New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory

(Online ISSN 2347-2073) UGC Journal No. 44829 Special Issue Feb. 2019

DEFICIENCY IN ENGLISH COMMUNICATION SKILL REQUIREMENTS AMONG FRESH ENGINEERING GRADUATES FOR EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT

It has now been widely reported and accepted that there is a wide and expanding gulf between the communication skills expected by the industry from fresh engineering graduates and the communication skills possessed by them. In the era of a flat world where boundaries between nations have melted away to form a globalized environment, English language communication is one of the most important, if not the most significant skill expected of a graduate engineer. It appears that there is a serious dearth of English language communication skills among the fresh graduates and this opinion seems to be accepted overwhelmingly by the industry. Though the right beginning was made in Tamil Nadu by Anna University in the early 90s by re-aligning the curriculum from text-book and grammar oriented towards student centric, it appears that the gaps are now yawning than bridging. In this context, this study attempts to review the gap between the communication skills possessed by the fresh graduates and the requirements of the industry by observation technique and extensive review of literature.

1. Introduction

English communication skill is considered to be one of the most important skill requirements in employability for engineering graduates in our country. Blom and Saeki (2011) in their research study conducted under the aegis of the World Bank observed that one of the most demanded skills by the employers is communication skill.

It appears that engineering students undergoing graduation programs are not sufficiently equipped with the communication skills required to meet the challenges of the job they are going to be placed in and this is the observation of the majority of employers.

Communication skills are called the "life blood" of an organization (Stoner and Freeman 1989). Proper communication skills need to be possessed by the managers and supervisors to effectively communicate with their employees and subsequently carry out day to day functions of an organization. These include dealing with subordinates, peers, customers, suppliers etc. Ramani (2006) has stated that any communication has to be received, understood, accepted and responded appropriately. The author has also stated that the ABC of a communication event has to have accuracy, brevity, and clarity.

2. Objectives

In the present paper an attempt has been made to-

(I) Review the gap between communication skills possessed by the fresh engineering graduate and the requirements of employers.

(II) Review the mode for improving communication skill training in students of undergraduate engineering courses.

3. Procedure

The present paper used the observation technique along with extensive review of literature. The investigation interacted with a few employers (N =6) and medium scale industries and interacted with members of the HR Managing teams who monitor the training of the engineering graduates in the industry at the time of their recruitment and induction.

Review of literature was conducted in two phases. The first phase of review was to identify the gaps and second phase of the review was related to the mode for improving communication skill training in engineering colleges.

3.1 Review of literature related to gaps.

The latter half of the 90s witnessed a paradigm shift in technical education in India. Liberalization of engineering education policy by the government saw an exponential rise in

the number of engineering colleges in India. There was also an insatiable demand for engineers with the expanding demand in the services sector. Large numbers of engineers passing out of these engineering colleges were lapped up by the industry. However, the bliss was short-lived. Soon, money-bags of all hues-politicians, real estate sharks, myopic caste leaders et al jumped on to the bandwagon. Tamil Nadu was not insulated to this metamorphosis. The land which was witness to the first ever Engineering Institute in India- the Survey School established in Fort St George in the year 1774, became the epicenter of engineering education in India. There was proliferation of private engineering colleges in the state, beginning from Chennai and soon spreading to the hinterland. This explosion came with a cost. Quality was sacrificed at the altar of quantity. Demand for teachers far surpassed supply, thus leading to poor quality of teachers. Admissions into engineering colleges which were at a premium, soon went abegging. This uncontrolled explosion led to absence of competent teachers and intake of underprepared students in engineering colleges. Prof. Dr. E. Balaguruswamy, former Vice Chancellor of Anna University and former Member of Union Public Services Commission quipped pitifully "Tamil Nadu is gone. The situation in the State is so bad that it can be written off. The government should wake up, compile data and close down colleges whose admission rate is less than 10 per cent in the last 10 years." "How can bad quality students, bad quality teachers and bad institutions produce students of employable status?", said Prof Balaguruswamy under the aegis of ICTACT Bridge an event for employability skills conducted by the ICT Academy of Tamil Nadu in association with NASSCOM in Madurai on October, 2011. After the third round of Tamil Nadu Engineering Admissions (TNEA) counselling for the year 2018, 214 self-financing engineering colleges, which accounts for 40% of the total number of colleges in Tamil Nadu, have filled less than ten seats each, while 71 have not filled a single seat!

