

Advanced Techniques to develop Communicative Competence of Undergraduate Engineering Students

Ravi Haridas Paikrao
Ph. D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Shivaji University, Kolhapur

Abstract

Today the professionals need to have better communicative competence. Apart from technical skills, communicative skills also carry an equal weightage. In the present scenario, Graduates compete for job positions with a global workforce, it is their English language proficiency that would be tested to the maximum, as English is the most widely spoken language. Thus, Engineers need to communicate with their counterparts across the globe, work in different countries, and with people from diverse backgrounds. Language learning is skill based learning and technical institutions need to train their students in developing LSRW skills so as to build up their career in this corporate world. However, English is approached casually in most of the Engineering Faculty and therefore, the course is yet to achieve the targeted goals of developing communicative competence among its students. The paper aims to focus on the factors that block the hidden skills of the students to be explored, subsequent remedies, and to the end suggests the advanced techniques to accelerate the communicative competence of undergraduate Engineering students.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Skills, Language Proficiency, Lingua Franca, Employability, Curriculum, Resources, Heterogeneity, Evaluation System, Techniques, and Globalization.

Introduction

Engineering education requires a practical approach along with theory and facts. Thousands of students pursue engineering degrees every year. As engineering courses are offered in English by most of the Engineering Institutes, students acquire knowledge through the English language. So, learning English is an inescapable task for the students. Apart from this, English has become Lingua Franca so it is very crucial to learn English for communicating with the outer body and inner body of the country. NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Services Company) finds that only 25% of the total Engineering workforce is found equipped with employability and other skills. The skill gap is both in terms of English language skill acquisition and employability skills (Hema N, 2015). A demand for quality Engineers is expected in the world of globalization. Quality refers to very good knowledge of English and very good communication skills. However, it's our subjective observation that the knowledge of English of Engineering Students is sufficiently good, but they seriously lack behind in their English communication. Students have to develop proficiency in English and life skills to meet the global demands of seeking employment in

multinational companies. So, there is a need for competent and trained teachers, defined curriculum/ syllabus, right approach for teaching- learning process, availability of teaching-resources, and proper evaluation system are major factors that contribute to bring the best results.

English Language Teaching

The teaching of English in India has a many-sided problem which needs to be analyzed thoroughly. The problems with their remedies will find place in detail in the following lines of the study:

1) Lack of Clear-Cut Aims for English Language Teaching

The primary aim of teaching English at this stage should be to concentrate on the fundamental skills of the language ability namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Most importantly, the teacher must be aware about the needs and wants of the students at the technical institutes. There is a dire need for a greater attention to the functional aspect of language, language which is related to the day-to-day needs of the learners, and not a language which was being used in some bygone age. Today, what the learners of English need most is to learn a language which enables them to cope with the real-life situations around them, where they can communicate with ease and confidence. It is of paramount importance that the teacher should know what his task is and what he is trying to achieve by teaching English. Even if they do have the syllabus in front of them, they have no idea about how to give it the practical form in their classrooms. It is for the teacher to decide how and when to teach a particular teaching item. Their entire focus is to cover the whole course in the given short period without having the slightest idea of its aims and objectives. Our aim of teaching English at the Engineering Institutes should be to make the students communicatively competent in the English language so that they may be able to use this language proficiently in their professional and social lives. At the same time, the students should also be able to read and understand books, journals and reference materials in English.

2) Dearth of Competent and Trained Teachers

We, teachers, should realize that a lot of responsibility rests on our shoulders. T. P. Reddi in his presidential Address said in October 1977,

“We, the teachers of English, are keenly alive to the responsibility that rests on us. We have to see that English is taught at all levels and taught well and its standards are properly maintained”.

Most of the teachers have done their Masters in English literature and have no idea about the English language teaching strategies and methodologies. Moreover, they do not keep themselves abreast with the recent developments in the field of linguistics and theories of learning and teaching, without which they cannot teach their students effectively. Dhamija in her thesis mentions that most of the teachers get in these jobs on the strength of their academic degrees. Only 4% of the teachers have actually attended any orientation programs or workshops on ELT (Dhamija, 1993). This goes to show the paucity of teacher training programs leading to the lack of interest in implementing changes in language teaching methodology and pedagogy. Though, changes are being made in the curriculum but the teachers have a resistive attitude towards these changes. These can only be overcome by conducting short-term as well as long-term orientation programs, seminars and workshops for the teachers informing and training them about the latest and upcoming trends and methodologies in ELT.

