

**Developing Soft Skills in Indian Learners: A New Perspective to Unplug
Teaching from Text Books and Adapting Authentic Material**

Dr. Priti Bala Sharma

Assistant Professor

ASCENT

Amity University, Jaipur

“A developed India by 2020 or even earlier, is not a dream. It need not be a mere vision in the minds of many Indians. It is a mission we can all take up - and succeed.”¹

-Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam

India is one of the youngest nations which houses more than 54% of the total population below 25 years of age. India’s workforce is the second largest in the world after China. However, India’s formally skilled workforce is approximately 2% as compared to China, Japan etc. One among the many challenges is that India is presently facing a dual challenge of acute rarity in highly trained and quality employees along with the non employability of large sections of the educated workforce with vast skill gaps. “As per the India Skills report 2015, only 37.22% of surveyed people were found employable -34.26% among male and 37.88% among female.”

In FICCI Higher Education Summit 2014 it was stated that,

“Un-employability is driven by several factors including irrelevant and outdated curricula, shortage of high-quality faculty, few academia-industry linkages, and a limited focus on developing soft/workplace skills.”²

Moreover, a strong disconnect is felt between the formal education system and work requirements by the employers. British council site refers,
“Most of the graduates from Indian higher education are not receiving an education that sufficiently prepares them for the demands and an opportunity of the country’s rapidly changing economy.”³

Employability skills are dexterity and personal attributes to enable the aspirants to get a job. The emphasis is more on ‘ability’ than ‘employ’. In essence, the emphasis is on developing both hard and soft skills among the graduates. These skills are indispensable wheels that ‘help the monolith of modern industry run smoothly.’ Employability broadly includes hard and soft skills.

Hard skills are a set or rather ability to perform a certain type of activity whereas Soft skills are the ability to interact effectively with management, other employees and customers. Both the skills go hand in hand. Soft skills complement the hard skills which are occupational requirement of a job. “In present scenario, soft skills are increasingly hunted by employers in addition to their academic qualification. It also complements many other activities even outside the workplace.”⁴

However, to make our learners future fit, we must ensure the inclination of the learners in contributing to future economic growth in new business environments through soft and technical skills which vary with industries or companies. Generally they are: communication skills in English, creativity, problem solving, interpersonal skills, leadership, presentation skills, use of technology, and ability to function as part of a team. A list of soft skills includes more than communication, but good communication skills in English are typically connected to all areas of soft skills training. Having discovered a lack of all-round interpersonal skills and communication skills in English in the university graduates, the management of various industries suggested the educators to review and redevelop their curriculum and change teaching methodology for soft skills to cater to their needs.

Keeping this view, Universities have been introducing soft skills syllabi. In these types of syllabi, the communicative aspect of English is at distance in the system of evaluation. In fact, there is a big mismatch between curriculum objectives, course materials and the pattern of evaluation. Campus shortcomings and infrastructure have defeated all the efforts to promote the above mentioned skills. Regular communication classes are over-crowded, text book bound, and examination oriented. In short, they suffer from the tyranny of the system.

In India on one hand, we have learners from the best institutes in the country like IITs, IIMs, and ISB.etc and on the other hand we have learners who are in margins. Communication in English is still considered to be a foreign language in the rural and semi-urban areas or to those who are socially, culturally and economically marginalized students as they find it quite difficult to learn or speak English. They are from the socially, economically, culturally disadvantaged group constituting agricultural, casual or industrial laborers resulting into poverty, low level of education and poor access to health services.

Therefore, it is a challenge for the teachers, educators or trainers to make soft skills specially communication skills accessible to them. They have been using multiple techniques or methods to make them proficient in this skill. Little is done to promote actual communication skills. Actually, little is learnt. So, we have highly knowledgeable learner with poor communication skills. After completing their education, they are doomed to suffer in the job market and in career building. A methodology which can effectively work is needed at the most.

Dr Elizabeth Erling said that,

“For many jobs, communication skills in English are in increasing demand. English is becoming a ‘basic skill’, along with computer literacy. But low access to affordable and high-quality English language and soft skills are stated across the region to be a barrier in many sectors such as retail, financial services, IT, beauty and wellness, tourism and healthcare.”⁵

It is in this context that we have to try out alternative approaches and methods. Promotion of soft skills through communication training is one such an arrangement worthy of exploration. But the

teacher trainers have various challenges to meet their needs for example they have to juggle with the plethora of inauthentic teaching and training material preventing them from any meaningful discussion. Instead of playing the role as a facilitator, teacher trainer's work is limited merely as the material operator. Another inherent problem with these materials is that they are written or prepared by those who never met the learners and are unaware of the background, cognitive abilities, learning styles etc of the learners.

