COMMUNICATION AND SOFT SKILLS - A STEPPING STONE FOR A BETTER CAREER

Abstract

Today's curriculum is embracing stimulating means of integrating language and communication skills with innovative technologies. These technologies help us teach new curriculum in a reciprocate manner. The Undergraduate Engineering students at Hindustan University undergo three levels of language teaching. They are Basic English Course for students of foreign origin, Remedial Course for students of Indian origin and Technical English Course and Communication Skills Course for both Indian and overseas students. With the emerging trends, the University has introduced technology based instruction methods through the computers, Internet, teleconferencing and soft skills training to produce industry-ready students.

Prior to introduction of the above tools, in the first year only 87% have qualified. The same batch of students in the III year have performed exceedingly well with no failures after the University has implemented technology driven teaching practices and online examination methods. The outcome of these measures was palpable. The paper presents a statistical analysis of learner achievements of 1200 students of the first batch (2008-09). To internationalise the curriculum and improve the learning process, periodic surveys are carried out and results obtained from the Likert Scale Analysis of a typical survey are also discussed in this paper.

Introduction

English has emerged as a global language and the demand for the language is universal and

youngsters from around the globe have realized that mastery in English would result in world wide

recognition and better job prospects. Many students from overseas join the universities in India so as

to attain mastery over the language. These overseas students are exposed to three types of English

language class rooms. They are Basic English Course, Technical English Course and Communication

Skills Course.

The University offers programmes to improve communication skills, guided by qualified and

experienced faculty, with the help of state-of-the-art computer-interfaced language lab (listen-records,

compare, monitor and intercommunication type). The labs enable the students to communicate better

in presentation, interview, listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar, and conversation skills.

The paper discusses the wide-ranging methods including technological tools to develop

communication skills in three distinct language classrooms employed by the language teacher. The

dire need for the implementation of soft skills program as part of the curriculum also forms a part of
the discussion in this paper. The main focus of this study is to analyse and evaluate the oral
communication and soft skills needs of the engineering graduates so as to enhance their career
prospects and frame a curriculum incorporating the aspects identifying the needs of the learners. The
paper highlights the importance of soft skills and has identified six important skills to be implemented
in all institutions of higher learning across the globe. They are:
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Thinking skills
- Positive attitude
- Leadership skills

Theoretical Background

The theoretical background for the present study is discussed in this paper. The concepts of ESP
(English for Specific Purposes), soft skills and needs analysis are briefly discussed here. Though the
study looks at the broader perspective of soft skills, it also advocates that without oral proficiency in
English language it is impossible for the engineering graduates to demonstrate any of the soft skills
demanded by the their prospective recruiters. So it is appropriate to highlight the concepts of ESP,
soft skills, needs analysis and the inter-relationship between them.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Munby (1978) argues that the most crucial problem for the syllabus designers in the field of language
for specific purposes is to specify validly the target communication competence. He adds that the
heart of the problem is the reluctance to begin with the learner rather than the text and the lack of a

rigorous system for finding out the communicative needs that are prerequisite to the appropriate
specification of what is to be taught.

It is very obvious from the above paragraph that Munby is advocating a learner-centered approach
beginning with the setting of objectives and the actual process of implementation of the programme. It
is also very evident from Munby's point of view that the learner should be the starting point of ESP
syllabus design and the syllabus should begin with the identification of learner's needs.
Palmer (1964:129) says, "We cannot design a language course until we know something about the
students for whom the course is intended, for a programme of study depends on the aim of the
students". But most importantly the learners should be identified first in order to ascertain their
needs. The present study, therefore, has given a lot of emphasis to needs analysis.

