

Reasons for Poor Communication Skills in English of First Year Engineering Students of Gujarat Technological University, Ahmedabad: A Study

Dr. Dipakkumar A. Bhatt

Assistant Professor (English)

Science & Humanities Department

Vishwakarma Government Engineering College

Ahmedabad.

Abstract

English language plays an important role in the life of an engineering professional as well as an academician. The present paper is an attempt to understand the difficulties faced by the engineering students with regards to learning English language in the first year of their four year engineering program. Majority of first year engineering students from vernacular medium school background are found lacking in the English language skills. There are many reasons for the poor language skills of these students. The possible reasons have been covered by conducting a survey of the first year engineering students of two engineering institutes, one government and other self-financed through google form and an attempt has been made to give solutions to the problems faced by students while learning English language. Finally, it is suggested that more consciousness on the part of the engineering students regarding language learning can make them better communicators in English language. To quote Kapoor (1994 48) , now the failure in teaching English as a second language stems not from the theory, training and mechanics of language teaching, but from the intrinsic conceptual inappropriateness in accepting English as a second language, L2, pedagogically and linguistically.

Key words: Communication Skills, English, Engineering Students, Vernacular Medium, Second Language

Introduction

English is a language of the world. It has gained importance as an unavoidable language for the generation of today and the generations to come. One cannot imagine a life without English language in daily communication and professional too. David Crystal (61) mentions that nearly 670 million people use English for the communication purpose and with the time the users are increasing. English language has been widely used in various fields like management and hospitality, tourism, media, correspondence, conferences etc.

With the new advent of Science and Technology, English language gained even more importance. It has become inevitable for an engineering student to learn English language to exist in this world of science and technology. English language is recognized as not only the language of knowledge i.e. science and technology but also as language of modern people, a window to the world, and also the language of library. The knowledge and use of English language takes the person to the heights of his/her academic as well as professional career. As the world is becoming a global village, it has become mandatory for using English as a language of communication. We cannot reject English language usage on the ground of calling it anti-modern, as popularly called. Moreover, we feel disconnected with the world if we do not opt for the language of the globe.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study is to find out the possible reasons behind the poor communication skills of the first year engineering students and offer the possible solutions.

Objectives

- i. To find out the reasons behind the poor communication skills of first year engineering student
- ii. To offer the best possible solutions for improving the communication skills of these learners

Review of Literature

A lot of research work has been done in the past few years in the field of English Language Teaching with special reference to engineering students. It is not possible to cover the depth of review of literature here but an attempt has been made here to include the crux of the notable contribution by the researchers. The NASSCOM report of 2011 is a well-known contribution which marks the poor communication skills of the engineering graduates and their poor employability. A survey conducted by Robert Hall International amongst 1,000 employers in the United States revealed that 96% of the executives expressed the need of effective communication skills to excel in career.

The effect of poor communication skills can be seen on the placement of the students as well. Studies done by Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation among Fortune

500 CEOs revealed that 75% of long term job success depended on people skills and only 25% on technical skills (Rao 5). Hence, we can say that the communication and soft skills are at the core of for the success of the engineering graduates. A good command on all the LSRW skills is must for securing a better career opportunity. The following research work (PhD Thesis) is a substantial proof to say that language, communication and soft skills are must for the engineering graduates.

Developing communication skills of the engineering students through learner-centred activities by Shanti R under the supervision of Ramesh R (2012)

Enhancing employability design of a need based syllabus for third year engineering students in affiliated colleges of Anna University by Al Muzzamil Fareen J under the supervision of Shrimathy Venkatalakshmi T (2015)

A Critical Analysis of the Soft Skills Requirements of the IT industry and the Soft Skills Training Provided in Select Engineering Colleges of Andhra Pradesh by Anjani Koka under the supervision of Prof. Meenakshi Raman (2016)

English Language Teaching with special reference to technical Communication by K Gurusamy under the supervision of Dr. G. Manivannan (2016)

Requirement of Need-based Syllabus of English for Undergraduate Engineering Students by Dipakkumar A. Bhatt under the supervision of Dr. Vikas M Raval (2020)

The directors of various institutes in Gujarat and India also seem to pint the same thing when it comes to the poor language or communication or soft skills of engineering students with regards to their placement needs. A few excerpts have been mentioned below for the sake of affirmation.