As the learners have their own history, their own experiences, life style, and family culture. Therefore, they feel they are learning an alien language of far away world and feel disconnected in the class. Scott has rightly said,

“... Classroom interactions are being mediated almost entirely through 'imported' texts. Lack of engagement with such texts, and the activities they generate, meant that learners are interacting at the lowest level of involvement”.⁶

Therefore, there is a dire need to unplug our teaching from the inauthentic materials for the learners. The question of authentic or inauthentic material in the language classroom is much discussed in academia. Many books on soft skills claim to help the learners with their language and other aspects of their personality, but even a cursory reading of the lessons or chapters brings to light a confused and contradictory picture. They not only have unrelated topics, the settings and the unreal speakers of different world but also the activities to be performed in the classrooms are culturally inappropriate. Therefore, the question arises that what is authentic material for our learners? It may be helpful at this point to consider a few definitions of authentic material.

Morrow in his famous book “Authentic Texts in ESP” defines it as,

“An authentic text is a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort.”⁷ (Morrow, 1977, p. 13)

Harmer in his book “The practice of English language teaching” writes,

“Authentic texts (either written or spoken) are those which are designed for native speakers: they are real texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question.”⁸(Harmer,1983,p.146)

From the above mentioned definition we can understand that the language in text books of soft skills or employability skills can be made by the speakers of that language for the speakers of that language but not for the learners of that language. This gives the teacher trainers of India a new perspective for adapting the authentic material in their best possible ways.

Students encounter in their daily lives the learning materials in various forms like print, video, and audio materials. The authentic materials are broadly categorized in to three forms—Print, Auditory and Visual. Some examples of the many types of

Authentic Print Materials include:

- Utility bills
- Order forms
- ATM screens
- Web sites
- Street signs
- Food menu
- Magazines and Newspapers
- Advertisement
- Articles

Authentic Auditory Materials include:

- Radio broadcasts
- T.V. Talks
- DVD's etc.
- Documentaries
- Phone messages etc.

Authentic Visual material includes:

- photographs,
- art works,
- signs with symbols,
- postcards,
- Picture books, etc.

How to create authentic material for our classrooms:

To accomplish our objectives in the classrooms of developing communication skills along with other personality traits, the lecture method need to be replaced with workshop mode where the learners are given maximum chances to perform and interact. Besides this, the emphasis should be on interpersonal, interpretive and presentational mode during teaching communication skills, Group discussion, presentational skills and personal interview.

Authentic Print Material:

To better facilitate the language acquisition for these skills, the content and objectives of the lesson of the text book can be tailored according to the needs of the learners. For example instead of using the imaginary articles from the text books, the teacher trainer can use the headlines of the national newspaper or can use the interview script of the local celebrity or the blogs written by the students of their own college or university. Besides this, the advertisements in the text books can be replaced by the advertisements or hoardings printed at the road sides of their city walls. Even the conference or workshop brochures for role plays can also be added. Reviews of movies and report writing on the experiences of tourist in their city can be a great help in developing interpretive and interpersonal modes in communication skills of the learners.

Authentic Audio Material:

Instead of using the audio CDs or DVDs attached with the text books, the teacher trainer can use the video recordings of the senior learners or the talk show with other faculty members of their

own institute or interviews with tourists visiting the historical places of their city. Even the songs or plays sung or performed in the targeted language in their own institution can be used to inculcate the interpersonal, interpretive and presentational skills. Besides this, the talks or speeches by the speakers of their own country in TED Talk, or Economic Forum can also be exploited in the class. Looking at their seniors or the local celebrity or their own national speakers or leaders, the learners can feel connected and start caring about the topic which would result in to better performance with appropriate fluency.

Authentic Visual Material:

It is said that “a picture is worth more than a thousand words” as an immediate response can be evoked from the learners in the class. Visual aids have been used to develop writing or speaking skills for a very long time in language classes, even then many a times learners find themselves uninvolved in activities based on visual materials. So when the teacher trainer uses visual materials for the communication skills, they can use the pictures or photographs with which the learners can connect easily and can stimulate their imagination. For example the pictures of the real tourist sites in the city, or the pictures of the senior students of the learners engaged in classroom activity or mock interview.

Besides these materials, the learners can be connected with other institutions through consortia, career fairs or job expos where the learners can understand the relevance and importance of soft skills and can apply their knowledge and training practically. If we mix these modes of communication with adapting authentic material, they can practice the same language in different context with different material. In this way, if the teacher trainer designs any activity for their class, they can adapt these types of authentic material to meet their objectives to develop soft skills among learners.

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