

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.6.Issue.2.2019 (Apr-June)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS: GAPS IN LEARNING ADDRESSING THE
EMPLOYABILITY FACTOR

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.6219.100>



ABSTRACT

The present article discusses the gap between the employability requirements of English and the way it is being taught in the technical colleges. A study conducted by *Aspiring Minds*, on 150000 engineering graduates, mentions in its report that only 7% of the graduates were found to be employable. To attend to this dismal state of affairs the policies at the national level have been framed, yet the colleges face the big question of employability of the Engineering students. One of the most highlighted factors accepted by multiple researches so far has been poor English communication skills of the engineering graduates. The aim of this study is to observe the necessary gap in the real-time classroom teaching and the expected standards for Employability. The study is based on practical observance of the classroom methods used in teaching English in the engineering colleges and the tools deployed for creating access for easy access to learning English communication in these institutions. The study has taken into account the barriers pertaining to age, interferences due to learning backgrounds, teachers learning and orientation, teaching environment, treatment of English teaching, its intensity and manner of placement amongst the learners and the perceived effect of expectations from the English Language learning. The study brings about an objectified list of responsible factors that deter the development of English in these students studying in technical institutions. The research has taken colleges of Bhopal into observation and is based on the literature available on researches on employability and contribution of English as a factor for employability. The expectations with regards to employability have been assessed through some of the standard test patterns used by the employers. The test content has been compared to the matter delivered in the classrooms and the way it is delivered to ensure the overall productivity. The study reveals multiple factors being responsible for the development of English language skills in order to help students acquire employable skill-set. Both, human and technical environment that is available to the student has to be treated in order to get desired output. The study shall provide ways to strategies English communication methods in a more streamlined manner in the present context.

Keywords: employability, engineering students, English Language skills, teaching of English in engineering colleges

1. Introduction

1.1 Concerns on Education versus Employability:

National Institution for Transforming India (NITI- Aayog), formulated under the Government of India focuses on some of the key areas pertaining to the socio-economic development of the country. The Institution has formulated a policy for national employment which discusses at length the present scenario of the job market and the educational and skill related interventions required to curb the gaps in employment and employability. In an article titled, National Employment Policy for India: A Perspective, Ms. Sunita Sanghi and Dr. Sakshi Khurana state thus;

“India, despite achieving an impressive and steadily rising economic growth in recent years, still faces the twin challenge of creating adequate decent employment opportunities for scores of young men and women joining the labour market every year and facilitating the transition from informal to formal employment for those already in the labour market. The youth presently make up close to 35% of the population and the Indian workforce is expected to increase to approximately 600 million by the year 2022 from the current estimated 473 million.” (Khurana n.d.) .The same article continues to express its concern over the skill-mismatch, skill training and re-training as a crucial part of employability. It is clear from the data shared through the policy that the growing numbers of unemployed youth which in coming future are only to multiply need an immediate address with respect to their conversion to be employable.

The post-independence India saw education policies addressed to envision the future India. India that was to be; both in light of the developments to be and the developers to be. The British education system that acceded to the immediate needs of designing the structure of education machinery made way for what was to come. The growth of India as a democracy had many dimensions and an important dimension was growth in technology and thereby higher life expectancy, reduction in mortality rate and a huge upsurge in population. The technical and developmental growth of the country however could not overdo the growth in population leading to the present scenario of employment crisis. Though the time and on interventions lead to increase in educational institutions, bringing forth the blast in the technical institutions mushrooming across every corner of the nation, the dismal picture only took a different shape.

Prof .Raghbendra Jha of Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University expresses concern over the employability factor in India and quotes in a blog, “When looking at recent data, it is hard to escape the conclusion that although India has enjoyed high economic growth this has largely been jobless economic growth. It is imperative for there to be a big push in the areas of education and employment in India. This is the most significant policy challenge facing the Indian economy.” (JHA 2015). The employment issue on this date has different questions than before to be addressed; primarily the education in light of employability and the training of the already ready workforce for the available employment opportunities. In light of technical institutions that have created a sort of niche in the global workforce market, positioning employable youth has proved to be a challenge. Policies and schemes are consistently being designed to address the growing need for of employing the candidates with high level of tertiary education certificates and degrees. Yet the colossal unemployed youth data is a clear view of the loopholes in the education system.

