EFFECTIVE WRITING SKILLS – ESSENTIAL FOR CIVIL AND OTHER CORE ENGINEERING GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

This paper titled “Effective Writing Skills – Essential for Civil and other core Engineering Graduates” begins with an introduction on the importance of English in the global market and moves with a brief discussion on teaching of English in engineering colleges. The paper throws light on the necessary steps that need to be taken in enriching written communication of engineering graduates. It, with authentic surveys, pinpoints the deficiency level of many of our engineering graduates in written communication. Besides highlighting the major differences between technical English and general English, the paper makes a sincere attempt to emphasize the role to be played by language teachers and to distinguish approaches and methods that need to be effectively and meaningfully adopted to serve the objectives. The paper ends with some suggestions that can be incorporated in the syllabus in English for engineering students.

Key words: Approaches and Methods; Communication; General English; Technical English; Writing Skills

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Language development is based on pragmatic communicative needs and that forms of language are used to convey meanings”. - Mitchell

Of all languages, the status that English has been enjoying for years as an international language, as a language of science and technology, as a language of commerce and trade and as a language of diplomacy is quite prestigious and prodigious. As a global language, with all
its rich vocabulary and wealth of literature and with wide use across the globe, English continues to have its great impact upon and domination over all regional and foreign languages, but of course, without causing any threat to any other language. Though there are obvious reasons for the dominance of English over other languages, the main reason is that most of the information in the world of internet are available in English, and it is English which not only linguistically, but also culturally unites people of the world. One of the requirements in the world of competitions for aspiring and ambitious candidates is ‘communicative competence’ in English. The ultimate purpose of language teaching is to develop the communicative competence of learners. The role of English in Indian context is of pivotal importance. Freedom fighters were able to make the English quit India, but not English. Mahatma Gandhiji himself admitted the fact that English is a language that can and should not be ignored. He said, “I would have our young men and women with literary tastes to learn as much of English and other world languages as they like and expect them to give the benefits of their learning to India and to the world”. –Young India-484

The following pie chart depicts the interest level of male and female students in the study of literature in VIT University, Vellore.

2. ENGLISH IN ENGINEERING COLLEGES

N.S Prabhu says that “Communication in the classroom - in the sense of meaning-focused activity could therefore be a good means of developing grammatical competence in learners, quite independently of the issue of developing functional or social appropriacy in language use”. In engineering colleges, the focus is on technical English and learners need to have a wide exposure to English for their academic, social, personal and professional prosperity. In engineering colleges, admission is based upon marks scored by students at school level in science subjects, not on the basis of the proficiency level in English. In the entrance exams for admission to professional colleges, proficiency in English is not a criterion, and one’s proficiency in English cannot be merely judged on the basis of one’s high marks in English. Nowadays in engineering colleges, there is much insistence on publication of research articles in national and international journals of repute. Many a research paper, notwithstanding the fact that they contain rich content in research, is miserably rejected due to presentation being improper or rather faulty. Hence, in technical institutes, teaching of writing is of greater importance, as it enables learners to write all kinds of technical reports.
The following pie chart shows the results of performance of engineering students from different branches in study of literature

According to a survey taken by Hindustan Times (June 25, 2018), as many as 97% engineering graduates in the country cannot speak English, which is required for jobs in corporate sales or business consulting. According to the report, only 57% of engineering graduates in India are able to write grammatically correct sentences in English and that those who understand the sophisticated use of words in English is moderately less than 48%. That 50% of engineering graduates are in possession of grammar skills, but not better than those of a student of standard VII is a matter of great concern. Only 48% of students have shown aptitude for words. The competency level of engineering graduates in the use of even common words such as ‘nefarious’ and ‘impasse’ displayed in the survey is only 28%.

Even though a large number of engineering graduates realize the importance of written communication in academic and professional contexts, they either lack necessary guidance, nor have the congenial linguistic atmosphere, nor put forth efforts in enriching written communication in English.

3. REASONS FOR LACK OF PROFICIENCY IN ENGLISH

The focus is more on teaching about writing rather than teaching writing. Fear is instilled in the minds of students when teaching is out and out rule based, with more focus on definitions of grammatical terms. When completion of the prescribed syllabus before examination becomes more important than developing the communicative competence of engineering graduates in English, the very purpose of language teaching cannot be served as desired. The impact of mother tongue is one of the major factors for students not being able to improve the writing skills. Frequent use of SMS language even in formal contexts might turn out to be a great hindrance to their getting accustomed to the use of King’s or Queen’s English.

