

**Demystifying the English Language Teaching-Learning Scenario in Engineering Colleges:
An Indian context**

*Ms. Binu V S¹, Dr. G. Gayathiri Devi²

Abstract

The changing professional and educational needs of an individual is the major determining factor that decides the energy to be consumed and the extent of involvement required for acquiring a foreign language. As the number of employment seekers passing out every year from engineering colleges to the job market outnumbers the available jobs, the empowerment of an engineering graduate in English language has become a major sine qua non and thereby facilitates a serious discussion. Education's categorical role shift from "nurturing" to "manufacturing" resulted in a rather make-believe approach to the teaching-learning process. English is treated with much indifference and the deprivation of a value added education imparted a false impression about the whole process of learning foreign language as trivial. It also spoiled the actual reason behind the need of being educated in the skill of language. This paper demystifies the current scenario of English language learning of engineering colleges in the Indian context. A survey was conducted among the students of Engineering and Engineering graduates and gathered feedback on a few aspects which throws further insights into the reality.

Keywords: Empowerment, learning teaching framework, cognitive difficulties, pedantry, foreign language pedagogy

The parameters that determine the successful career of an employee are redefined in a context where job outsourcing and multicultural workforce form an integral part of the employment sector. The depreciating number of "employable" job seeking Engineering graduates entering the job market every year necessitates an analysis of the current educational scenario in the engineering colleges. What is the determining factor behind the unproductive engineering graduates passing out from engineering colleges every year who lack the ability to carry out their knowledge further? The less explored areas in the academic set fields are demystified in order to make the future learner and the educator realize that a students' learning is "something that make him better educated, more cultured and equipping him with a useful skill for future occupation" (Sharma 2002) rather than manufacturing a "product" available in the market by paying a fixed amount. An online survey was conducted among the students of

¹Assistant professor of English, R.M.K Engineering College, Kavaraipettai, Chennai, binuvs916@gmail.com, Phone: 9994211982

²Associate Professor of English, R.M.D Engineering College, Kavaraipettai, Chennai, gayathiri77@gmail.com, Phone: 94441 39002

Engineering and the Engineering graduates employed in industry and in the Educational institutions by sharing ten questions.

As the number of employment seekers passing out every year from engineering colleges in India to the job market outnumbers the available jobs, the empowerment of an engineering graduate in English language and soft skills has become a major sine qua non and thereby facilitates a serious discussion. English proficiency makes the professional life easier and hence mastering English language has become the need of the day. “The language must be taught as a tool of interpersonal communication” (Spolsky 1973) and it is important for the learner to acquire confidence in using it which allows him to express himself in speech or in writing in various contexts. Rajpal Kaur in *Teaching of English. New trends and Innovations* stated that “acquiring communicative competence is not just awareness of some grammar, vocabulary, reasonable pronunciation. But it involves the competence to suit the language to the situation, the participant, and the basic purpose. Also, it involves the competence to interpret other speakers to the full” (2006).

When the change in the whole arena of higher education over the past twenty years is analyzed, it is understood that education faced a massive setback with the impact of population explosion and the information overload. This has resulted in the appreciation in the quantity of knowledge seekers with a downgrading in the quality of education. Another major challenge is the increasing number of disciplines to be taught within the limited time span. The responsibility of education also has been changed from “nurturing” to “manufacturing” during this four year period. The easy accessibility to education and the increasing number of professional colleges reduced the meaningful learning to an absolute minimum. The criteria for quality became the quantity of marks scored, where the students are tied to their seats by the ironclad bonds of conformity. A penalty is paid in case of any deviation from the expected course of behavior and the fear of challenges compels the learner-teacher to follow a tedious learning-teaching framework forced upon them without any complaint. The pressurized learning task would engender a feeling of not belonging to one social group or the other. With a lesser number of language teachers updated with the latest developments in their field, with minimum teaching hours and with the learning teaching atmosphere turning into an arena of strict discipline with poor infrastructure made the provision of language learning and teaching, a highly difficult task.

The opportunity to inculcate a new lifestyle and culture for a better career and for a better life is lost with the emerging trend of categorizing English as General English, Technical English, and Communicative English etc. On the whole, this restricted the scope of the art of teaching into a mere coaching. Srivastava has mentioned that our professional colleges are similar to “Brilliant tutorials and Aggraval’s classes and other coaching institutes where the effort is directed towards convergent capsule type of approach with not so much of effort directed towards broadening the horizon of their knowledge and experience (Srivastava 2004).

