same. It gives a comprehensive scenario of present possible framework in the context of English Language Teaching.

Introduction

The core principle of humanistic education is that “*there is only one subject-matter for education, and that is life in all its manifestations*” (Whitehead, 1929).

The 21st century dawned with globalization and digitization which has reshaped the communication landscape, and deeply altered the terrain of language and literacy education. The abilities individuals should have for self-actualization, career, citizenship, and life in the 21st century are different from those needed in the 20th century. Thus, 21st century demands the explicit integration of learning strategies, digital competences and career abilities along with efficient communication.

Students in the 21st century will likely have several careers in their lifetime. The youth today, getting built up under the hood of Higher Education system, are going to face a world of tremendous opportunities with an economy driven by innovation and knowledge and be a part in the employment scenario of intense competition and constant renewal.

Thomas Friedman stated ‘geography is history’. In most economies today, work culture almost seamlessly flows across geographies. In today’s world, where the students would be competing for job positions with a global workforce, it would be their English language proficiency that would be tested to the maximum, as English is the most widely spoken language and has rightly been considered as a lingua franca. Along with it, a competent display of soft skills shall be an added flavour to the blend of personality expected to work efficiently in the global market. As stated by Schulz (2008) ‘*having the minimum requirements of the language is not enough anymore. One must seek for self development in a world of challenges.*’

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Post liberalization, privatization and globalization has made India one of the favoured destinations of some of the world’s largest corporations and multi-nationals providing wide scope of employment opportunities to the Indian youth. Skilled youth for Indian economy is not only required for rendering the education system accountable but also making it relevant to the operations of the country’s economy and its sustainability in the world at large.

Present employment scenario in context of English communicative competency and Soft skills

English is widely perceived in India as a valuable communicative and employability skill. Yet, the result of a global survey undertaken by EF Education First, suggests that out of a total of 54 countries that were surveyed, India ranked 14th under the English proficiency index with a third category level of “*moderate proficiency*” with countries above exhibiting “high” and “very high proficiency” levels.

David Graddol (2010) in his book ‘*English Next India*’ argues that India has to keep pace with global development of English or it may lose its edge over other developing countries.

A ‘*Times of India*’ report dated 15 July 2014, states that less than one out of four engineering graduates are employable. Of the 1.2 lakh candidates surveyed across multiple states, 71.23% lack soft and cognitive skills and 73.63% lack English speaking and comprehension skills. The National Employability Report, Engineering Graduates- 2014 revealed that only 18.33% of the engineers are employable and only 18.09% actually get a job. (*Times of India, 15 July, 2014*).

Thus in the present day, there is a titanic mass of competent job seekers existing in the social order and the competition surrounded by them for job procurement and job maintainability is becoming hard-hitting. Irrespective of the professional qualification and apart from the domain knowledge, today's professionals need to possess a high soft skills quotient in order to succeed in this competitive era. *Hard skills contribute to only 15% of one's success while remaining 85% is made by soft skills* (Watts M and Watts R. K, 2008).

The effectiveness and growth of India's talent pool have been seriously constrained due to a deepening 21st century based soft skills crisis and English communicative competency. Hence we have a scenario of classic contradiction-on the one hand, employers are on the constant lookout for skilled manpower, and on the other hand, the youth fail to get a job and remain unemployed despite the degrees and qualification.

These reports are an alarm for the teaching fraternities, curriculum framers and higher education system at large for awakening towards the rudimentary needs of the present youth and demands of the society i.e. the effective English communicative competency and versatile 21st century core set of soft skills. The Higher education system need to ensure that the youth are suitably and sustainably employed after they spend substantial amount of time and money on obtaining a higher education degree.

Soft Skills –importance and necessity (a vital key to employment)

Soft skills is a term often associated with a person's "EQ" (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, interpersonal skills, managing people, leadership, etc. that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills contrast to hard skills, which are generally easily quantifiable and measurable (Wikipedia). Soft skills can be considered as intra-and-inter-personal socio-emotional skills, essential for personal development, social participation and workplace success.

As stated by Ramesh Gopalswamy and Ramesh Mahadevan(2010) '*Soft skills' is an abstract concept, which is, in fact, a compendium of several components like attitude, abilities, habits and practices that are combined adeptly to maximize one's work effectiveness. Therefore, soft skills are built on attitudes, and are manifested as etiquette and polished by communication.*

A number of related terms such as applied skills, cross-curricular skills, cross-disciplinary skills, interdisciplinary skills, transferable skills, transversal skills and non cognitive skills among others are also widely used in reference to the general forms of knowledge and skill commonly associated with soft skills.

