A Critical Analysis of the Problems in Communicative English Faced by Learners in Engineering Colleges

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Abstract:

A critical study is conducted in a premier Engineering college in Tamil Nadu.This Institution enjoys an excellent status in terms of admissions, extra-curricular activities and placement. Meritorious students with high scores in plus two are admitted every year. The institution takes up a series of steps to improve the communication skills of learners. Despite these efforts, many final year students are unfit to be placed due to low proficiency in the basic skills of English language. Hence the study aims at identifying their problems with communication skills, analyzing the causes and suggesting remedies for improvement. Every class room has a heterogeneous group of students from different educational streams such as- CBSE, matriculation and state board. A majority of students have had their schooling in Tamil medium. Further, they hail from different backgrounds, rural, semirural and urban. Technical English is included in the curriculum only in first and second semesters, where concentration is on teaching grammar items. In the fifth semester, every branch of students is given a three hour training per week in the communication lab. The study reveals that the learners' indifference and lack of intrinsic motivation is the prime cause for low proficiency. The evaluation system compels the faculty to complete the syllabus from an examination point of view. This is another handicap which prevents the teachers from imparting the required communication competency within the prescribed hours. It is hoped that this study will create awareness among the language teachers to discover more efficient methods to cope up with the learners' need.

Key words: Competence; Proficiency; Communication; Interaction.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

There has been a growing complaint that the students from rural background do not excel in Communication Skills in engineering colleges. The present study makes an attempt to analyze the problems faced by these students. The study also points out the reasons behind the problems and suggests various measures to develop the communicative competence in L2 learners. Globalization has promoted English as a medium of communication on a global level. Proficiency in the English language is essential for academic performance, as well as social and professional development.

Traditional methodologies in language teaching have been heavily criticized. It is felt that the present methodology is decontextualised as it is not fit to encourage the learner to come out with interaction. "To master another language, the learner needs to pickup not only linguistic accuracy but also communicative competence which incorporates grammatical discourse and socio-linguistic competence".

In an engineering college, students look for placement in leading corporates in the final year of their course. The author of this paper has been interacting with students who have to go through the various stages of the placement procedure. During the course of the procedure, students with low proficiency in communication skills are left out. The feedback from the heads of the corporate is that the students have to improve their oral communication. In turn, the English language teachers are forced to review the situation and implement remedial measures and make the students competent enough to face interviews.

Therefore, successful language learning and teaching is vital for the students who are likely to be placed in corporates and public sectors. General language teaching is insufficient and defective. Every language course should have a specific purpose and it should be meticulously designed. "No language program should be designed without a thorough need analysis".

Methodology:

The methodology adopted depends on the author's long experience in language teaching, interactions with fellow teachers and students, analysis of structured interviews, conversation analysis and questionnaire analysis of selected participants.

Drawbacks of the present methodology adopted in the class room and suggestions for improving the methodology.

Most of the grammatical structures are taught in total isolation drawn away from situational application. For example, the grammar item, 'change of voice' is introduced without applying its practical relevance for communicative expression. As a result, learners do not understand for what purpose the item is taught. This problem can be solved by introducing the teaching item against practical situation. Some technical constructions are more effective when they are put in the passive, rather than active. Students should realize, though drilling is given in changing sentences from active to passive, the grammatical item is to help them construct better sentences in technical writing. For example,   "Modifications have been effected in the design of the plant". "Desalination plants have been set up" These sentences convey the full meaning when structured in the passive. Communicative functions of the language and the communicative need should be kept in mind both by the teacher and the learner.

Grammatical, linguistic and communicative approaches are very essential. In the words of D.A.Wilkins "linguistic forms provide a means to an end and that end is communication. Great concern should be given to seeing what is learnt has communicative value, and what has communicative value is learnt". Only on the foundation of grammatical competence of the learner, the super structure can be built. The need of the learner is to have greater communicative ability in the target language.

Another defect of the present methodology is lack of opportunity for the learner to express the skills he has acquired. Outside the class room everybody transacts business in the local language. It is like having a legal driving license on hand, but not being able to drive the car. The learner should take initiative in finding out ways and methods to express his ideas in English.

During coffee break and lunch break learners assemble in groups where they have 'small talk'. They should make deliberate attempt to converse in English. For example, one learner asks 'Do you prefer black coffee to lemon tea? Another learner answers 'usually I take ordinary tea but today I am taking black coffee'. What is taught in the class room about the usage of present tense and present continuous tense is directly implemented in the situation. Similarly those who are in the playing field can have spontaneous display of L2 especially when the players are from different states. The tennis players in the college court have a casual conversation on a recent match

A   Did you watch Roger Federer crushing David Gaffin in the Sunday finals?