“At Nirma University, students are taught not just communicative English but also report writing and critical thinking apart from foreign language course. Despite this, we have received complaints from recruiters highlighting lack of communication skills among students, especially when it comes to non-technical communication. Even if knowledge of English language improves in students, be they from Gujarat or other states, proficiency continue to be a problem”, said Dr Ketan Kotecha, director of Institute of Technology at Nirma University (Gujarat).

“Over the years, the focus in the education system has shifted to chemistry, maths, Physics. Focus on soft skills has reduced. Students may lose out on good job prospects as many companies come to campuses for global positions as well.” -U B Desai, Director of IIT Hayderabad.

Alan, Jennings, & Ferguson, J.D. (2006 305-314) in *Focusing on Communication Skills in Engineering Education* address the major consequences of poor communication skills of engineering students. If students do not learn these skills well then their conceptual clarity will also remain unclear which is a bigger risk as an engineer, hence it can't be rectified at the later stage. In the research paper Marc J. Rimer (2012 91-100) discusses on the *English and*

Communication Skills by the Global Engineer. He stresses on the importance of English language as lingua franca along with the multilingual skills required by today's engineer. He also stresses on the importance of English for Specific Purposes.

Chung, Yoonsook, Yoo, Jungskook, Kim, Sung-Won, Lee, Hyunju and Zeidler, Dana L. (2014 2-27) in *Enhancing Students' Communication Skills in the Science Classroom through Socioscientific Issues* elaborate on the demand of communication skills in the 21st century. They also stress the importance of peer interactions, and stimulating students' reasoning. Kovac, Mirjana M. & Sirkovic, N. in *Attitudes towards Communication Skills among Engineering Students* (2017 111-117) emphasizes the need of not only the education of engineering but also the need to prepare the engineering graduates for job market. The paper focuses on the attitudes of the learners towards the communication skills required for their career advancement. Providing more opportunities to the students to learn better communications skills from the beginning is recommended by the researchers as an important contribution.

Hamid, Roszilah & Kamaruzaman, Fathiyah Mohd (2019 15-28) in *Comparison of Engineering Skills with 4.0 Skills* point out the requirement of new skills required with the advancement of technology. With the present scenario in the field of recruitment new skills are required by the engineering aspirants, which are analytical thinking, creativity, originality, active learning, learning strategies, technology design, programming, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, system analysis, and evaluation. It is also pointed out that these skills can help the engineering students get better job opportunities in future.

Research Methodology

The research methodology used in the paper is both subjective and objective. A questionnaire containing 10 statements was designed to understand the problems faced by the first year engineering students and the respondents were asked to choose the answer as per their experience out of the given options. The responses were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The simple percentage value is brought out to each statement of the questionnaire. Total 553 responses were collected and two engineering institutes were selected, out of which one was a government institute Vishwakarma Government Engineering College and another was a self-financed institute Silver Oak University of Science & Technology under Gujarat Technological University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The collected data was of the academic year 2019-2020.

Discussions

Following is the discussion of the questionnaire statements both qualitatively and quantitatively. The following graphical presentation helps in understanding the problems faced by students in an easy manner. The following first table is to show the medium of school background in which majority of our respondents were from the vernacular medium background. Apart from the respondents personal information like their name, enrolment number, the name of the institute, the branch of their study, the medium of their school background was considered as an important factor.

The first statement on the questionnaire reads: I can understand the basic concepts taught in English language in classroom. The question was asked with a view of understanding whether students are comfortable in understanding the English language used by the teachers while teaching different subjects.