One of the factors for engineering graduates lacking good writing skills is that they are not aware of the difference between “Use” and ‘Usage’. A good communicator, in order to avoid errors while writing, is to be aware of the difference. Use is the way in which language is practiced, whereas usage is the manner in which a language is spoken and written.
4. APPROACH AND METHOD
In teaching of writing to engineering graduates, use of appropriate approach and method matters a lot. Any approach in the absence of appropriate method or vice versa shall not yield the desired output. White (1987:118) says that “Teaching writing through interesting and creative materials helps the teachers provoke creative response from students. Therefore, this kind of environment on the part of the learners helps them not only to be creative but also to participate in writing”.

With regard to approach and method, Edward Anthony (1963) says that “An approach is a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning. An approach is axiomatic. It describes the nature of the subject matter to be taught”, whereas “Method is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected approach. An approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural.

Hyland (2003) says that the most appropriate approach should be used to help learners “understand writing and learning to write”. (26)

In L2 classes, there are students from varied academic and economic backgrounds and with varied language capabilities. So it is the teacher to determine the approach and method to be adopted in class to serve the purpose. Use of authentic materials in language classes is very significant in the sense that they feel linguistically supported.

Engineering graduates need to be quite aware of different types of writing such as free writing, controlled writing, guided writing, descriptive writing, narrative writing, technical writing, expository writing, argumentative writing, reflective writing, persuasive writing and interpretive writing.

Besides engineering graduates being sound in technically expressing themselves, they need to be exposed to different types of writing in order that they might be able to write effectively and professionally in all contexts. In technical English, there is no place for imagination, creativity, emotions, feelings and sentiments, but they matter a lot in general English. Use of idioms, phrases, expressions is avoided in technical English, but they add some unique value in general English. A technical writer is impersonal and so use of impersonal passive forms is preferred in technical writing. A sound vocabulary is not required for one to make presentations on technical topics, and language structures are also limited. Engineering students may be able to technically express themselves well, but in real life, many of them have difficulties in communicating freely in English and English is taught mostly as a subject to be studied, not as a skill to be developed.

None can deny the fact that there is a mismatch between the marks secured by students in exams and their real proficiency level in English. Even though language labs have been established in many leading technical institutes for developing the language skills in English, the desired output is not up to the mark. A wide exposure in writing is essential for engineering graduates. Problems of engineering students in writing may be not only linguistic, but also psychological or cognitive. The real problem must be identified and sorted out by language teachers in order to pave way for effective communication in English. Nunan (1989) argues that “writing is an extremely difficult cognitive activity which requires the learner to have control over various factors. These factors vary from academic background and personal interest of the writer to various psychological, linguistic and cognitive phenomena”.

5. ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN WRITING
Appropriate assessment, as part of curriculum structures, of writing is important. In a heterogeneous class, though it consumes time, individualization of instruction is much
needed, as it breaks the obstacles that block free and effective writing. Proper assessment gives engineering graduates some direct experience. During the process of assessment, use of encouraging words becomes a great source of inspiration for young learners. The type of assessment whether it is teacher feedback, or peer feedback or electronic feedback should be identified and implemented through suitable pedagogical strategies for the sake of learners’ linguistic abilities, and making errors in written communication is one of the developmental stages of language learning. Constant motivation is indispensable throughout the process. 

The following graph shows the overall assessment of Experimental Group and Control Group

![Graph showing overall assessment of Experimental Group and Control Group]

6. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION FOR ENGINEERING GRADUATES

Engineering students can be actively involved in language activities and fruitful and frequent interactions in the forms discussions, debates and meetings enable them to practice and produce the language in unique and innovative ways. The ultimate purpose of using any approach or any method or any technique must be enriching written communication in English. It has to be understood by learners that writing can be developed over stages moving from primary level to most an advanced level. Under any circumstances, learners should not be discouraged when errors are committed in language. Learners must be made to realize that making mistakes is a progressive stage in language learning. Suitable approach, method and technique with authentic materials in English iron out the wrinkles.

- Engineering graduates should be rich in technical competencies and ability to clearly communicate their ideas to others.
- They must be able to communicate their findings with others in a productive, efficient manner.
- They need to communicate with supervisors and clients on daily basis.
- Lacking adequate communications skills can inhibit an engineer’s ability to get a job.
- Communication skills they posses must be strong as it is one of the determiners of success.
7. CONCLUSIONS

- A technologist informs, but impresses others through effective language. Information is obtained, but impression gets registered.

- Communicative competence, especially effective writing skills are essential for all engineering graduates.

- Writing, being a productive skill and more conceptual than speaking, is of paramount importance in the academic and professional careers of engineering graduates.

“Communicative language ability can be described as consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use”. - Bachman

It is quite apt to say that communicative competence is the ‘ability to linguistically compete with a spirit of competition in this competitive world with any competitor’.

REFERENCES


