

Effective Material to Teach Communication Skills and Soft Skills to the Engineering Students – A Classroom Try Out

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the following objectives:

- Need of communication skills and soft skills to engineering students/engineers
- Role of material & Choice of material
- Effectiveness of English Literature to engineering students.
- Relevant literature is a right choice to develop communicational skills and soft skills.
- Teaching of English Literature to engineering students – a classroom experience.

Teaching materials and methodology are indispensable in any course; engineering English as Technical English I & II is not an exception. Lessons prescribed in the prescribed textbooks by Anna University in **Mindscapes** (2013) or the earlier **English for Engineers & Technologists** are not used by the English teachers in engineering colleges for various reasons. This paper tries to illustrate how the lessons can be more human interest centered with a variety of functional language activities. ELT and its emerging trends allow facilitators to choose any relevant material from anywhere to ensure the teaching-learning process. Computer and the internet provide a rich array of English language teaching materials. One such human interest centered material is **Story of Narayana Murthy (Infosys Founder) and Sudha (From Sudha's Autobiography)** and the multiple activities tried in the classroom by the teacher were explicated in the paper.

Keywords: ELT, English for engineering students, human interest-centered lessons, language teaching materials.

Introduction

The primary function of language across the world is to ‘communicate’; English language is not an exception. English language teaching in India is deep rooted. It evolved through many dimensions which range from day to day communication to high level presentation. English Language teaching is expanded not only to ‘communicate’ but to acquire jobs, promote business ventures, learn science and technology, provide forms of entertainment, and so on. Engineering students’ need for English language is to communicate, is to update their work based technical qualification, to carry out their project work with their team members, to send/receive and review reports, to conduct presentation sessions and board meetings and to work in multi cultural set up. To acquire the above said skill set, in the curriculum - syllabus redesigning with suitable inclusion of literature is proposed by the presenter. The idea inferred to introduce ‘literature’ may sound very conventional. Though it is a traditional methodology, linguistic researches done all over the world and literature reviews proved it as an authentic source to develop communication and soft skills.

Literature and Engineering Students

Engineers and engineering students all over the world are in need of acquiring communication skills and soft skills. Literature is embedded in the above skill sets. It can be used for teaching English with relevant choice of material and methodology is the appeal of the researcher. Facilitator’s classroom experiment is accounted here.

Teaching relevant skills of language through literature involves both the teacher and the learner. Choice of material should involve the teacher and learner for meaningful discussion on life, society, culture, characters, history, settings, and so on. Ultimately it should make the learner understand language and communication. The objective of language teachers is not to teach about language, but to develop learner’s abilities to use language in various communicating situations. Such social contextual exposure is to be given in the form of ‘Material’. The material

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prescribed in the syllabus can afford a chance for the learners to have the possibilities of language operation in all levels. Like in ancient days ‘literature’ is not for entertainment and pleasure reading, instead it can provide interesting language practice materials. Literature is one of the best tools to bridge the gap between engineering English syllabus and the outside world.

William R. Lee states in his editorial in the journal **English Language Teaching** as:

Literature is rooted, as far as the foreign language learner is concerned, in the oral basis of language learning; rooted in lively and meaningful oral drills, in spoken and acted dialogues, indeed in those very procedures which make for successful and interested learning of the language. (4)

ELT accepts the use of literature as a popular technique for teaching both language skills (LSRW) and language components (Vocabulary, Grammar and Pronunciation).