This brings us to the crux of the issue- what is ailing engineering education in Tamil Nadu? It need not be overemphasized now that a large percentage of engineering graduates are unemployable and the foremost reason for this appears to be the lack of effective communication skills. **Aspiring Minds**, an employability solutions company based in Gurugram conducted a pan-India study in the year 2014 and then again in 2016. The *National Employability Report* submitted by them in the year 2016 paints a rather gloomy picture of the future of Indian Engineering graduates. It was found that in 2014, only 18.43% of engineers were employable for the software services sector, 3.21% for software products and 39.84% for non-functional roles such as Business Process Outsourcing. Unfortunately, no substantial progress is witnessed in these numbers in the two years and change, if any, is only marginal.

These numbers in 2016 stood at: 17.91%, 3.67% and 40.57% for IT Services, IT Products and Business Process Outsourcing respectively. The survey was based on a sample from 1,50,000 engineering students from more than 650 colleges spread all over India. The participants in the survey had all graduated in the year 2015. But the most alarming aspect which this survey revealed is that students from Chennai had the least mean scores. In the SVAR test, an automated language assessment test, conducted by this organization around 30,000 students all over India participated and in this, around 35% of the participants from Chennai performed very poorly and 59% could only speak very basic English. It is reported that there is a "Yawning skill gap" among fresh graduates in India. Only 10% of MBA graduates and a mere 7% of Engineering graduates in India are employable says Wheebox an online talent assessment company in its India Skills Report, 2014 (The Hindu, January 21, 2015). In another article titled "Winning English" in The Hindu, the scantiness of English language communication skills is pointed out. The worst part of this poor communication skills comes out in mails where these recruits often use common colloquial conversation language, states one senior HR Official. It also reports the plight of a student who had an 8.7 GPA admitting that he is unable to find a job due to poor English. (The Hindu, July 30, 2012). In one of the worst manifestations of this malady, a 19-year-old engineering student of Anna University hailing from a very poor family could not cope with the pressure of college mainly due to her inability to comprehend and communicate in English. (The Hindu, April 18, 2012). Subsequent reports in various newspapers described the plight of engineering students in Tamil Nadu, 70% of whom hail from rural backgrounds as dismal and for them, even core subjects appear to be "Greek". (The Hindu, September 10, 2012). The story in endless.

Tamil Nadu has been a pioneer in technical education in India. Like elsewhere in India, Tamil Nadu witnessed a mushrooming of engineering colleges in the 90s and early 2000s. There are about 580 Engineering Colleges in the state of Tamil Nadu awarding Engineering degrees. Seven of these are Government/aided colleges, 20 of them are autonomous colleges and the rest are self-financing. These colleges are affiliated to Anna University while there are a number of colleges which are self-financing (deemed university). The colleges affiliated to Anna University follow the syllabus prescribed by the university and the self-financing colleges (deemed universities) have their own syllabus. It is presumed on the basis of reports that the inadequacy is more pronounced among the graduates from the colleges affiliated to Anna University and hence this study focusses principally around these colleges.

The structure of education in Tamil Nadu is in line with the national level pattern with 12 years of schooling consisting of 8 years of elementary education, which again comprises of 5 years of primary and 3 years of middle school education, followed by secondary and higher secondary education of 2 years each. Recently, two years of pre-primary education too has been included. The Tamil Nadu State Board of School Examinations evaluates students' progress by conducting 3 board examinations – one at the end of Class 10, another at the end of Class 11 and another at the end of Class 12. The scores achieved by students in the Class 12 examination (combined with Class 11 scores) become the yardstick for admissions into universities and professional colleges. While Government schools have Tamil as the medium of instruction, in most private schools, the medium of instruction is English. Besides, there are quite a few Kendriya Vidyalayas and private schools, particularly in urban areas, which are affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Examination (CBSE) where the medium of instruction is English. Additionally, there are a small number of schools, mainly in the cities which are affiliated to the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) where the medium of instruction is English.

In Tamil Nadu, English language teaching is introduced in Class 2 and continues as a second language up to the Higher Secondary level. The teachers, who do not have any exposure to ELT techniques, teach by translating the texts, grammar and students learn by mere rote learning. The assessment system too is framed in a manner that facilitates rote learning. This method which is referred to as the Grammar Translation Method or the Classical Method appears to be the principal reason for weak foundations in communicative ability in English language among students.

