

DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF ENGINEERING STUDENTS THROUGH ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSE (ESP)

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Abstract: Much of the success in today's competitive world depends upon the communicative competence of the professionals. Apart from technical skills, communicative skills also carry an equal importance. As English is the most widely spoken language, English language proficiency of engineering students will be tested to the maximum. Language learning is basically a skill based learning and technical institutions need to train up its students in the skills that would help them build up a career in the corporate world. However, English is approached casually in most of the engineering colleges and therefore, the course is yet to achieve the targeted goals of developing communicative competence among the engineering students. To this end, the concept of ESP (English for Specific Purpose) can be used as a tool to develop the communicative competence of students. ESP, by focusing on the learner's reason for learning, can help in the formulation of content and teaching methods appropriate for technical students. The purpose of this study is to emphasize and highlight the strategic role of ESP in English Language Teaching in order to help students in acquiring effective communicative competence. ESP will achieve more in the education of engineering students by focusing on the learner's attention on particular terminology and communication skills required in the workplace by making a shift from the traditional lecture-based method towards more student-centered activities. The concept of ESP, therefore, can be termed as appropriate for teaching English to the students of engineering institutes as language learning is a skill oriented activity and requires an entirely different pedagogic approach.

Keywords: Classroom activities, communicative competence, English for Specific Purpose (ESP), English Language Teaching (ELT), pedagogy, skills.

Introduction: In the fast emerging competitive world today, the ability to communicate effectively is perceived as *sine quo non* for all the undergraduate and post graduate students. This scenario becomes more imperative for professionals in technical fields. The core competence of professionals is judged on the basis of their élan and expertise in writing and speaking skills. However, we cannot also overlook the listening and reading skills. With the proliferation of English medium institutes, over the years, our pupils seem to be more at ease in using English as a medium of spoken communication. Students need to be exposed to the professional settings and presentation skills which are the prime requirements of modern day professionals. The success of presentation depends on how effectively it is presented. In the same way in some situations non-verbal communication, interviews, speeches and negotiation skills orient young professionals with verbal as well as non-verbal skills. Emphasis should be given on clarity, convincing power and cooperativeness in order to ensure organizational effectiveness. In the same way, Kinesics, Artifacts, Chronemics, Proxemics, Paralanguage and Haptics should be given importance so that the students can get a taste of real- life situations.

Today's professional world demands effective transfer of technical information in the form of talks, discussions or documents more than ever before. Such forms of communication not only reflect the knowledge and achievements of engineers and other

professionals but also act as a public face for organizations reflecting their policies and achievements.

Nowadays, professionals do not work in isolation but in groups so group communication rooted in team culture should be considered as an essential ingredient of collective and individual efforts. As a large part of the scientific and technical community across the globe communicates in English, students and professionals should involve in the technological development to enhance their English language skills, teamwork, problem solving, decision making, planning, organizing, self- learning and self- management. However, research has indicated that out of large number of engineering students being graduated every year, only 10% are employed in various industries. The reason behind this is because of the lack of soft skills, particularly communication skills which are imperative for IT industries.

Statement of the problem: Engineering students come from different backgrounds and mastering English is important not just for their academic life but also for their prospective career. In the absence of adequate competency in English language skills, a majority of learners find it difficult to master the technical terminologies. 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. According to Brookes (1964, p.115-116): "A report or paper must be written. Anyone engaged in scientific

work that is incapable of making this kind of report is not a scientist but a technician, not an engineer, but a mechanic. Proficiency in his written and spoken dialect is a badge which cannot be counterfeit". Even in the Indian context, an engineering student's success on campus recruitment is mainly based on their demonstration of communication skills. According to NASSCOM, only 25% of technical graduates are suitable for employment in the outsourcing industry because of their lack of abilities to speak or write well in English (Karnik, 2007).

Mushrooming of colleges further raises a doubt about the quality of education being imparted in these institutes. In most of the institutes, English is approached casually (Sasidharan, 2012, p. 9). The teachers themselves need to be provided with adequate resources and training to impart superior language teaching practices demanded of the course for their students (Tickoo, 2004). This study considers the extent to which English for Specific Purpose (ESP) can be used as a strategy to fulfil the students' needs of acquiring communicative competency in English. The study aims to emphasize and highlight the strategic role of ESP in developing communicative competency for engineering students.