International Labour Organisation embarks on the alarming issue of unemployment thus;

“A part of the problem of employment has always been the result of a mismatch between qualitative aspects of the supply and demand of labour: demand has remained unfulfilled due to non-availability of workers with requisite skills and workers have remained unemployed or underemployed as they have no skills or their skills have no demand. This mismatch seems to have grown in recent years due to fast changes in production technologies and structures to which the skill supply mechanisms and institutions have not been quick enough to respond. The problem is essentially two-fold: a large part of

the Indian workforce has no acquired skills and many have skills which are not in demand. Thus, a certain part of the Labour force does not get employed due to their “unemployability”. (Papola 2008). The report also quotes Planning Commission in saying that, of those with secondary and higher-level education, 15 per cent were unemployed, whereas in the total labor force only 7 per cent were unemployed.

The term ‘Employability’ stands apart in light of the education that is framed in the present scenario and the skill set demanded by the employers. The present scenario of human capital content of the Indian workforce consisting of a miniscule number of highly skilled technical manpower — particularly in the hi-tech and IT sectors — at the top and a vast majority of illiterate, uneducated and unskilled workforce at the bottom, prompted an eminent observer recently to characterise the Indian labour market as the “peacock with beautiful feathers and ugly feet” (Chadda 2004)

1.2 Skills for Employability:

The subject of employability, skill sets and the employer’s perception have been talked at various levels internationally. Universities across the globe have featured reports that reflect much in common when the talk is about the employability matrices and the perceptions of the employers.

The SCRE Centre which is now part of the School of Education within the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow, was commissioned by the Edge Foundation to explore employers’ perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. The research began main data collection in 2009 and was completed in October 2010. The report which was published in 2011 accommodates the UKCES report ‘The Employability Challenge’, that drew on the most commonly used definitions of employability:

It discusses about the skills that almost everyone needs to qualify for any job. These are some of the fundamental skills that must be present in an individual in order to use the more specific technical skills in the job sphere. These skills provide for a sound base for any job. The report mentions the skills as;

- a. A foundation of Positive Approach: This foundation supports three Functional Skills:
 - i. Using numbers effectively-measuring, recording measurements, calculating, estimating quantities, relating numbers to the job.
 - ii. Using language effectively- writing clearly and in a way appropriate to the context, ordering facts and concepts logically
 - iii. Using IT effectively– operating a computer, both using basic systems and also learning other applications as necessary, and using telephones and other technology to communicate
- b. These functional skills are exercised in the context of four Personal Skills:
 - i. Self-management – involving punctuality and time management, relating proper dress and behavior to context, overcoming challenges and asking for help when necessary
 - ii. Thinking and solving problems – Involving creativity, reflecting on and learning from own actions, prioritizing, analyzing situations, and developing solutions
 - iii. Working together and communicating– co-operating, being assertive, persuading, being responsible to others, speaking clearly to individuals and groups and listening for a response
 - iv. Understanding the business – understanding how the individual job fits into the organization as a whole; recognizing the needs of stakeholders (customers and service users, for example); judging risks, innovating, and contributing to the whole organization. (Kevin Lowden 2011) The report pays immense focus on the interactive side of human relations as a part of job requirement. It can be clearly seen that communication skills tend to reflect in realizing all interpersonal skills.

1.3 The Indian Side of Employment

Looking at the Indian side of the picture, Aspiring Minds, an employability solutions Company based in Gurgaon produced National Employability Report based on tests administered on the Engineers in 2015. The report that accommodates the assessment conducted over 150000 engineering graduates reflects that only 7% of the engineering graduates were found to be employable. The test known as AMCAT included assessment of Quantitative Aptitude, Communication Skills, Logical Skills and Technical Skills. It is a clear reflection that communications skills formed for about 25% of the total assessment.