The survey result of a question which was framed to identify people who use English for talking, shows that only 24.3% of the students converse with their friends in English. An average of 28.6% of the Engineering graduates, either teaching professionals or those working in Industry use English for speaking. The pie chart indicates that the majority of the respondents i.e., 38.6% is not comfortable in using English for speaking and is limited to communicating through letters or mails. Figure 1 suggests that English is used mainly for written communication rather than oral communication.

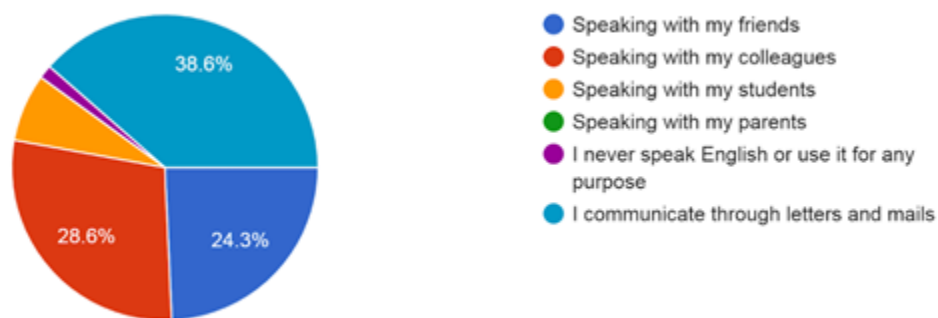


Figure 1: Usage of English in the academic & professional field

The history of English education in India shows that a section of Indians were given only the basic English education by the British and never imparted them more, to keep them under control. A similar aspect is widespread in professional colleges for the past twenty years. There is a colonizer mind-set prevalent among a vast many who assume that English is the tool to “master” or and thus it is partially imparted to the learner for keeping them under control. The learner is given minimal information with less resources and the framework of the studies. The syllabus is fixed, keeping in view of only the final examination of the learner. This indirectly influences the learner to marginalize English learning by giving priority to other subjects. Thus English, which is a skill to be practiced and the language of confidence and career, is thus suffering an underprivileged status. And English language acquisition has taken a backseat. The interest of the learners towards English language learning has been diminishing due to various reasons ranging from a boring lecture (22.9%), lack of awareness about the actual job scenario where English language proficiency is a criteria for success (47.1%) to a lack of interest in the subject or in the course either. Figure 2 highlights the viewpoint of students about English language acquisition.

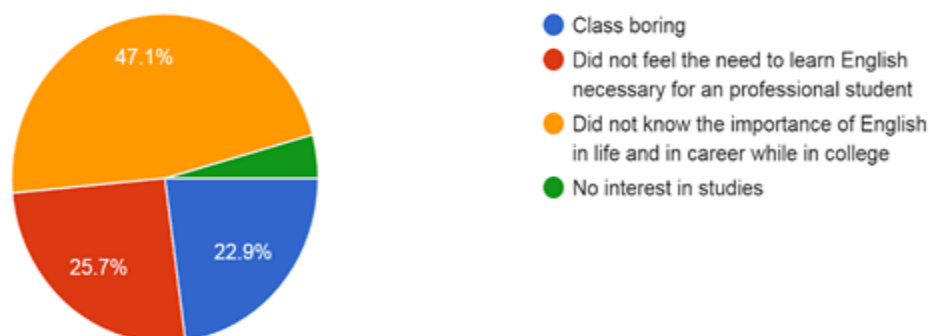


Figure 2: The reason for the students’ passive outlook towards English

The survey suggested that the absence of the interest to learn English was mainly because of the lack of giving real life experience. Neither the learning ambience inside the campus nor the curriculum of study supported the process of learning that makes English language usage compulsory nor was the learner exposed to the industry scenario. The reason for a lack of interest in acquiring language skills is also owing to the out-dated mode of teaching which made the entire teaching-learning session monotonous for the student and also for the facilitator. The

continuous teaching and learning hours with less leisure time brings mental and physical exhaustion and causes behavioral symptoms like aggression, mood swings, disinterestedness, frustration and psychological symptoms such as anxiety and pessimism. There are possibilities of cognitive difficulties like reduced ability to make decisions and also physical symptoms like sleep difficulties, fatigue and headache. Figure 2 shows that the majority of the students did not make any conscious effort to master the language skills and 25.7% of the participants never felt it necessary for an Engineering student to seriously improve English language skills during their four year study.