Thus Soft-skills are set of skills which the youth of today needs to acquaint and develop for a successful entry and existence in the global workforce.

Importance of Soft skills: International perspective

The Current conceptual frameworks for “21st Century Skills” include the ACTS (2009) by Melbourne University, the ISTE framework by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2007), the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2006), Seven C’s framework (2006), and the En Gauge framework from Metiri /NCREL (2003). The core soft skills elements of 21st century skills, which are defined based on the current conceptual framework are critical thinking, communication, problem solving and collaboration. These frameworks are developed for students, who will become part of global workforce in the 21st century, and who need to be taught different skills than those learned by students in the 20th century, and that the skills they learn should reflect the specific demands that will be placed upon them in a complex, competitive, knowledge-based, information-age, technology-driven economy and society.

In ‘*Are They Really Ready to Work*’ (2006) Employers’ Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce, have indicated the four most important foundation skills needed by employees are: Professionalism/Work Ethic, Oral and Written Communication, Team Work/Collaboration, Critical Thinking/Problem Solving.

The Conference Board of Canada, American Society for Training and Development, United States Office of Educational Research and Improvement have emphasized on the importance of teaching soft skills and hard skills in workplaces which is evident in the European society's criteria of employment (Leroux & Lafleur, 1995). Moreover, they have classified The Employability Skills Profile into three divisions:

1. Skills that are needed in academic context such as communication, presentations, critical thinking, problem solving skills... etc.
2. Personal Management skills such as taking personal actions, setting goals, positive attitudes and self-esteem.
3. Team Work Skills including group work, give and take, respect of others and leadership qualities

The British Association of Graduate Recruiters, which recently reported that “*Employers say many graduates lack ‘soft skills’, although candidates are normally academically proficient but lacking in soft skills such as communication as well as verbal and numerical reasoning.*”

Assessment and Teaching of 21st Century Skills (ATCS) was developed by the University of Melbourne and sponsored by Cisco, Intel and Microsoft in 2009. This project aims to provide definitions of 21st century skills and design innovative assessment tasks that can be used in the classroom.

Importance of Soft skills: National perspective

The FICCI Higher Education Committee has endeavored to create the 'Vision 2030' for Higher Education in India. The Vision is aspirational and futuristic, looking at India as a globally dominant economy, with a high quality higher education sector that leads and fulfills the needs of society. The economic imperatives states to develop a skilled, job ready and productive workforce by imparting technical and soft skills training. The curricula is envisioned to have pedagogy that focuses on developing critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills, while emphasizing student learning outcome through pedagogical techniques such as blended learning, flipped classroom, experiential learning.

According to a recent study by the HRD, 60% percent of our population will be at working age by 2020 whereas that of China, Japan, EU, and the USA will be around 40%. The Indian government wishes to ensure good dosage of hard skills and soft skills so that the Indian human resource power can take control of the world. But a large number of these young professionals are not adequately equipped to face the highly competitive and very demanding corporate world. (From the foreword to the book 'The ACE of Soft Skills' written by Gopalaswamy Ramesh and Mahadevan Ramesh and published by Pearson group.)

An important note in this context is an initiative to this effect that was already taken up by the Infosys (Campus Connect Programme), Wipro (Mission 10 X), CISCO (CCNA), HCL (CDC). Even various state governments have taken up these kinds of projects. Universities like Anna University, Gitam, JNTUH, JNTUK have made soft skills as a part of the curriculum.

'Soft Skills India' has been set up to meet the growing needs for soft skills among employees at the entry level and at supervisory and managerial levels in the corporate sector. It provides customized needs assessment and training services in the areas of soft skills and English language skills to corporate India.

Society for Creation of Opportunity through Proficiency in English (SCOPE) (*A Govt. of Gujarat initiative*) envisions building English language proficiency among the youth of Gujarat and thereby provides employment opportunities for them. SCOPE, being a language flagship body of government focusing only on English language skill and development, has already tied up with University of Cambridge, UK for providing international certificate to its students.

The changing role of English language teaching and learning in Higher education in the present scenario

Alexander V. Sandoval states in his essay, '*The Importance of English*', "*English is becoming the world's language of the 21st century. Most of the world's population, about 70% speak*

English or know it. And more than 80% of all stored information in the world is written in English or translated into it.” English Communication skills in the 21st century include active listening, use of academic or formal language, nonverbal communication, effective writing, speech delivery, argumentation, debate, discussion and more. Communication is instantaneous. As technology facilitates global communication that is fast and convenient, English learners will need to be able to skill fully communicate in what is rapidly becoming the international language of business. English communication skill is essential in multiple professional careers and is an accountable factor for upward mobility too.