However, certain very promising developments have been taking place towards improving English language communicative ability among school students in Tamil Nadu. Under the aegis of *sarva shikshya abhiyan (SSA)*, the Government of Tamil Nadu, in collaboration with the British Council, India identified areas in which primary school teachers could improve the effectiveness of their English classes leading to higher levels of English proficiency among students. To begin with 60,000 English teachers of Class 5 underwent a Teacher Development Program across the state. The areas of focus of this program were to "(i) give teachers greater confidence to speak English in the classroom in order to maximize learners' exposure to English ; (ii) make children more active in the classroom, with teachers using their existing textbooks in more student-centered ways: (iii) empower teachers to teach their syllabus using activities and interactive games, with a focus on speaking skills; and (iv) encourage teachers to

consider their professional development by informing them of existing professional communities." After training the Class 5 English teachers, the focus has now moved further to cover teachers from Class VI to VIII. The outcome of these programs on improvement in students' English language communicative ability are yet to assessed, but would definitely in the long run create students with better preparedness when they join graduation schools/colleges.

Numbers of studies were conducted by scholars in the area of assessing the 'wants' and 'gaps' in English Communication abilities. Remedial measures too were suggested. Ryan (2011) in his study 'English Engineering: A critical evaluation' acknowledges the fact that there is a gap between the needs of the learners, industry demands and the technical English course being taught at the colleges affiliated to Anna University in Tamil Nadu. He observes that most students lack the skill-set which the recruiters seek and there is a wide gap between the students' final scores in English and their proficiency in the language. He also feels that the engineering English course does neither meet the present needs nor does it cater to the future needs of the students and one of the reasons, he believes, is that most teachers in these colleges are from Literature background and have very little exposure to linguistics and ESP.

In her study conducted in Orissa, titled "A need-based Approach to Teaching and Learning of English for Engineering Purposes" Priya.S (2012), feels that the students who enroll for engineering courses are from different educational backgrounds and language acquisition problem is very common among the students who did their schooling in the vernacular medium which becomes an impediment in understanding the concepts during class and later causes these students to be inadequately prepared to face job interviews. She feels that there is a casual approach towards English in engineering colleges and is studied with the sole objective of passing the end-semester examination.

Dhanavel.S.P (2012) opines that the developments in Anna University in the early 90s where the focus was shifted towards student-centric curriculum promised a bright future for engineering students. It brought in a radical change and texts with explicit focus on grammar and end of the lesson essay type questions were done away with. Despite this change bringing about limited success at the initial stage, soon the gaps appeared and industry started voicing their demands for equipped graduates. One of the primary reasons he attributes to this erosion is the increasing size of the classrooms where the teachers are unable to cater to the individual students of the class who are from a widely heterogenous background.

3.2 Review related to mode of improvement

Mackey and Mount ford (1978:28) feel that needs of the learners could be broadly categorized into academic needs and job needs- the former required at the time of learning like writing journal articles and making presentations and the latter when the learner is on job. Hence, these needs are not constant but dynamic, varying among various stages in the life of the student.

Given that there is a paradigm shift in the approach to designing syllabus from the teacher's perspective to the students' perspective and making it more learner – centric, it becomes essential to assess the needs of the students and also the needs of the industry. Need analysis is pivotal in designing any language course, irrespective of the purpose. Need, put it simply, is the gap between "what is" and "what should be" (Witkin et al., 1995).

Though the majority of the scholars would argue to state that the purpose defines the methodology and, in that respect, English for specific purpose (ESP) or English for Technology (EST) varies widely with general English requiring a very different approach towards the course design. However, the difference exists in only the focus and specialization and teaching ESP is not very dissimilar to teaching general English. This view has been echoed by many scholars (Hutchinson and waters (1987)), Crocker (1981) etc.,)

As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) remarks, "Given that the purpose of an ESP course is to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation, that is, the situation in which learners will use the language they are learning, then the ESP course design process should proceed by first identifying the target situation and then carrying out a rigorous analysis of the linguistic features of that situation. The identified features will form the syllabus of the ESP course".

The first step in this process is the awareness of the 'needs' by the learners and also their realization of the 'lack' of it. In most situations, students are exposed to English language communication at the very beginning of their graduation course and it should be rightly so. But, at this juncture, the students may not be able to make a correct assessment of the 'wants' due to lack of exposure to the target situation where the knowledge of language would be required. They may be required to make presentations of papers in international journals during their final semester. The students, in the first year, may not be aware of the level of proficiency that may be required later. Similarly, they may not also have the desired understanding of the skills required in facing a job interview at the beginning of the course. As Hutchinson and

Waters (1987) says “learners may well have a clear idea of the ‘necessities’ of the target situation: they will certainly have a view as to their ‘lacks’. But it is quite possible that the learner’s view will conflict with the perception of other interested parties: course designers, sponsors, teachers…” (pp.56). Hence, in this ESP situation, it is essential that opinion and inputs from all actors in the target situation are obtained and analyzed.