Communication skills and Soft Skills

The role of communication skills cannot be undermined when studying the corporate soft
skills needs of the engineering graduates. It is important to note that the major language of corporate
world is English and graduates all over the world who aspire to make it big in their career need to
improve their English language proficiency. But one's language skills alone cannot make him / her
successful in one's career as there are other soft skills like assertiveness, team management,
presentation skills etc. too which are equally important. Soft skills are a set of skills that influence
how we interact with each other. It includes personal and social skills like effective communication,
creativity, analytical thinking, diplomacy, flexibility, change-readiness, problem-solving and listening
skills. It also includes a lot of business skills like communication and presentation, leadership and
management, human resources, sales and marketing, team building, professional development, project
management, time management, customer service, administration and personal development.
Wikipedia defines soft skills in the following way:

"Soft skills is a sociological term relating to a person's "EQ" (Emotional Intelligence

Quotient), (Harms & Credé (2010)) the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication,
language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other people.
Soft skills complement hard skills (part of a person's IQ), which are the occupational requirements of
a job and many other activities."
The importance of soft skills as distinct from hard skills is increasingly being recognized in several
sectors of today's highly competitive world. Soft skills play a vital role in one's professional success.
They help a professional to excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in this age
of information technology. Soft skills complement the hard skills, which are the technical
requirements of a job, and are essential for success in the challenging work place environment.

Role of English among learners:

Roe (1986) suggests three levels of motivation to learn English. 'Level One', the highest level, when
English is required to obtain a degree or a desirable job or to get promotion. 'Level Two', is to
improve exam grades or influence positively career prospects of the participants and 'Level Three' is
where English could increase the student's chances of going abroad or widen his knowledge and
interests. This system of levels assumes instrumental motivation (where English is seen as a means to
achieving some practical or professional purpose) to be more important to success than integrative
motivation (where the learner identifies with the social or cultural aspects of learning English). It is

generally assumed that ESP programmes, by their nature, tend to emphasize the instrumental aspect of
a student's motivation.
  According to this definition ESP should be seen as a device through which a learner could
perform or play a role in a given context. In other words, the significance of ESP lies in its 'utility

value'. However, Robinson (1980:13) gives primacy to the role of needs analysis in her definition to
ESP. She adds a different dimension to the definition of ESP. She says that "We may say that an ESP
course is purposeful and is aimed at the successful performance of occupational or educational roles.
It is based on a rigorous analysis of needs and should be tailor-made."
  Information about the learners' current language skills and their language use form a major
data for needs analysis. It presents the proficiency of English of the participants in the present
situation and will allow the researcher to assess their lacks. The next important criterion taken into
account is the proficiency gap. It is all about the gap between the learners' current proficiency in
English and the level of English proficiency demanded by their profession.

Two major approaches of Language Learning

Cognitive approaches to communicative language teaching are based on the view that learning a
language is an individual psycholinguistic act. Technologies which support a cognitive approach to
language learning are those which allow learners maximum opportunity to learn the language in
meaningful context. Examples of these types of technologies include text-reconstruction software,
concordance software, and multimedia simulation software. A cognitivist would be interested in
grades but would also examine the effects of the computer program on student attitudes to computers
or to the course material or would investigate the knowledge acquired about the subject matter
(Thompson, Ann D., Simonson, Michael, R. & Hargrave, Constance, P. 1992)
 At present, most of the language teachers in India encourage students to do online communication
exercises and listen to audio files found on the net relating to their topics The Internet also serves as a
powerful tool for assisting a sociocognitive approach to language teaching, which largely accounts for
the new-found enthusiasm for using computers in the language classroom. Internet as well as the Web
is used as tools in the design of Creative learning activities.

Language Classrooms

In India most of the engineering colleges and universities still follow the traditional methods of
language teaching and the teacher student relationship plays a vital role. The teacher still utilizes the
basic teaching tools such as blackboard, chalk and flipcharts. The teaching material used is the
textbook prescribed that contains language-learning tasks meant for developing the four language
skills namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also contains tasks for learning grammar and
improving vocabulary.
There is a transition in the teaching methodology and the focus is on communicative methodology.
This entails students in Group Discussions, Role plays, Presentations and Debates and ensures
participation of learners whereby they do not remain mere passive listeners in classrooms. Role of the
language teachers are more of a facilitator and mentor. A language classroom serves as a good
platform to provide ample scope for personal interaction with the students and teachers. However the
teacher also faces several challenges in a classroom, as they have to handle students exhibiting fear
and anxiety to use the language.
The language teachers have a specific responsibility to develop soft skills. Apart from developing
communication skills steps should be taken by the language teacher to shed the anxiety and fear
among the students to use the language.

