DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILLS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSES USING ICT FOR THE ENGINEERING STUDENTS: AN INDIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The importance of developing engineering students' competence in English professional communication skills to achieve their career goals in the 21st century needs to be acknowledged. In a multilingual and multicultural context of India where students come from diverse linguistic communities, it is a challenge for most of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) practitioners to develop students' English speaking skills (Presentation, public speaking, group discussions etc.). The English language course is a part of the curriculum of the first year engineering undergraduates, however, how much focus is given to the development of oral communication skills in that course is questionable. The present paper is an inquiry into the existing curriculum of professional communication being offered to the engineering undergraduates, and it also probes the weightage being given to the teaching and learning of speaking skills in it. In the era of information technology, where oral communication has a varied mode, it is of utmost importance to delve into the discussion of the pivotal role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in improving the oral communication skills of engineering students. Indian classrooms are turning into smart classrooms, hence, integrating the teaching and learning of speaking skills with ICT is a pre-requisite for the teaching of professional communication. The present study aims to reveal the significance of the combination of such an advanced teaching and learning method. This study has adopted a methodological approach, such as interactive methods and communicative method of teaching English language supplementing it with the application of ICT. The theoretical part of the paper is followed by a more practical approach of suggesting activity-based practising of speaking skills in a specific ESP class; to narrow down the gap existing in the curriculum and the need for the speaking skills of engineering students.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, English for Specific Purpose, Speaking Skills, Internet and Communication Technology

1. Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is a learner-centred approach to English language teaching. One of the important contributions of ESP has been the fact that it emphasises a thorough analysis of the students' needs while designing the course. The focus of the present analysis consists of an assessment of the need of the engineering students in the context of the target situation and developing oral communication skills in the students. The analysis also provides suggestions and improvements that can be made in the existing curriculum in order to enhance students' fluency in the English language.

The present research paper aims to introduce the topic of speaking skills/oral communication in the engineering classrooms. Engineering course is dominantly an application-based course which emphasises learning by doing rather than talking about it theoretically. In a course like

this, the vital role of oral communication cannot be over-emphasised, as it is essential for communicating in engineering-related activities.

The process of curriculum design in such cases often becomes more dynamic and negotiated which varies in accordance with the varying group of students and their socio-educational profiles. As Dudley-Evans (2001, p. 9) advocates the fact that 'EAP often tends to be a practical affair and these areas are typically understood in terms of local contexts and the needs of a particular student". However, this practice of curriculum design is not followed in the educational institutes, and the syllabus is also not updated on a regular basis, nor it is based on students' need. ESP teachers and students follow the courses designed by others who might or might not be aware of the students' need in the given context. In the cases where ESP teachers get an opportunity to design the syllabus, a thorough analysis of the previous-mentioned factors are not considered while designing the curriculum. Similar weightage is not given to both oral and written communication skills is a curriculum. Also, the teaching methods employed to teach ESP are not revised and changed as per the advancements in the teaching techniques. These are few issues, which need to be addressed in the profession of ESP.

2.The present status of English in India

English is a widespread language in India and has taken deep roots in the country. It has become a common language for different purposes such as trade and commerce, education, industry, fashion, science and technology, fashion etc. There are several government-funded prestigious English institutes which indicate government's support for research and teachers' training in English. Students from across the world are joining English language streams in Indian universities. With a little more effort and encouragement in the area of education in English language, India can hold the lead in providing English language education/training in Afro-Asian countries.

English nowadays is not only a window to the outer world, but it is also a pre-requisite to get into the field of IT and other related fields. Indian IT workers do not just have an advantage of the right skill and wage but also the knowledge of English language. In India, the popular belief of being educated has become synonymous to English-literate.

3.English as a Second language in India

India as a multilingual country has given many chances to almost all its regional languages to flourish. Students get the liberty to study in their regional languages. Three-language formula was adopted by the Indian parliament in 1968. This policy formulation was more of a strategy to promote education in the regional medium. This policy framework emphasised the mother tongue or regional language to be studied as the first language. A focus on the regional language as a medium of education at a primary level was given. The implementation of this policy gave enough space for the proximate regional languages to prosper in the education sector keeping this in line with the declaration of UNESCO (1953) that the mother tongue serves as the best medium of education for children.

At the university level, the prevalent medium of education is English. The students coming to these universities come from a variety of educational backgrounds with respect to their general and language curriculum. A class in the university consists of a mixture of students coming from an English medium and a non-English medium educational background. To address the needs of a class with such a diverse educational background becomes the challenge that needs to be addressed.