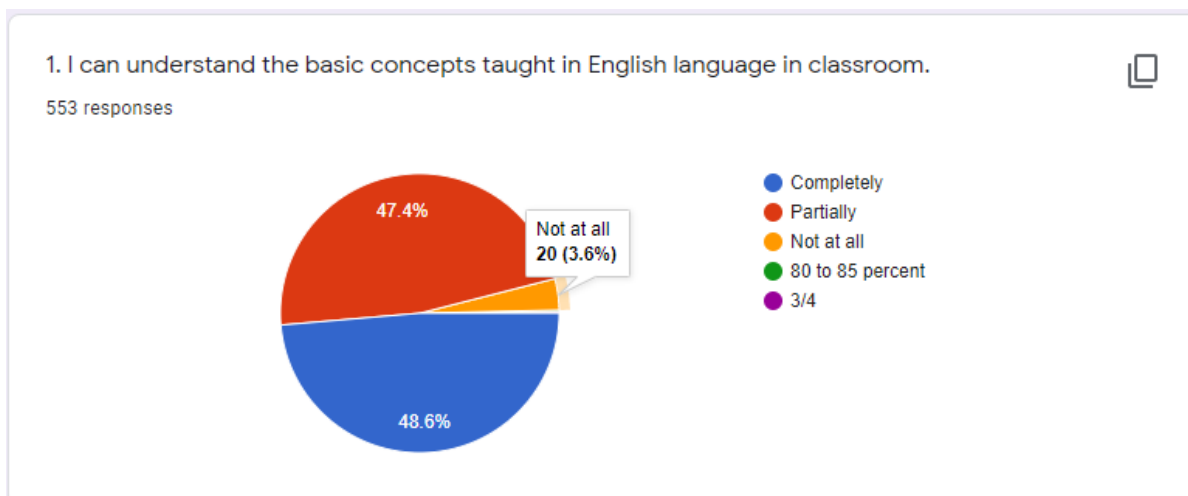


Figure 1.1

The analysis tells us that majority of the students (47.4%) who belong to the vernacular medium school background find it difficult to understand the basic concepts taught in the classroom. Hence, issues with the conceptual clarity are a bigger risk with these learners and it should be taken care of.

The second questionnaire statement is whether all the lectures in their first semester were conducted in English language, as these students were in second semester this question was pertinent to their experience. 65.1% of the students responded that their lectures were partially conducted in English language; hence it is very important for us to mention here that language as

learnt through listening also has to be in use while delivering lectures by the faculty.