Relevance of Teaching English Literature to Engineering Students

Language through literature has been discussed by curriculum developers and academicians for the last few decades. Still, the idea has not materialized at present in technical education. Scope of language acquisition in the engineering colleges is limited within grammar exercises and few written exercises like writing instructions, recommendations, checklists and report writing. The role of English teachers in engineering colleges is multifaceted. Their responsibility is to make students acquire language skills to get placed, or to pursue higher studies across the world. Technical English – I & II is definitely not the material for the English teachers to train and hone the language skills of the learner. **Penny Ur** in his **A Course in language Teaching Practice and Theory** (1991) explains a common characteristic of a syllabus as follows:

It is available for scrutiny not only by the teachers who are expected to implement it, but also by the consumers (the learners or their parents or employers, by representatives of the relevant authorities (inspectors, school boards), by other interested members of the public (researchers, teacher trainers

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or textbooks writers). Underlying this characteristic is the principle of accountability: the composers of the syllabus are answerable to their target audience for the quality of their document. (176-177)

Importance of Literary Texts

Practically speaking, composers of the syllabus may not be questioned and they may not have the situation to answer for the quality of their document. But on behalf of the target audience, researchers, teachers, textbook writers and students can review it and recommend for addition or deletion of lessons. The recent recommendations by researchers and academicians in various forums stress the need for the importance of literary texts for a comprehensive attainment of higher levels of language skills.

Learning language through literature creates many possible situations in learning and acquisition of English as the lingua franca. The benefits of the inclusion of literature or literary texts in engineering curriculum are: They generate language learning and refine soft skills in particular. Literary texts/materials included in the Engineering English curriculum would broaden the functions of language and refine the overall personality of engineers. Suitable literature and literary texts will motivate and inspire the learners to improve on their own. Literature is not a replacement in the English curriculum, but it is a compliment for language acquisition. To a large class or to a heterogeneous class, language components or language drills without a relevant material is meaningless and irrelevant.

According to Krashen (1982) quoted from **Second Language Acquisition an Advanced Resource Book** (2005):

... people acquire a second language, much in the same way as they acquire a first language not only talking about the language, but by talking in the language. In other words, to acquire a language one needs a great deal of meaningful input. He also argued that explicit rules that were ‘learned’ did not lead to ‘acquisition’. The implication is that languages were best acquired without any formal study of structure and form”. (79 – 80)

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Engineering students have specific English needs. Of course their specific need can be met through carefully chosen relevant literary text/material. Literary texts are the source to learn the functions of a language in different realistic situations outside the preplanned atmosphere of the classrooms.

Literature – an Ideal Source to Develop Communication Skills and Soft Skills

At this juncture, the idea of language through literature becomes relevant. This paper explains in detail the importance of literary texts and the need for it in the engineering curriculum. Tamilnadu engineering students and engineering teachers do not have complete satisfaction with their English ability. It is not evident whether the textbook **Mindscape** offered in first year B.E/B.Tech courses have seriously considered their specific needs. In such a state, a syllabus based on literary texts mixing a few genres like short stories, poems, excerpts from autobiography, science and technology articles from dailies and magazines', is suggested to add as literature-based syllabus. The syllabus redesigned with such literary lessons would present the social context of the world. It would slowly lead the learner to understand language as a social phenomenon and it allows them to develop their own language competency. Language acquisition unlike other engineering subjects, should not be learned without the real practice of communicative language. The meticulously chosen literary text based on the learners' need would expose them to a variety of communicative expressions. Intellectual ability of the learner would rise to the level of communicative purpose. Incorporated grammar drills would impel learners to move from fluency to accuracy.

Penny Ur in his **A Course in Language Teaching Practice And Theory** (2009) states in an approach to literature teaching as follows:

I am, in principle, in favour of including literature in courses, not only as a rich source of language, but also because of its intrinsic educational and aesthetic value and its contribution to motivation and enjoyment. The problems of length, difficulty and alien content are very real ones: I attempt to solve them by careful selection of texts or, occasionally, by using only part of a long text. In some

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cases I use simplified or abbreviated versions, in spite of the ‘watered-down’ quality, if I think that enough of the literary value of the original is preserved and that my students will get worthwhile learning from them.

...Finally: literature may be strictly speaking irrelevant for the learning of science and technology, but students of those subjects may still enjoy and ultimately benefit from studying it. (201 – 202)

Penny Ur’s idea of language through literature teaching is an alien matter to learners and may be difficult for them to relate it in their field of study and may think it is irrelevant to their needs. He felt that to attain functional skills of English language ‘literature’ is the best kind of source. He himself explained the advantages of literature as follows:

Literature can be very enjoyable to read.