A Clement and T. Murugavel in their paper titled, 'English for Employability; A Case study of English Language Training Need Analysis for Engineering Students in India', discuss a list of aspects pertaining to the English Language training deficits in Engineering colleges. These aspects namely are, 1) Lack of training for English professors. 2) Students of different levels in the same class. 3) Number of students in each class (60 per class). 4) Lack of time to complete the prescribed syllabus. 5) More importance on written exams (traditional method in India). 6) Pressure on teachers to produce high pass percentage in final exams. 7) Lack of quality text books. 8) Use of workbooks that compile the exercises from previous university question papers. 9) Lack of support from college managements. 10) English being treated as yet another subject to study. 11) Irrelevant syllabus design. 12) Lack of relevant methodologies (Murugavel 2015). Though most teachers teaching in colleges are professionally qualified as per the standards laid by the affiliating agency, the gap lies in the proper understanding of the teaching methodology. The paper presents that only 30.6 % of the students felt that the methodology for teaching English was effective, 39.4 % disagreed with the effectiveness of teaching practices and the remaining 30% remained indecisive about the effectiveness of the course. The paper addresses to the non-structured and teacher-centric approach followed in the engineering colleges in India that allows little participation of the student in order to groom the necessary skills in English Language. It is a fact that the rote learning and the question and answer methodology where students are taught to learn English as a curriculum has not served the employability side rightly. The students are trained and mentally prepared for acquiring high level Certificates and Marks whereby the expectations increase but the lack of communication skills and the right approach to handle the research and industry driven requirements creates a huge gap.

Teaching of English as dealt in the colleges, is a subject of contention. Having understood that in India, English has a status of Second Language. The treatment to teaching of English in such capacity has not been seriously dealt with, leading to a lot of anxiety and frustration to the learners and affecting the employability of the learner. The Grammar translation method which inevitably finds way in the multi-cultural, multi-lingual and non-native English classrooms in India is not an exception with the technical or non-technical institutions when it comes to professional education.

2. Methodology

The study has taken into account classroom observation of teaching practices in some of the Engineering colleges in Bhopal. The names of colleges and the faculties have been held for the reasons of privacy and non-revelation of identity. The college wise faculties were asked about their professional qualification and their teaching methods observed in the classroom. The students were asked through questionnaires the efficiency in the teaching methods and the suggestions for improvement. The student's English communication assessment methods were also discussed in detail with the teachers in charge.

The students studying in these colleges of Bhopal come from different states namely; Bihar, Odisha, Assam, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. It is to be understood that the admission process largely impacts the kind of student input in these colleges. The colleges in Bhopal accommodate students who get qualified through the competition and those who come through lateral entry by merit scores of Higher Secondary.

A total of 8 faculties teaching in different Technical institutions in Bhopal were administered for their qualifications and teaching processes. Out of the 8 faculties 5 faculties were Ph.D. and one M.Phil. in English. Remaining 2 faculties were good in speaking English but did not have a degree in English.

The students studying in the Final Semester were administered through interview schedule which was used on a random basis. The purpose of the study was to assess the gaps in teaching-learning in a general manner and not specifically targeting a comparison between a set of colleges in Bhopal therefore no single college has been taken. The participation was purely voluntary. A total of 200 forms were distributed out of which 134 were received.

The questionnaire was structured with descriptive questions to allow room for individual minds to express their views more openly and not restrict them through options and numbers.

The short questionnaire which was descriptive in nature has been shared as follows:

1. How many classes do you have every week for English in your college?
2. How many of these classes do you attend?
3. Tell us why do you like to attend, or do not like to attend the English classes?
4. Has the English curriculum that has been taught in your college helped you to improve your English to the desired level? Tell us how?
5. What all skills/ subject matter is taught in the English class?
6. Do you have a prescribed book for English in college?
7. What do you do apart from the regular English classes in the college to improve your language skills?
8. What according to you can be done in order to motivate students to attend the English classes?

Findings

The teachers teaching English Language Communication Skills in these colleges are of the qualification level of Master's degree and M. Phil or Ph. D in English. The teachers however are not all trained to be teaching English as a Second Language or Teaching of English to adult learners. This explains that the teachers at this level are subject matter experts lacking necessary training in teaching methodology.