B   Yea, it was awesome. He has added a sixth title to his success story.

A   Did you watch the record timing?

B   In just 51 mts, he lifts the trophy and he is likely to end the season on world No1 ranking.

These players gradually gain confidence and they do well in class room discussion and HR interviews. These learners' interest in tennis drives them to watch the game on the TV or read the commentary   in the sports column. This is a boon in disguise as they unconsciously pickup communication skills.

One of the major drawbacks in the present day teaching methodology is the role played by the teacher .The language teacher continues to be the dictator of the class. This attitude of the teacher should be changed. He should no more be the absolute dictator of the class, making the learners totally dependent on him. The tendency of the language teacher should be to make the learners work at their pace .The teacher can be a facilitator playing minimum role in the class room. This will go a long way in allowing the learners feel free and participate in the daily interactions in the class room. Though the teacher plays a minimum role inside the class, room he should play a major role outside the class room. The teacher is a guide, counselor, and philosopher for his learners. All the deliberations with his learners outside the class room can be in the target language.

Another major issue the learners face is the wide gap between the English proficiency of Engineering college students and the requirements of the industries. This gap should be filled by introducing strategies for the development of communicative skills. English curriculum should be revised and reframed to equip the students with the skills the industries require. The text books, the syllabi, and the teaching materials must be revised periodically as per the need analysis and made suitable for developing employable skills. Spaced orientation to the teachers by language experts can also be arranged.

"Language is taught in a vacuum", thus goes the general comment on the defective method of teaching. In the words of H.G.Widdowson, "it is taught as a set of skills which have no immediate utility. When the need arises in future what is learnt cannot be converted into adequate performance. Language teaching has to be geared to specific communicative purposes. The process should be from grammatical competence to communicative performance".

Linguistic Competence versus Communicative Competence:

To achieve communicative competence is the goal of language learning. The question is "are we teaching language for communication or are we teaching communication via language". Linguistic accuracy is very essential but it should not become a barrier for fluency in communication."The aim of language teaching is to teach the learner to exploit grammatical knowledge in creative acts of communication."

According to D.A.Wilkins "communicative and grammatical facts are to be learnt simultaneously, otherwise the learner will have no foundation. There is an impression that linguistic competence is secondary to communicative competence. The language teacher is expected to tolerate the linguistic inaccuracies committed by the target language learner(L2).For example, the learner writes "I am living in Chennai for 20 years" instead of "I have been living in Chennai for 20 years". The question is where the focus should be--on linguistic skills or communicative skills. In other words, communicative competence includes both the use of linguistic skills and the functional aspects of communication.

Advantages of Different approaches:

In the past, the teaching process was mainly teacher-centered. Gradually it got evolved into a   learner-centered approach. The present methodology   welcomes interactional approach. In the class room situation this approach gives ample opportunity for the learners to come out with their responses. In an Engineering college the students' low proficiency in communication skills has to be improved. Therefore, the need based approach or ESP approach is preferred to ESL (English Second Language) or ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages).The question is- what is the primary need of the learner. Most people would say that the need of the Engineering students is to use the language for technical purposes, such as preparing project proposals and project reports, The ESP approach motivates the learners to apply what they learn in the class room to their main fields of Engineering. They should be able to use the linguistic knowledge (vocabulary and grammatical structures) in meaningful context.

Analysis: questionnaire and Interviews:

Selected learners were asked to answer a set of questions regarding the reasons for low proficiency in the language acquisition. The majority of students who are neither fluent nor confident enough to speak English. They confess that the learning environment does not provide an opportunity to speak English inside the campus. Lorrenzo Fiorito Professor of Linguistics at the university of Naples expresses his opinion that, "the teacher is responsible for creating the learning environment in the class room and the campus. Being their teacher, he may be the only English speaking person in the classroom available to the students, and although his time with them is limited, he can structure effective communication skills". Learning environment can be created by discussing current issues in the country and latest events in the field of national and international games etc. Discussions and debates can provide lively interaction in the class room. Ten to fifteen minutes should be set apart for this purpose. To start with, students who have good fluency in English should be allowed to lead the discussion. As days go by, those who are hesitant and timid should also be encouraged to join. The teacher should take care not to interrupt by pointing out mistakes. A series of items or topics can be displayed in the Department notice board for future discussion and debate. The teacher has the responsibility in building up the learners' confidence to speak English. In short,   the role of the English teacher is becoming an increasingly challenging one.