The learner who is lucky to gain a strong language base in their schools will not find it difficult to engage in situations later in their lives where their language skill is exposed. But the majority of participants who lacked experience and practice need a thorough training and practice before they become professionals. The self-grooming is a continuous process and it cannot be achieved within a week or two by exposing the learner to sessions just before their campus placement. Many students expect to have experience from the first year itself.

Language is a growing entity. It is the expression of culture and civilization. With the passing of time, language assimilates and discards certain aspects from various cultures and lifestyles. The addition into and extraction from a new language occurs automatically. As language is the carrier of a new civilization and culture, the anxiety of losing one's tradition and culture with the new adaptation stays with the learner and hence a passive attitude prevails towards its acquisition. Being ignorant of the expectation of the professional field also creates a passive approach towards English language learning. The teaching and learning of English language hence becomes rather superficial and this produces a less efficient learner who lacks communicative competence. No doubt that the reduced status of English as mere 'classroom English' or 'textbook English' and a subject of study like Math or Physics has proved less than useful for any real communicative process.

A learner opting to study in Engineering Colleges under parental pressure or without any target to achieve is always absent minded towards the andragogy/pedagogy. Goal settling is neither done prior to getting admission in the courses nor is it given while they continue their studies. Thus the teaching and learning become rigid without a preferred set of ideas to fulfill and hence learning seems to be a herculean task for the student. It is often said that the pedantry occurs through active construction of meaning and not by passive recipient (Piaget 1977) but when the teaching is carried out without much for the learner to contribute and to create, the learner remains as a mere spectator forever.

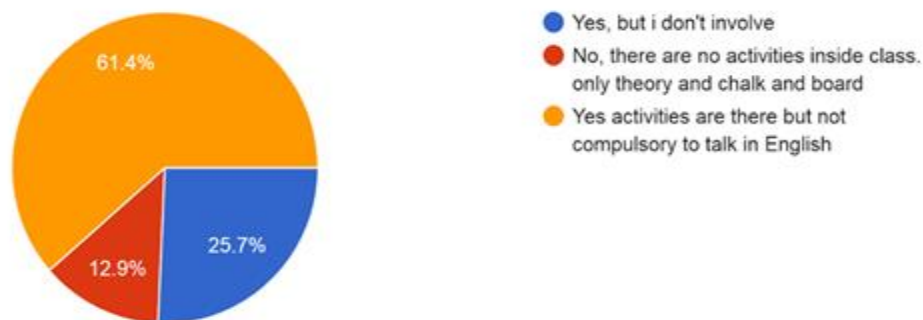


Figure 3: English speaking scenario inside the class

Figure 3 suggests that English was not used as the medium of communication during the classroom teaching & learning though there were situations of using English was available. This makes it clear that English speaking was not made mandatory inside the learning environment. In the survey, 61.4% of the participants conveyed that even during those sessions of interactions, speaking in English was not compulsory. More than 25% of the learners were passive spectators during those activity sessions. They were either not drawn towards the task or not given any serious instructions for participation. The lack of external pressure or motivation or encouragement also leads to the underdogs remaining in the same category. The survey brought into notice another harsh reality in which learners are not involved in interactions in English. 12.9% of the students opined about the traditional chalk and talk scenario which served less options for the learners to talk or to interact in the target language.

The strategies of acquiring English as a foreign language depend upon various factors like the urgency of the situation or the requirement of the learner, the degree of prominence given to the target language and to the interlocutor by the context in which he or she is placed. The ability to learn a new language is inbuilt in an individual and it is stimulated through the pressures from the parents during the formative years of a child and later by their teacher-facilitator and then by their peers. The changing professional and educational needs of the participant determines the amount of energy to be consumed and the extent of involvement required in acquiring a new language in the later stage of education and career.

Language use is fundamentally contextual and foreign language pedagogy should focus on teaching language in meaning making situations. The learner must be able to observe verbal communication in the target language in meaningful situations. Observation activates the perceptions relevant to the communicative data. This type of exposure to foreign language data is called input. i.e., the information that goes into the learning system. When the learner is a participant in the communicative act, the input is addressed to him or her personally.

There is no substitute for the experience of participation in a communicative act in the soles of the sender and the addressee, which activate the process of language comprehension and production. It is pointed that in addition to comprehensible input; learner needs comprehensible output, i.e. language production opportunities (Swain 1995).

Thus it is observed that communicative (meaningful) input for observation and comprehension, communicative interaction consisting of comprehension and production, and communicative feedback for the learner to approximate the target language norm are the primary conditions which are indispensable for activating language learning process.