4. Why is the language needed?

In the words Hutchinson and Waters (1987), “it is obviously necessary to obtain answers from variety of sources, and then try to negotiate (delicately) a satisfactory compromise.”

Ryan (2011) suggests that there is a requirement for a paradigm shift in the approach towards technical English course and training pedagogy. He recommends that the engineering English course could be aimed at the target situation and all stake holders- students, teachers and prospective employers should be involved in the design of the course. He also suggests realigning the testing methods besides involving latest technological aids in inculcating speaking ability among the students.

Vijay.V (2014) feels that there are serious flaws in the syllabus as well as the testing process of the students. Majority of students in the class are who have all the while studied in the Tamil medium and engineering colleges are their first exposure to serious English. They remain in awe and require constant attention from the teachers which may be found wanting at times due to the large size of the class and its heterogeneity. Students themselves pay scant attention to English language skills and prepare/study only as much is required to fill in pages and obtain pass marks. Even the university administrators indirectly admit that English is a subject which does not require serious study. English examinations are kept at the end of the examination time-table with only a day’s gap in between.

Clement.A & Murugavel.T (2015) opine that one of the principal reasons for lack of English communication skills among fresh graduates is the lack of qualified teachers in engineering colleges. The teachers are post-graduates and PhD too but only few have exposure to ELT. This, combined with the pressure of large classrooms, urgency to complete the syllabus and the pressure to ensure better scores, do not leave room for any creativity for the teachers. English teachers need to be trained extensively on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

5. Industry Perspective

"The ability to communicate in English is very essential in my organization as my clients are from various parts of the country, up-north to deep down south and from the far east to the distant west. Interactions with these clients need to be carried out on a daily basis as issues and problems need to be addressed on the spot. It is a herculean task to train engineering graduates who are recruited and often long duration training sessions have to be organised for these employees" says Mr.Sandeep Mohanty, MD of M/s.Clubman Hospitality Services, a medium level entrepreneur engaged in offering customised software solutions to social clubs all over India. He says that being a small company, he is unable to tap talent from elite engineering colleges and depends more on graduates from Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities. He feels that though these graduates are reasonably competent in their core skills, they are found to be very poor in soft skills particularly English language communication resulting in long incubation periods before they are fully integrated into the system.

Mr.Gopinath who heads a leading garment manufacturing and export unit and also a Special Economic Zone Unit who has clients all over the country and abroad which includes leading fashion brands of the world, recruits Engineers from mainly Textile Engineering. They also recruit graduates from fashion schools like NIFT. He observes that compared to the graduates from the fashion industry, engineering graduates lack communication skills, particularly in oral communication and writing. The mails drafted by these engineering graduates are not just grammatically incorrect but also overloaded with colloquial expressions which could sometimes become offensive to international clients. He feels that today's need is not merely to communicate but communicate keeping in mind the sensitivity of the person at the other end. In order to achieve this, the sender has to be aware of the culture and ethos of the country. All these could be imbibed with extensive reading which the engineering graduates seldom indulge in.

In recent times, more than 70% per centage of Managerial level posts in the Central Government Service are occupied by engineering graduates. This phenomenon is observed in the past one decade. In the government service, one of the most essential prerequisites is ability to write coherently and communicate appropriately. While general level of communicative ability has waned over the years, this is more pronounced in the case of engineering graduates. Mr.D.Srinivas, Assistant Commissioner in the Customs department who is in-charge of training fresh recruits also laments at the poor ethos and empathy with these freshers. He opines

that as majority of the lessons during their graduation days are technical, English course should be the medium of conveying essential lessons of ethos, empathy and goodwill. Text books should necessarily include short essays and stories which could have a lasting impact on the graduates, he opines.

6. Conclusions

It needs to be acknowledged that there is a serious and pronounced inadequacy in English language communication skills among graduate engineers. Admittedly, the foundations are weak and it is not an easy task to help these students master the traits of effective communication in a short span of time. However, efforts are being made by various governments including Tamil Nadu to overcome these deficiencies in the schooling years. But much needs to be done in colleges. Right from the content of the text to its delivery mechanism to testing procedures, all require a re-look. Administrators may be required to invest more in the appropriate training of English teachers and also ensure that classroom sizes are kept as small as possible. Use of latest technological aids and innovative methods like peer teaching etc, would go a long way in improving the communication skills of engineering graduates.

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