English for Special Purpose (ESP): In recent years, teaching and learning styles are by their very nature have undergone a tremendous change and there has been a noticeable move from lecture-based activities towards more student-centered activities. When English is taught for special purpose (ESP), it is imperative to develop the communicative competence of the students for career development. "ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning". (Tom Hutchinson and Alan Warters, 1987, p.19). Language learning is basically a skill based learning and technical institutions need to train up its students in the skills that would help them build up a career in the corporate world. In schools, English is less competitive in nature but consists of more syntactic rules. In technical institutions, English is learnt with an occupational, vocational, academic and professional requirement. As the concept of ESP can be termed as appropriate for teaching English to the students of engineering institutes, teachers also need to develop an effective pedagogy to teach the students. ESP focuses more on the learner's attention on the particular terminology and communication skills. Since students' learning style varies, a language teacher may have a mix bag of students coming from different educational backgrounds. However, a teacher is much more likely to be sequential, verbal and reflective than his/her students are. Students of engineering colleges or technical institutes learn best when they are engaged in active learning by giving

them ample opportunities to deal with observations and concepts so that they feel themselves as part of the learning environment. Since the students need to develop the skills of learning the English language, teachers are thus required to engage the students in interactive teaching techniques by allowing them to deal with real life situations, making students give presentations, dramatize situations, group discussions or to make them do collaborative assignments through word walks. Assessing the prior knowledge of the students is also an essential component of teaching as the students' disposition to learn can be influenced by the knowledge and mental framework they bring to the class. ESP is not a particular language product but "an approach to language teaching which is directed by specific and apparent reason for learning". This explanation emphasizes the need for a learner centered approach so that the students acquire the communicative competence. There are always concrete purposes for learning the English language such as technical, professional or academic studies. Emphasis is laid on teaching methodology, not on the contents of the subject only. As the levels of English proficiency of engineering students are varied, it is not always possible to expect active feedback from the academically poorer students.

Strategies of teaching English: Gaur (2008) states that in order to teach communication skills, the traditional ELT methods are not enough. To this end, the following strategies are suggested to improve the communicative competence of the engineering students.

Use of technology in teaching English: With the spread and development of English throughout the world, English is used as a second language in a country like India while for some people it is the first language. The new era assigns new challenges and duties on the modern teacher. The traditional way of teaching English has undergone a drastic change. With the use of technology, teaching has become more productive in terms of improvement. At present the role and status of English is that it has become the language of social context, political, socio cultural, business, education, industries, media, library and key subject in curriculum and language of imparting education.

As the popularity of the use of language has increased, so the need for qualified teachers to instruct students in the language has also increased as majority of them still teach in the traditional manner. The use of multimedia, featuring audio, visual, animation effects comes in full play in promoting activities and initiatives of students and teaching effect in English class. For this reason, it is important for language teachers to be aware of the latest and the best equipment and to have full

knowledge of what is available in any given situation. Traditional teaching has always hampered students' capacity to comprehend certain language and also in understanding the structure, meaning and function of the language and makes the students passive recipients of knowledge. Multimedia teachings enrich teaching content and make the best of the teaching time and break the "teacher-centered" teaching pattern and fundamentally improve class efficiency. Due to large classes, it is difficult for the students to have speaking practice. The use of language labs materializes the individual and cooperative learning. The teacher's role as a facilitator improves the language environment of a traditional teaching model. It helps students to improve their ability to listen and speak and to develop their communicative competence.

Vallance (1997) highlighted a unique Internet Aided Language Learning (INTALL) which incorporates problem-solving and decision-making tasks thereby providing opportunities for sustained communication and linguistic development. As students are digitally more literate, therefore, they can learn and acquire more skills with the use of visual media (Mohanty, 2011).

Teaching of skills: The need of the hour is to provide students facilities and guidance in developing technical language skills with proper orientation and practice. Thus, the English syllabus should include tasks that reinforce the achievement of generic skills, team work, critical thinking and problem solving activities along with effective communication skills. When the task is to teach English for special purpose, the teachers should give ample practice to students in lab classes and to give power point presentations, report writing, project report preparation etc. individually and in group. Software relating to corporate etiquettes, communication or selected movies with related themes can be used in a language class. All these would provide opportunities for developing leadership skills, team spirit and cooperation. Role plays, performing skits, puzzles, quizzes, slogan writing, creative writing, mock interviews, group discussions on current topics, word walks etc. are examples of useful language activities that can help students acquire leadership and communication skills. It is also necessary to set achievable goals for the students and to provide an environment to solve a problem at his/ her own pace. "Methods of instruction are to cater to the varying groups of learners, not the 'fit for all' mode" (M.H. Long, 2002). Provision should be there to train the students in the basic skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing especially technical writing for which the allotted time as per timetable in most teaching institutes is quite inadequate. The need for soft skills training, personality development,

phonetics practice, and exposure to corporate world, business communication, training in public relations, well equipped classrooms for theory classes, motivating the students etc. are imperative. Teachers of technical institutes should give ample practice to students in lab classes to give power point presentations, report writing, project report preparation etc. individually and in groups.