3) Undefined Curriculum

What we have right now is an undefined curriculum. Our curriculum should be clear and well-defined. We actually need a learner-centered curriculum reflecting a communicative methodology which facilitates meaningful communication, authentic texts, and communicative tasks with negotiated and not predetermined outcomes. Learning should be viewed as a self-realization experience in which the learner has considerable say in the decision-making process. A flexible and not rigid curriculum is the need of the times. Responses should be taken from the students at regular intervals to provide feedback which should be incorporated into the learning process. Self-evaluation and peer-evaluation should be sought instead of teacher-evaluation. The curriculum should, therefore, be based on the socio-cultural aspects of the nature of language.

4) Inappropriate Approach for Teaching-Learning Process

Language has to be acquired through a natural process of learning, rather than an artificial one and English language is definitely not an exception. Just like we naturally acquire our mother tongue, similarly students should be exposed to real-life situations where they get first-hand experience of the language. Teaching the English language in an artificial manner also leads to the weaker foundation of the subject in students. M.S. Thirumalai rightly observes in an introduction to TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), "The English taught, spoken and written in Third-World countries is often not plain, simple and straightforward. As in the Indian sub-continent, it is derived, more often than not, from the English style spoken and written a century ago, in some instances" (2002). We do need to emphasize on grammatical correctness but not at the expense of fluent use of language. Grammatical errors should be accepted as a natural part of language acquisition at the early stage of learners, while they can be expected to master the language at the later stages of their learning process.

5) Lack of Teaching-Aids

English language teaching is actually a skills-based subject and not a content-based subject. Thus, it requires a whole environment which is conducive to language teaching. Teachers are required to use a wide range of teaching- aids that enhance the whole teaching-learning process. They make the process lively and interesting and hence, make it effective and better. Though, there is a provision of language laboratories in every engineering and technology institute but only few are equipped with the basic teaching aids like projectors, overhead projectors, record players, computer systems, language software, discussion tables, models, maps, flash cards, bulletin boards etc. Some have even set-up their language labs only recently though they have been running in the documents since long back.

6) Unmanageable Class-Roll

The size of the classes everywhere is considerably large and thus, student's participation in the class work is quite impossible. The ratio of students in relation to teachers is not proportional. There are

around 60 students in a language classroom in the technical institutes which makes it almost impossible for the teacher to make the teaching-learning process conducive. This is one of the reasons why individual attention is not possible to the students, which is very much required especially during activities. Though small lab-groups are made for conducting practical sessions, one lab session in a week and that too for just one semester is really insufficient to improve their communication skills.

7) Heterogeneity among the Students

Another major hurdle observed in the English language classrooms is the heterogeneity which characterizes our learner groups. Our technical students are varied as regards their proficiency. The students coming from private schools or the so-called English-medium schools are better exposed to the language than those students coming from government schools. Students from the rural areas also find themselves out of place in the language classrooms in these technical institutes. Here, they are all grouped together which has an adverse effect on all of them. Since the problem is at the root-level, corrective measures should also begin from the same. Some of the remedial changes could be proper implementation of English as a subject right from nursery class, making English as the medium of instruction in all schools, framing a uniform syllabus in all Government and Private Schools as well.

8) Faulty Evaluation System

Though most of the universities have now included practical examination (viva-voce) along with the written examination to evaluate the students, it has turned out to be a mere obligation. Neither the teachers nor the students take it on a serious note with most of the students coming for the viva-voce, unprepared. Thanks to the cut-throat competition amongst various private engineering institutes to fetch more admissions that instigates them to give undeserved marks to their students which consequently makes the students laid-back. Thus, written examination is left as the sole criteria to evaluate the students' language competency on a fair basis. So, what is actually evaluated is not the communicative competence of the students but how he fairs on a fixed pattern of written examination. Instead of these end-semester examinations, students should be evaluated on the basis of their day-to-day performance so that they may be motivated towards improving their communication skills rather than just their writing skills.

9) Less Contact Hours

With just one course dedicated to English language teaching in one of the semesters during the entire 8-semester Engineering degree course offered by most of the technical universities, how can we expect our technical graduates to compete and excel at global platforms? If we really want to address this serious issue of communicatively incompetent technical graduates who are unable to make it to the vast ocean of job opportunities waiting for them after their graduation, we have to provide more contact hours between the language teachers and the students so that they can be well-prepared and groomed for the competitive world outside. Various language modules should be prescribed in different semesters as per the proficiency and needs of the students.

Advanced Techniques to develop communicative competence

Teaching strategies that are grand slam with students.

1) Task-based Approach

It represents a significant paradigm shift since the focus on content has shifted to skills and competencies. So, planning and design aren't about what's taught, but why it's taught. This approach isolates individual skills and competencies in order to teach material students actually need to know to meet their goals and objectives. Sample tasks could be ordering in a restaurant, booking a hotel room, or perhaps more advanced tasks like critiquing a movie or voicing their opinions about politics. In this approach, the language taught revolves around the task itself, not the other way around. For this method to work, teachers must understand their students' needs and expectations in order to design lessons that help their students succeed. Grammar, vocabulary and language skills are just the vehicles that enable students to achieve their final outcomes.