With the emergence of English as a dominant language in the globalised world, there emerged many English medium schools of differing standards in the Indian cities. Some of these schools insist that the students use English for both oral and written communication within the premises of the school. In the other variety of English medium schools, English is taught as a subject and is also used as a medium of education, mainly in the written texts. The teaching method of English language in India is still burdened with multiple hurdles and difficulties. There has been a major shift in the motivation factor of English language learners; there has been a universal interest development in the students towards English language learning. As mentioned by Sheorey (2006, p. 19 & 37), Indian students have a strong desire and motivation for English language learning as they are conscious of the fact the it is a window for them to get a well-paid job, to achieve success in terms of one's socio-economical status, from getting a professional job to establish one's professional credibility. According to Sheorey (2006), many Indian students who belong to non-English medium schools have frankly expressed their fear and frustration regarding their English language proficiency which also induces fear among the students regarding their future career prospects. Students believe English language to be a necessity in their academic and social life and they consider it to be an asset.

English for Specific Purpose: what is in the curriculum vs what is required?

As discussed in the above section, English language forms a fundamental necessity for a student to be successful in any field. In the present paper, English for scientific and engineering purposes has been taken into consideration. The course of English language is usually offered to the students in the first year of B.Tech course. English is a compulsory course for all the branches of engineering. This course emphasises developing all the necessary communicative skills of students that are; reading, listening, writing, speaking, grammar and vocabulary. The professional communication course consists of four to five units comprising the sections such as introduction to communication and related concepts, English grammar, business writing, essays etc. It is evident that speaking skills are being given less weightage in this kind of curriculum.

The importance of speaking skills in an engineering course is even more as the students can be found quite reluctant when it comes to speaking in public. This hesitation of public speaking can be attributed to the factors such as lack of sufficient practice. Lack of practice can further be attributed to the less weightage given to the speaking skills in the professional communication curriculum. Since the English language is not our native tongue; this fact makes the situation more complicated. Hence, even if students know the content that has to be expressed, the expression of it in the English language comes across as a major hurdle in their expression. The future of career in engineering is inclined towards the inevitable use of speaking skills, that too in the English language. After globalisation, especially in the field of trade and commerce, the field of engineering has witnessed a greater emphasis being given to the interpersonal and communication skills. This change has led to the emphasis and reconfiguration of the linguistic challenges in a particular ESP class. The present study envisages a corresponding theoretical background to the idea of oral communication. With the changing dynamics of the role of an engineer on a global platform, the need for a tailor-made course for developing speaking skills in the engineering students has become imperative.

As discussed above, the syllabus is indicative of the weightage being given to the practising of oral communication; it is imperative that a setup of constant practice needs to be included in the curriculum of professional communication. Without the presence of practice of speaking in each class, it will be difficult for a student to progress in this section. An integrated approach can be adopted where speaking skills can be combined with the practice of other language skills in the course. This gives a didactic approach to language-learning where the practice of

speaking can be merged with other language skills giving way to create natural language act in the similar fashion as it happens in reality. This approach will be helpful to the students to conceptualise language in the given context, practice and use the natural structures freely of the target language.

Developing Speaking Skills Through ICT

Technology and language combined can be seen as a tool for change in both individual as well as societal level. Language-learning these days has become more output-oriented, and a certain desired level in language proficiency of student is expected after a language course. Developing speaking skills of engineering students do not only emphasise changing of teaching content and curriculum, but there need to be innovative techniques required to make it more learner-centred and productive. The role of the computer has been pivotal when it comes to language teaching.

With the rapid diffusion of ICT in English language teaching, the benchmark of being a competent language user has shifted to new heights. One instance can be taken from the fact that e-mail has become a commonly accepted means of communicating in formal set up or business communication. This indicates a need for the English language teacher not just to use e-mail for communication with the students but also to teach the students how to communicate efficiently by e-mail. Similarly, with the emergence of World Wide Web as an essential medium of exchange of information related to academics, civic affairs, trade and commerce, company sites etc., the teaching of web-based literacy has also become an essential part of English language teaching curriculum. More than 50% of the world's online content is in the English language. Therefore, it is imperative for a student to be proficient in the English language to access these contents available online.

In the case of second language teaching, the most dynamic application can be Computer-assisted language learning (CALL), which involves electronic communication, multimedia production, and simulations etc. instead of only drill-and-practice method of language teaching. Teaching the English language can be made more comprehensive through the use of audio-visual aids in the teaching. Practising speaking skills through the use of the techniques mentioned above and aids gives it a more comprehensive and holistic approach.

Conclusion

The present era is equipped with modern technology where CALL can be called to be a new realm towards language-learning in general and learning speaking skills in particular. "A real catching up process can only be achieved through acquiring the capacity for participating in the generation and improvement of technologies, rather than in the simple use of them" writes Corea (2000, p. 9).

It is essential in the field of language education to have a group of teachers with desired skills, knowledge, positive attitude towards adopting, and designing and applying technology innovatively in the classroom in accordance with the local context. This implies that it is imperative to have a network of English language innovators who have the expertise of the area of technology-aided teaching, educational reform, and teachers' development. It is this kind of approach to ICT aided teaching speaking skills that ELT professionals can achieve their desired goal of making the students proficient in speaking skills.

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