- In all the colleges English was compulsorily taught in the first year as a part of the curriculum. Most students accepted that English communication was taught at the time of final semester as a part of placement activity in a training scheduled just before the campus placement drives. Most students accepted that English was compulsorily taught in the first year curriculum and then inputs were provided in short training before the placement activities in the final year. From item 1 of the questionnaire it was realized that, in the first year class frequency was 4 classes a week, but later it was not found to be consistent in all the colleges. Item 2 gave an insight into the total presence felt in the English classes. While most students said that they attended about 80-90% of the English classes in the first year, the students of later semester who received some input classes of English saw about 50-60% attendance only.
- The students had mixed responses when they were questioned if, the English classes in the college were helpful in improving their English language skills. The responses were not very clear to bring about a statement on the effectiveness of these classes. But 73% of the respondents in response to item 6 of the questionnaire agreed that they had a prescribed book for English in college.

- The English curriculum taught in the administered colleges did not have any uniformity to suggest that the program were based on same framework. The teaching material used in the classes and the pedagogy varied with the teacher teaching in class.
- The English for employability factor was apparently addressed in an unstructured teaching encompassing the following subject matter which was received as a set of responses to item 7 of the questionnaire:
 - Speaking skills: speaking about oneself, family, institution and environment, short extempore, group discussions on concurrent topics, speaking in interview
 - Reading Skills: Reading Comprehensions
 - Writing Skills: email writing, letter writing and Resume writing
- The researcher tried to observe the teachers for their delivery of the required skills in the class. The teachers were found to be good speakers of English and had good command over the subject knowledge, however the classroom demands with employability in light made a different expectation altogether. The teachers were found deficient of required teaching skills in two ways:
 - They were not groomed to teach English. As said earlier, they had subject knowledge but did not have enough knowledge to transfer that knowledge. Unlike other subjects, English skills need to be taught in a more constructive manner and therefore require proactivity from the side of the Language teacher to create aids from the environment to develop a concept and the focus on the skillset taught can make learning interesting and interactive.
 - They were not groomed to teach adult learners. Teaching adults is a specialized subject. The students who are adult learners of English come in various categories. Those who have reasonable exposure to English language need of only the inputs that can develop professional attitude to it. While the students who come from vernacular backgrounds need to be psychologically trained for receptivity
- The kind of population in these colleges was of heterogeneous background with respects to ethnicity, mother tongue and the area of upbringing. The aspect of heterogeneity was not addressed in the colleges while addressing the teaching of English.
- The faculties of other subjects were flexible in the use of English. They could easily swap with other languages to teach the required subject matter in class. This apparently failed the purpose of English class in general and automatically made English classes as classes of yet another subject. The added factor which was realized during the general observation was that not all faculties teaching the technical subjects were comfortable themselves in the use of English.
- The necessity of acquiring English Language skills was commonly felt by the students of all the colleges, however, the attendance in the classes reflected that the participation to acquire the required skill set was not wholehearted. In most cases the institutions had a clause of mandatory attendance ranging between 50 to 60 percent of the total number of classes. The students were interviewed on the said aspect through a suggestive question, 'What according to you can be done in order to motivate students to attend the English classes?' Some of these responses are shared as under:
 - "There should be more interactive sessions than lectures."
 - "The basics should be taught, as we are not able to make simple sentences."
 - Teachers should work on helping the students to overcome hesitation."

- “I am good in my technical knowledge; I don’t think I want to study English.”
- The motivation to learn English was not found to be a part of teaching-learning environment but rather realized as a need to qualify for an employment and hence having a very specific and narrow appeal.

Conclusion:

It can be clearly seen that communication skills in English Language make an important factor towards employability. The communication skills in English Language as taught in the colleges need to have a serious probe both in method and content in order to help the present scenario of employability. A strategic approach to teaching English Language as a Communication skill should be adopted in consensus to deliver visible results. The teachers trying at the college level should be taken into concern as much as it is imperative at the school level. The multilingual methods of teaching should be replaced with more teaching conducted in English Language and the treatment of English as a subject should be transformed to the accepted cultural level in the environment by large. As an added part of the responsibility of the system it should be ensured that the faculties teaching in the technical institutions be comfortable in delivery of their subject matter in English. This in turn shall ensure providing a conducive environment required for the development of the English Language skills for making the technical Engineering graduates in particular more employable.

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