2) Project-based Approach

Much like the task-based approach, the project-based approach is meant to address students' real needs by adapting language to the skills and competencies they truly need personally and/or professionally. This project can be anything from an oral presentation to a large-scale production such as a class play. Whatever the case, the project must consist of individual tasks that lead students to the goals in the assessment. Think of the project as their final, comprehensive assessment, whereas small tests or the completion of individual tasks are cumulative assessments. Just remember, your evaluation criteria must be clear so students know what they're being graded on. The project-based approach also works best with a lot of relevant supplemental material like the resources found on FluentU. FluentU takes authentic videos-like music videos, movie trailers, news and inspiring talks-and turns them into personalized language lessons. By adding a mixture of entertaining videos, natural dialogues and relevant course content, you can revitalize your English lessons and give your students the learning material they need to succeed.

3) Lexical Syllabus

While the previous two approaches focus heavily on the skills and competencies that students need to develop, this approach focuses on what language students actually need to produce. In particular, the actual words that students need to understand in order to conduct specific tasks. This approach is based upon the core language that students need to know given their needs. Again, professional students need very specific vocabulary pertaining to their field. For instance, "profit" is an essential term for business students, much the same way "scalpel" is to medical students. Moreover, any other language taught outside of this core language is meant to be supplementary and intended to enable students' communication within their respective fields. Topics such as movies and hobbies may take a back seat to things like booking a hotel or describing work experience. Nevertheless, there are common skills in all fields, such as saying your name or providing personal information. Since this approach focuses on content, tasks and homework assignments should focus on students' true needs. Therefore, assessment should be based upon what students actually achieved. Examples of these assessments include writing an email for a job application or arranging a time for an interview. This approach requires teachers to understand what students really need right away, focus on that, and then expand students' horizons as their communication skills develop.

4. Using Smartphones in the Classroom

Smartphones provide many useful tools for students such as dictionaries, translator and grammar reference apps. Much like computers, students need to understand that their phones aren't for play or personal use, but to be used as learning tools. Smartphones have a great dictionary/translator/grammar reference tool. Apart from translations, WordReference has a thesaurus, English dictionary and a forum where other users can comment on difficult words or expressions. A good example of how smartphones enhance classroom learning is the scavenger hunt exercise. Here, students must go through websites to find the information they need to fill out a worksheet. Students can also use their devices to access free, online exercises that reinforce language and/or skills seen in class. The key issue here is to be creative with the use of smartphones. Other uses for smartphones in the classroom could be polling apps, surveys or even recording, yes, recording! Students can record themselves in action, which is perfect for helping them receive feedback on specific tasks and activities.

Bringing It All Together

While traditional approaches do provide a solid foundation for effective language teaching, it's important to understand that these techniques don't always address students' current needs. In fact, the communicative approach, still widely preached as the latest and greatest approach, is already due for a makeover of its own.

Summing-up

In the light of the role the English language plays in the twenty-first century, there is a crucial need to teach English as a life skill. Life skills are the abilities an individual can learn which will help him/her to be successful in living a productive and satisfying life. The urgent need of the hour is to gear up the engineering students for the job market by teaching them job-oriented English language skills. In the age of globalization teachers of English need to undergo a paradigm shift and customize their teaching methodology according to the needs of the learners. Teaching English to these young creative minds could be real fun if we, the teachers, do it the right sporting way. We have to make it fun for our students too-that's the way they learn it better. The teachers have to come down willing to the level of learners and instill confidence by playing the role of a facilitator rather than the traditional role of an instructor. They should assess the present and future language needs of learners and teach them how to fish instead of giving them fish to eat. This is possible only with the collaborative attempt of the curriculum designers, the teachers, the students as well as the administrators. Then alone we can remove these roadblocks and teach students effectively for better results.

Works Cited

Dhamija, Deepti. (1993). Teaching of English Literature and Communicative Language teaching in the Indian Classrooms. Unpublished Thesis, pp. 135.

Hema N., Tamilarasan K., "Strategies for Language learning through skill-based approach for Engineering Courses" ELT Voices, 5 (5), 43-50, 2015.Print.

English Language Skills for Engineering Students: A Needs Survey. (2007). Retrieved from

www.esp-world.info, Vol. 6/17.

Nagraj, G (1996). *English Language Teaching: Approaches, Methods and Techniques*. Calcutta: Orient Longman Lts.

Johnson, K. and Brumfit, C.J (1979). *The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching*. Oxford: ELBS/Oxford University Press.

White, R.V (1980). *The ELT Curriculum: Design, Innovation and Management*. Basil Blackwell Oxford.