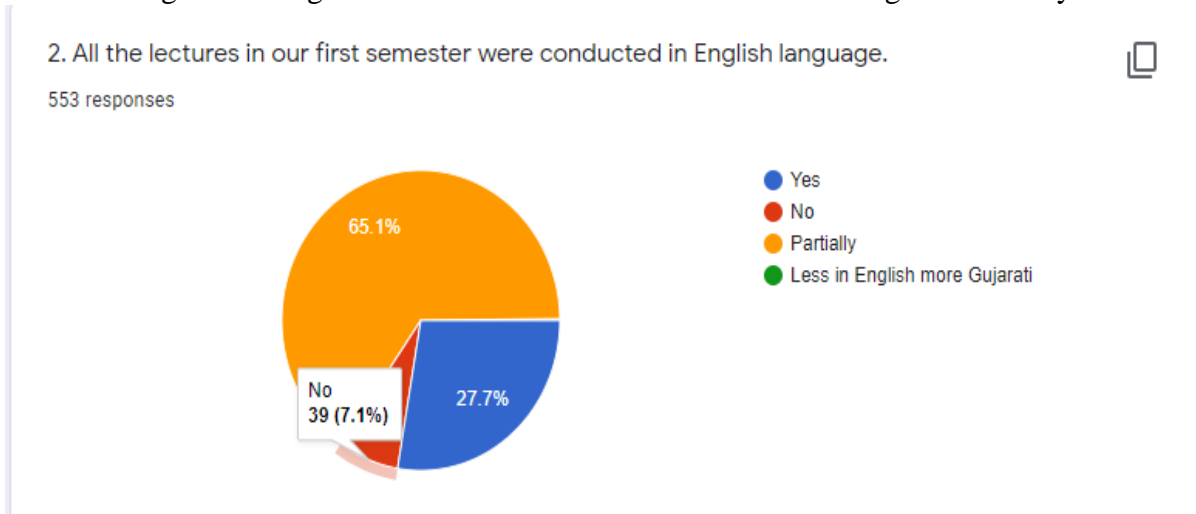


Figure 1.2

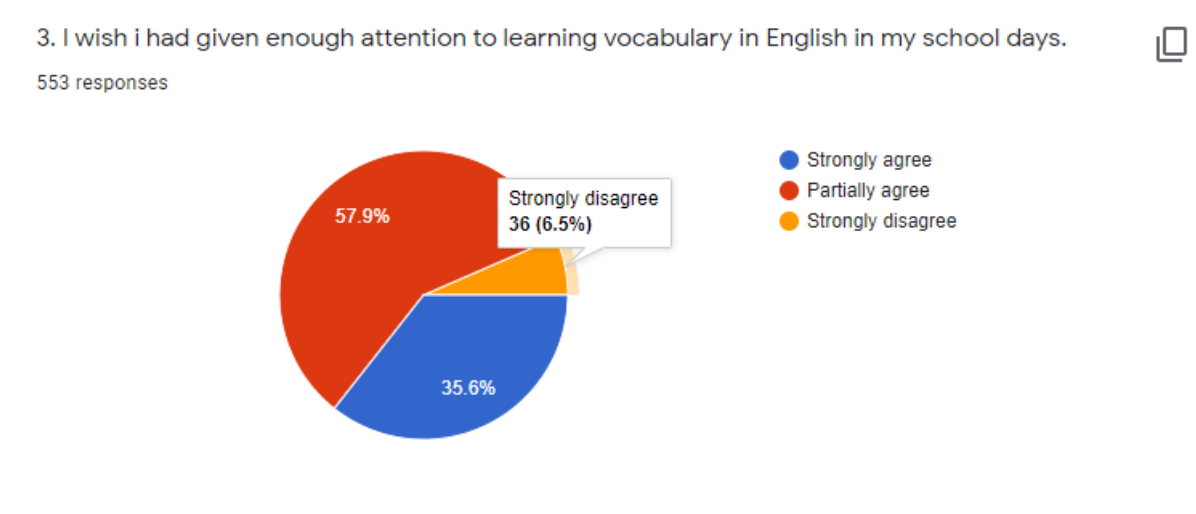


Figure 1.3

The third statement was to ensure whether students feel that their vocabulary should have been string enough to learn English language better. To my surprise, a good percentage of the respondents (35.6%) feel they should have given enough attention to learning vocabulary in their school days. This brings to our notice that learning new vocabulary should be part of syllabus and also taught to the engineering students for their vocabulary enhancement.

4. I have a habit of using English dictionary when having difficulty in understanding English words.



553 responses

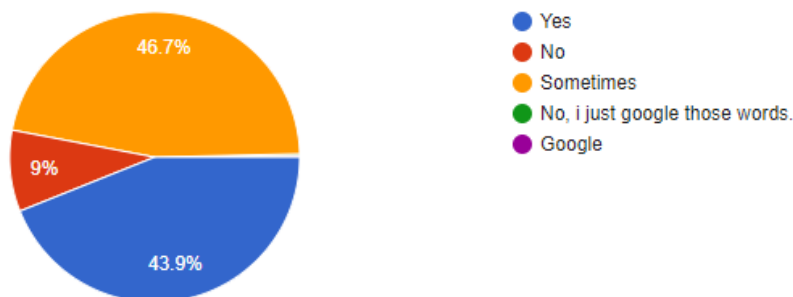


Figure 1.4

The fourth statement on the questionnaire was meant to understand the practice followed by the students when they face difficulty in understanding new words in English language by using dictionary. To my surprise, I could find that students are much aware about the use of dictionary. They also make use of internet to get meanings of the words instantly. Still we felt that dictionary usage has to be made compulsory for the students while giving them reading practice in English. This can definitely enhance their vocabulary. Digital dictionaries are so handy and accessible nowadays, which is more in knowledge of the learners as well. In fact, it can of best use to learn pronunciations in English.

5. I read English newspapers, magazines, novels, etc to improve my communication in English.



553 responses

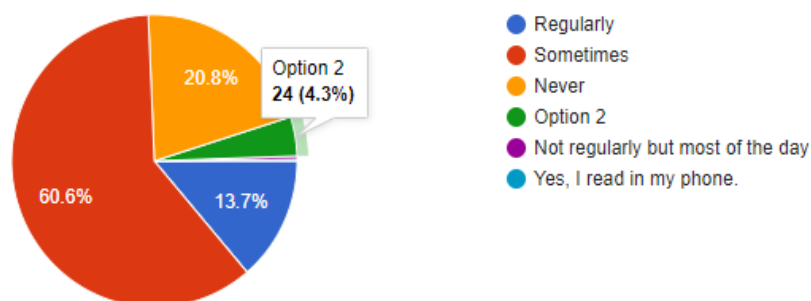


Figure 1.5

The fifth statement of the questionnaire was useful to identify the reading habits of the students. It is noted that 60.6% of the respondents sometimes read newspapers, magazines, novels etc. to improve their communication in English, whereas 20.8% of the respondents never do reading. 13.7% read regularly and 4.3% read in their mobile phones. It is recommended that reading habit has to be nurtured to learn language and strengthen the reading skills in English. Enough reading materials and practice has to be made part of teaching learning in the subject of English for engineering students.