There is emphasis on instructional innovations and the development of an inquiry and discovery approach keeping in mind the presence of multiple intelligences in the classrooms, “teaching should start where the learner is” said the cognitive psychologist and scholar David Ausubel (1968). It is said that the main focus of interest no longer rests in the teaching aspect, but on the language learner, their capacities, strategies and needs. The teacher’s function of being an instructor following the chalk and talk method has changed to that of facilitator with their prime duty is to impart an atmosphere for easy linguistic and communicative skill development. Active instructions are provided which allows the learner to hypothesize, predict, manipulate objects, pose questions, research, investigate, imagine and invent. Dykstra and Nunes (1970) argue that the teaching program must be structured to match the specific individual characteristics of language learners and it should be developed and evaluated in the context of

purposeful communication. The educator now should focus not to dispense knowledge but to provide the learner with opportunities and incentives to build it up.

Teaching and learning are active processes and cannot be practiced inside a conventional classroom set up. Fixed seating arrangement poses special constraints which can be avoided by providing individual seating. Complete silence cannot be expected inside a language learning session and class rooms can be made sound proof to overcome the problem. The role of the instructor can be further developed to that of a counselor where easy interaction with the learner can be made possible. Curran, who held a doctorate in Psychology, believes that a non-threatening counseling relationship between the teacher and the learner is the perfect context for learning (2001). The facilitator must give up the questioning manner and generate an unconditionally positive attitude as well as deep understanding of the learner's mind. The facilitator's attempts should be in such a way as to make the people realize that "education is a process rather than a product and thus if one can get into the right process the success of the educative process is ensured" (Srivastava 2004).

The traditional role of the teacher from the transmitter of skills or knowledge and student as a passive recipient lost its relevance with the change in occupational, educational and computer technologies. The teaching process is no more a one way dissemination of knowledge with the exposure of the learner to the latest information at the fingertip. Diversification of the cognitive and creative domains of knowledge of the learner helps in the active construction of meaning and also open up for a reciprocal learner-teacher relationship. The role of the teacher is again minimized to that of a spectator where constructive feedback and suggestions are given. Teachers should thus be interesting stimulators and convince the students that foreign language learning is much more than maze learning, that it is the code of a different and interesting social group. The challenge of the facilitator is thus to go beyond the mere achievement motives of students and to link teaching with more appropriate and more productive means (Sharma 2002).

Maximum participation in the learning process can be ensured in the beginning of the course by giving concentration to the four language skills and having only two majors to study-soft skills and hard skills. This helps to create a firm base for further construction of a long lasting structural framework for academic life and thus helps for a focused learning throughout.

Proficiency in hard skills is an entry ticket to the interview for the job and grooming in the employability skills in the first year by giving enough time for its practice is compulsory. English is an international language and a window to the outside world. One cannot see the world with the windows tightly closed. The current educational eco system expects the learner to look through the minute holes on the wall keeping the windows shut and thereby making the whole learning process a highly exhausting endeavor.

English has to be accepted as a part of life and not as an idea to be taught and followed just by learning its basic rules. The deliberate attempt to undermine the importance of the role of English in the curriculum has to be seriously taken by an expert monitoring committee. Thus the forces restraining the natural dissemination of language attainment has to be checked by the timely interference by the university or by language experts from outside universities. It is clear that in India English still carries the stigma as the language of the foreigner and this notion has to be eliminated from the mind-set of the participant by accepting a job oriented methodology of education in the higher education sector throughout.

Works cited

1. Ausubel, David Paul, Joseph Donald Novak, and Helen Hanesian. "Educational psychology: A cognitive view." (1968): 78.
2. Curran LN in Rodgers, Theodore S., et al. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. South Korea, Cambridge University Press, 2001.
3. Dykstra, Gerald, and Shiho S. Nunes. "Vol9# 1_The Language Skills Program of the English Project." (1970).
4. Kaur, Rajpal(ed.) *Teaching of English: New Trends And Innovations*. India, Deep & Deep Publications, 2006.
5. Sharma, Arti. Wallace E. Lambert S *Psychology of Language Learning*. India, Global Vision Publishing House, 2002.
6. Srivastava RC, Sumitra. *Issues In Education And Society*. India, Regency Publications, 2004.
7. Swain, Merrill, and Sharon Lapkin. "Problems in output and the cognitive processes they generate: A step towards second language learning." *Applied linguistics* 16.3 (1995): 371-391.