Recently The Education Plus of The Hindu(National Daily) came out with the first person experience of "a student in the hot seat" narrating what happens during a placement interview. He was successful in two rounds of aptitude and technical interviews. In the HR round, he was asked to tell them something that was not in his resume. He replied, "I am creative, curious, and cautious". The next question was whether he was aware of the attrition rate of the company. Although he was not sure, he confidently said it was 10%. They were testing his confidence. He was further asked to explain the purpose of the

project extensively and tools he used at the front and back ends, and how long would he stay with the company and what he wanted to do in life. He could answer all these questions because he had good communication skills and he displayed his confidence during the interview. Hence it is essential to conduct a number of mock interviews so that the learners would be prepared to face any situation. English teachers need to design a series of similar mock interviews. To make the class more lively and interesting the teacher should introduce a few language activities. A recap of the weekly news items can be introduced. As most of the students regularly watch movies, film reviews can be introduced once a month.

Remedial measures for enhancing communication skills

Communication related activities can be introduced in campuses to engage students through Toast Masters' Club, English Literary Club, Readers Club, etc., Learners can freely participate in the various programs of the club which meets once a week. Students with intrinsic motivation respond positively and take active participation. In addition, learners can find out 'self-directed learning'. All these activities provide enough opportunities for confidence building. 'Brush up your English' is a periodical event where linguistic and grammatical rules are revised. English camp is another opportunity where learners can meet, mix and chat in the target language. Students are taken to a hill station during weekends and holidays when nobody is allowed to transact any business in the local language.

Workplace Communication

Communication is one of the important skills, leaders should have on their list of competencies 'Language plays a crucial role in creating a harmonious atmosphere at the workplace." 'A work place is a typical community of practices with its own repertoire of resources including linguistic and discourse resources. Joining a new workplace entails learning how to use language to negotiate new meanings with new colleagues. Person to person Interaction is dynamic and language is a crucial resource in managing social relations at work. Effective communication skills in the workplace will improve your ability to be a strong leader. The learners of today are going to be employed in different capacities. The employers or the industries look for excellent communication skills in their prospective employees. So it is the duty of the language teachers to make their learners excel in all channels of communication which include verbal, non-verbal, face to face, telephonic, video conferencing and also written communication. One should remember that all written communication is open to interpretation. Written communication should be professional, precise, and clear. It should be free from grammatical errors and all steps should be taken to reduce miscommunication and maintain professional credibility. An e-mail letter or a memo may not be the best way to communicate critical information. Effective communication at workplace accelerates productivity.

English language has become very essential in the MNCs and at international levels where people speak different languages. English is the only language which can be used as a common language for people from different nationalities. The Times of India from Bangalore reports that the police personnel working at the International Airport, Bangalore started learning English. Spoken English classes were arranged for the police force for fifty days. They realized the need to learn the basic English skills. 'We need to communicate in English as thousands of foreigners use the airport daily. The language lessons are helpful building bridges not just on the roads but even at home…' (21stOctober 2014, Bangalore Edition).They say they are reaching out to their kids too. Dinner conversation at the household has a different flavor these days. They are able to interact with their kids at home. Need based learning works wonders at the receiving end.

Transactional Value of the English Language Skills:

Practising a variety of basic language skills or linguistic skills produces a tremendous effect on business transaction in public places. 'Small Talk' generated during the brief interaction at super market checkouts, coffee stalls, banking counters, works very well for person to person network skills. A good rapport is built through impressionistic language and expression. The customers' leave taking with a word of 'thank you' or 'very kind of you' goes a long way in the employee's job performance. It is very important to communicate better with people. One can integrate more easily into society. All agree that good communication is an essential component of good business. Language is the bearer of the culture in a world of ever increasing internationalism and globalization. Therefore, language competency is necessary in public life and in the business world.

Findings and Conclusion:

The analysis reveals that learners do not make use of the available resources .The three hour communication lab session is not properly used by the students. Group discussion and oral presentation are done nominally just to show that these tasks included in the curriculum are completed. Uniform participation in group discussion is not emphasized. The one who takes initiative to lead the discussion monopolises the entire session. No extra reading is undertaken by the learners. Seldom do they read Newspapers nor do they listen to English News bulletins. Self directed learning beyond the class room is totally neglected. The role and responsibility of the teacher is discussed in detail. The importance of interaction-centered teaching is stressed and the importance of work place communication is vividly analysed. The study has highlighted the different aspects of communicative competence rather than linguistic competence. To sum up, the present study is highly profitable and rewarding for a language researcher in the field of English language teaching.

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