According to *Larsen and Freeman, 2000, p.53*, "The teachers should learn to be facilitators, not instructors and help learners take responsibility for their own learning." This shall suit different learning needs of students if the teachers follow an interactive, supportive and co-operative teaching technique. One of the important goals of communicative English course is to equip the students with proper communication skills for effective usage in everyday situations and also to manage future workplace situations. The teachers teaching in engineering colleges have a crucial role to play as they not only help students to acquire English language skills but also have to act as facilitators in shaping the personality traits of the students. If the students do not possess the necessary soft skills along with their academic qualifications then they will never be able to advance in their career. So, students need to be guided to develop their soft skills along with language skills. Thus, the students can be helped to acquire language skills, effective negotiation skills, effective presentation skills, teamwork skills, interview skills, non-verbal communication skills by integrating them in an English Language Teaching (ELT) class.

The following activities can be suggested in an English class-

- a) Students can be asked to research on a particular topic using internet either individually, in pairs or in small groups for presentation or a piece of writing. This would help them develop presentation skills along with writing skills.
- b) Speaking and listening skills may be integrated in an activity of story-telling as it requires only an imaginative mind. Each student may be asked to build up a story and the other students may go on adding sentences according to his/ her own imagination.
- c) Reading and speaking skills can be integrated by designing an activity in a manner to provide the learner's thoughts on the subject and thereby making them forward to what the listener's views are. After making a student read aloud an article, other students may be asked to prepare questions on it which would improve their listening comprehension.
- d) Speaking and reading skills can also be integrated through the Pick and Speak activity. Each student can be asked to pick a chit and speak on the topic for a minute or two. If the topics are pertaining to

current issues, the students will automatically adopt reading skills.

- e) Emails are the most important writing skills the students need in effective business writing as they need to learn the correct tone, structure and layout. Engineering working in corporate sector may need to negotiate through emails. So, students need to develop effective negotiation skills. Teachers may therefore set writing task and ask students email their teachers.
- f) A group discussion leads to the development and improvement of certain aspects like verbal communication, non-verbal behaviour, conformation to norms, decision making ability and cooperation. The English teacher can conduct mock group discussions based on various topics and give detailed feedback to the students.

Competent teachers: Teachers' proficiency in handling such communicative sessions would highly rely on the orientation they receive from experts. "Teachers need to practice differentiated instruction to suit varying learning styles of students". (Tomlison, 2001). The teachers may be trained in pre-service/ in-service situations to design suitable lessons/ tasks/ activities/ learning resources and materials to suit their purpose. (Hubbard & Levy, 2006 in Asmari, p.4). A positive learning environment coupled with suitable materials, lessons and worksheets designed according to the needs of the learners would help to develop a set of generic skills forming the part of graduating engineers' academic and professional development. Students cannot be "taught"- they can only be helped to learn. In a student- centered classroom, the role of the teacher is to help and encourage students to develop their skills, without relinquishing their more traditional role as a source of information, advice and knowledge as the students get more "talking time." Grammar and vocabulary classes are ideal student- centered activities. They can

provoke lively discussion and genuine communication in English.

The course in English in Engineering colleges aim to teach the students to use English correctly and effectively in written and oral communication to give them the basic knowledge of the content and form of technical reports and to introduce them to various cultures through literature.

Writing and speaking skills are the basic tools for getting the business done. Without them, the professional man, whether he has experience or knowledge, is restricted in the professional and civic influence. The course provided to the engineering students is restricted in professional includes study of creative literature which humanities the students in significant and lasting manner—a process particularly important for technical students who are inevitably moving towards leadership in our highly organized technologically oriented society. The literature course with its intensive and dramatic discussion of human experience past and present expands the students' limited understanding of the values, behaviour and qualities of man hence helping him to acquire the leadership qualities.

The English language teachers teaching in engineering colleges should develop new and existing means of integrating language in all aspects with innovative technologies. English should be taught in context. Students should be allowed to commit mistakes, open themselves to all possibilities and trust their intuition. An integrated skill approach can be interwoven to expose the learners to authentic language and challenges in order to increase their expertise in the communication skills. Having the right communication skills would equip the students with confidence and ability to express them which would eventually make them stand out for career growth and development.

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