6. I talk with my friends in English who are fluent in speaking English.



553 responses

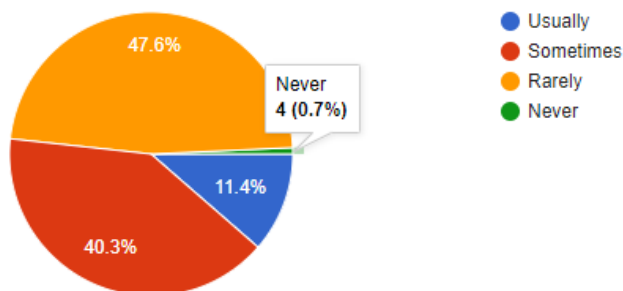


Figure 1.6

The above statement was given to the respondents to find out the practice of speaking skills by peer learning. It has to be noted that majority of the learners rarely (47.6%) talk with their friends, or sometimes (40.3%) or never (0.7%) talk with their friends in English. The teacher’s responsibility is to boost the peer learning in the class for enhancing speaking skills of the learners.

7. I make use of internet, technology and relevant applications for learning English.



553 responses

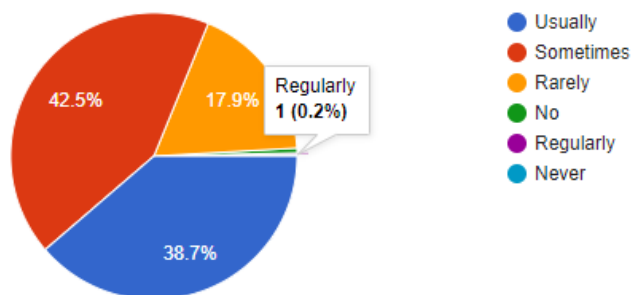


Figure 1.7

Being students of engineering and technology, it was assumed that they are better users of technology in terms of language learning and hence the statement was whether the learners use internet, technology and relevant applications for learning English language. A mixture of opinions was found regarding the statement. 38.7% of the students usually use internet and relevant application to learn English language whereas 42.5% sometimes use it and 0.2% regularly uses it. It is expected that learners should be motivated to make the best use of technology to learn language.

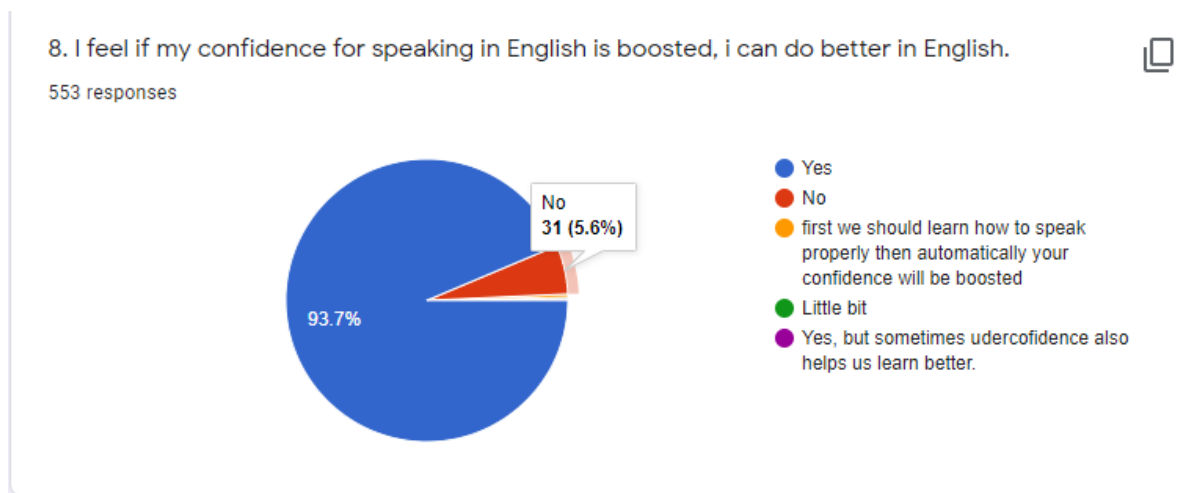


Figure 1.8

The eighth statement was very important to understand whether the students have the need of confidence to perform better in learning English language. As per the hypothesis with the statement, it is generalized from the response (93.7%) that confidence boosting plays a big role in learning any language and so is true for English language learning as well. An ELT teacher has a greater role to play in boosting the confidence of the learners.