Language Labs

The Language lab sessions are gradually forming part of the English syllabus in many engineering
colleges in the country. The need for introduction of language lab sessions had risen to fulfil the goals
of language teaching using technology in order to meet the demands of the recruiters. The primary
objective of the language lab sessions is to develop effective speaking and listening skills, soft skills
and people skills, which will make the transition from college to workplace smoother and help them
to excel in their careers. The computer assisted language learning in the language labs provides ample

opportunities for the students to develop their study skills. The underlying role of the language lab has
not changed dramatically over time. The role is to help students to master their reading, writing,
listening, and speaking skills in the target language. While the traditional role of the lab has not

changed significantly, both the technology of language labs and the teaching methodologies employed
in language labs have changed dramatically. It is more supportive of communicative learning and
student interactivity.

Three levels of English language teaching

Broadly the students are exposed to three levels of English language teaching at the Hindustan
University. They are:
Basic English Course for overseas students from China, Korea, Nigeria, Liberia, Afghanistan, Oman,
Libya, Nepal and Thailand. These students undergo language course before getting enrolled in the
regular stream of engineering, management, arts and science course offered by the institution.
Technical English Course for the first year engineering undergraduates from various parts of India
with different cultural and vernacular background
Communication Skills Course for the students of higher semester engineering graduates.

I. Basic English Course for overseas students

The University provides Basic English Course for the students from overseas. The primary goal is to
make the students comfortable with the environment and help the students to cope up with the cultural
dissimilarity. A course co-coordinator caters to the needs of the overseas students and interacts with
the subject teachers so that a receptive environment is first established.

Features of the Course

The Basic course in English is for six months. It was designed for students from Non-English
speaking countries and is offered as a Bridge Course. This is to upgrade their level of proficiency to

take up higher studies with confidence.

Course Structure

The main objectives of the English course are to impart the four language skills. The course focuses
on Grammar, language, listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The lab sessions includes
learning correct pronunciation, listening to BBC News, Internet News and Video clips and Phonetic
lessons.

Learners Profile

The participants who enrolled in the Basic English course (Batch 2008-2012) were 17-19 years of
age. They were educated in schools of their respective nation. The goal to enrol in the course is to
acquire proficiency in the target language and pursue the regular engineering programmes offered by
the University.

Data gathering: Informal discussions

The researcher conducted an informal discussion with a random group of 40 students (comprising
Omanis, Chinese, Africans and Middle East students) after the completion of the Basic English
Course. The questions were based on the reasons for enrolling in the Basic English course and it also
focussed on the specific areas that the course should concentrate according to the needs of the target
learners. The students responses were recorded, quantified and analysed for better interpretation and
understanding.

The important findings of the informal discussion are presented briefly here. The students opined that
they joined the course to be more confident in the use of English language before joining the graduate
course. Their goal was to improve the fluency in spoken English, develop vocabulary and learn to
frame grammatically correct sentences. Enhance their career prospects and build on personal
knowledge base.

A majority of the students expressed their views that the Course apart from developing the four
language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing should include specific areas of

development of the personality of the students such as motivation, assertiveness, stress management,
time management, thinking skills and creativity
The above data clearly indicates that the students have given prime importance for developing
communication skills before joining the graduate programme. It is interesting to note that the students
have emphasised the importance of soft skills such as developing the personality prior to enhancing
their career prospects and developing personal knowledge base.

II Technical English Course for the first year engineering undergraduates

The students from a regional medium background every year join various engineering disciplines in
several colleges and deemed universities in Tamil Nadu. In addition, the intake of engineering