“ELT has the potentiality to be applied to other domains of knowledge” (Pishghadam, 2011). The present scenario of unprecedented development expects the arena of ELT to expand and no longer confine itself to only developing learners’ language literacy, knowledge and skills; rather, it should also take responsibility for advancing learners’ whole person development i.e. incorporating soft skills.

ELT plays a very crucial role as an enabler in increasing the employability value of individuals. Dr. Goeran Nieragden states *“We (English teachers) should try to do our best in achieving the two fold targets of enablement and empowerment successfully that are vital in view of ever changing face of English, to enhance our student’s linguistic competence and to prepare them to handle the extra linguistic demands-via soft skills.”*

Today’s English language teachers should worthily accept the changing and flexible nature of literacy’s and need to attempt to reduce the yawning gap between global skill requirements and the present inadequate skill levels of students so as to enhance their English language competencies along with soft skills.

Incorporating Soft skills through ELT – suggestive methods and approaches.

In the age of globalization, just as effective and efficient communication in English has become a proficient need of the hour, so has the display of versatile soft skills gained paramount importance. One of the ways to meet the arising new demands and expectations from the graduating students, is the explicit and integrated orchestrating of English Language teaching [ELT] with what experts have called the soft skills

As stated by (Taylor, 2009), *the ELT classroom needs to move away from traditional methods focused on language mastery in order to start incorporating new approaches aiming to integrate content, culture, technology and lifelong skills.* In the present scenario, teaching English in isolation disintegrates language from other aspects of human development while an integrated English language teaching process shall aim to keep these components of

development together helping the learner to be proficient in the usage of English language along with congruent acquisition of soft skills.

Teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) has been called as a tapestry by Oxford (2001). If the English language teacher weaves this tapestry skilfully by using integrated-skill approach it can lead to an optimal output of the entire teaching learning process through manifold development in English communication and soft skills.

The terrain of English Language Teaching (ELT) can be substantially enlarged to incorporate the focused set of soft-skills. A few suggestive ways of incorporating soft skills through English language teaching are enlisted here:

- Creating awareness about the significance of Soft-skills and English communicative competency among undergraduate / postgraduate learners through class discussion, role-play, pair-work, interactive activities, seminars, workshops.
- Enlisting and scrutinizing the various selection procedures adopted by the recruiters, and preparing learners with the set of soft skills and communicative efficiency to face modern challenges of facing interviews.
- ELT and soft skills can be integrated to all elements of teaching through 5 M's: Materials, Methods, Media, Measures, and Management.
- The most widely used learning theories in competency education i.e. Experiential Education Theory and Social Cognitive Theory can be adopted and implemented effectively.
- Soft skills elements can be integrated in the English Language Teaching (ELT) based lesson plans, instructional materials, instructional activities, and the assessment of the students' achievement.
- The methods of teaching English along with soft skills can comprise lectures, projects, role-plays, quizzes, and a number of other participatory sessions.
- Student-centered classroom, learning by doing, experiential and highly interactive sessions can make English language and soft skills acquisition in a blended and elusive way of learning.
- Contextualized tasks and systematic instruction shall provide skills-related learning experience and provide a holistic coverage of effective English communication with embellished Soft -skills.
- Simultaneous assessment of English language communicative competency and set of soft skills can be carried out.

ELT can be a substantial platform to bridge the latent lacuna of lack of initiative for cultivating soft skills in colleges and paucity of information on the utility and adaptability of such skills in the global market by providing skill-base-developmental-program among

college goers. It will facilitate them with the skill-base-training and able them to cope-up with the modern challenges of employability.

Conclusion

Education is not solely about academics. It is the responsibility of all colleges and universities to prepare the budding young graduates to meet global demands by upgrading the curriculum and developing courses of study. It is important to lend emphasis and focus on overall development of students and their comprehensive educational needs, now and in the future. The aspirations and expectations of the youth, and the current challenge to excel as global citizens can be worthily addressed through embedding the two focused criteria of success i.e. English Language Communication and Soft-skills.

The integrated knowledge of soft skills through English language learning shall result in a variety of character traits that help students transfer academic learning into a life time of changing careers, professions, avocations, academic service to others and civic engagements. The push to prioritize soft skills integration with ELT is typically motivated by the belief that all students should be equipped with the knowledge, skills, work habits, and character traits they will need to pursue continued education and challenging careers after graduation, and that a failure to adequately preparing students effectively denies them opportunities, with potentially significant consequences for our economy, democracy, and society.

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