9. I firmly believe that good command on English language will help me in getting a good job. □

553 responses

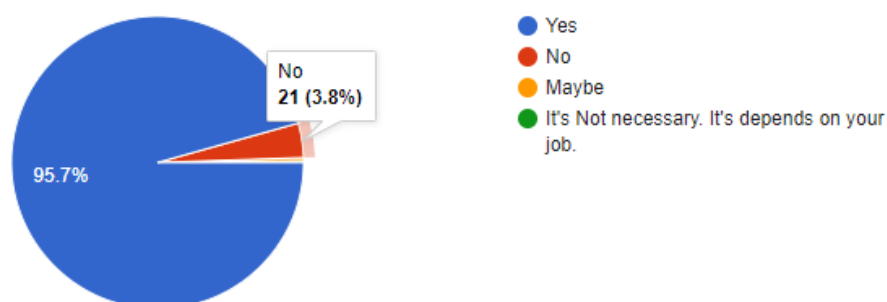


Figure 1.9

There is no dispute regarding the need of good command on English language/ communication skills in English for getting better career opportunities in the field of science and technology. The respondents are much aware of the fact that that English language makes their dream job career realistic. Hence, it must be instilled in the young minds by an ELT teacher that good command on English language is inevitable in the 21st century job market.

10. I realise that my own role and practice in learning English language is much bigger than anything else. □

553 responses

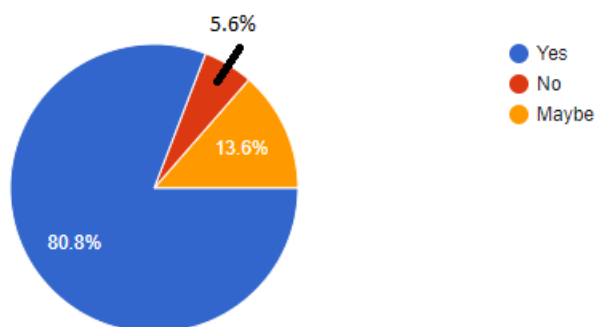


Figure 1.10

More than 80% of the respondents are aware that they have a bog role and practice in learning English language that just blaming the other reasons for poor communication skills they have. Since learners are conscious of putting their efforts in learning language, it is the duty of the syllabus designers, ELT teachers and policy makers to make the efforts of the learners make successful by designing the appropriate/ need-based syllabus, and giving it due importance for their betterment.

Findings/Suggestions

Based on the study conducted, the following suggestions are made for the improvement in the learners. Moreover, consciousness on both the teacher and the learners is required to achieve the desired outcomes. Since majority of the engineering graduates are clear with their career goals, it is expected to fulfill their specific needs for learning language by the ELT teacher. Finally both technical skills and communication skills are must for attaining the heights in academic and professional career of an engineer.

1. The learners need to have clarity of the concepts taught in the classroom and for that the teacher has to be more careful in making his/her lectures easily understandable.

2. For strengthening the linguistic abilities of the engineering students, the delivery of the lectures has to be in English language and not in the vernacular medium or any other medium of instruction.
3. Vocabulary development is very much necessary for enhancing the LSRW skills in English.
4. Dictionary usage is mandatory for the students, and hence digital dictionaries can be promoted in the classroom for better vocabulary.
5. Enough reading materials need to be provided to the students by the institutes for making their reading skills better.
6. Peer learning has to be promoted in the classroom by the teacher.
7. The use of internet and technology can be boosted for developing the LSRW skills in English.
8. Confidence of the learners needs to be boosted and a positive language learning environment has to be provided by the teacher.
9. Learners need to be assured that a good command on language skills can make their professional as well as academic career more appealing.
10. Self-directed learning should be made accessible to the learners as it is the best way to of learning a language.

It is expected that this research will help the teachers and learners of English in engineering institutes to solve a few major linguistic problems faced by the students.

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