It provided examples of different styles of writing, and representations of various authentic uses of language.

It is a good basis of vocabulary expansion.

It fosters reading skills.

It can supply an excellent jump-off point for discussion or writing.

It involves emotions as well as intellect, which adds to motivation and may contribute to personal development.

It is a part of the target culture and has value as part of the learners’ general education.

It encourages empathetic, critical and creative thinking.

It contributes to world knowledge.

It raises awareness of different human situations and conflicts. (p – 201)

The above listed advantages of literature remain the same when it is included in the engineering English curriculum. Since industry needs engineers with the synchronization of communication skills and soft skills, the inevitable choice is literature. It is an irony to omit ‘literature’ for engineering students. Few educators in the past rejected the use of literary texts as drill materials to develop the four basic language skills. They wrongly felt that when language

was taught through literature, the learners would learn neither language nor literature to suffice their multifaceted needs.

Irrespective of difference of opinion, literature is considered as one of the best tools for language acquisition and attaining soft skills. Recently, the role of literature as a basic language component and source of authentic material has been gaining popularity in engineering English curriculum. Vigorous research and serious discussion of how literature can be included for the engineering students to their benefit has led the establishment to some interesting ideas in the teaching-learning process. To exploit literature texts – different genres of literature like short story, poem, excerpts from autobiography and human interested science and technology are identified to teach the learners. Literary materials do not easily fit in with the conventional types of technical English testing. The treatment of the literary lessons and designs of related activities has to be very relevant, inspiring and imaginative for the overall achievement.

Teaching of English Literature to Engineering Students – A Classroom Experience

As a part of the doctoral research - **An excellent and Great Love Story of Narayana Murthy (Infosys Founder) and Sudha (From Sudha's Autobiography)** was discussed in the classroom as one of the lessons by the presenter. This classroom experience of the presenter is very purposeful and meaningful. The following structure is adapted in the classroom to motivate the heterogeneous class to participate.

- (A) Pre-Reading Activities
- (B) Title analysis
- (C) While-Reading Activities - Illustration, key words, contextual meaning and expressions
- (D) Exploitation of LSRW skills

Pre-Reading Activities are presented by discussing love, puppy love, man-woman relationship, Indian marriage system – its uniqueness and complexity. Then a brief note about Infosys Narayana Murthy (Infosys Founder) and Sudha his wife, was presented.

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Title analysis was done with a handful of information about autobiography and biography.

Good examples of autobiography and biography titles were shared by both the learners and facilitator. While-reading activities on illustration, key words, contextual meaning and expressions are focused along with the main reading of the story. This literary lesson gave a chance to the teacher to discuss in detail the life of engineers, women engineers, engineering career, computers, multi-faceted lives of women, and so on. Exposure to genuine and selfless love, parenting, sacrifice, recognition of husband & wife and due respect of life partners for each other were focused upon as the theme of the story.

Speaking Activities like title analysis, setting, character analyses and human values were discussed with the facilitation of the teacher. This story was well received by all the students. Entire class room experienced a mixture of emotions and feelings for the first time in Technical English class. It has provided a rewarding experience for both the teacher and the learners.

Word power is built using the following exercise.

A) Fix the contextual meaning of the following words/expressions:

1. Bespectacled
2. Aback
3. Relentless
4. Wannabe
5. Dutch
6. Stalemate
7. Interim
8. Fag end
9. Pooling
10. Backpack
11. Trafficking drugs
12. Panicked

13. Zero capital
14. Apprehensive
15. Rock the boat
16. Sabbatical
17. Et. al
18. Commute
19. Juggling
20. Baby sat
21. Unstinted

Do you like this story? Let's review & share – Another activity was conducted on review writing and the same was asked to be presented in the class.

Conclusion

Inclusion of literature in English curriculum for engineering students will develop learners' ability to use language for a variety of communicative purposes. The choice of material is very important to train the learners on language skills. Further, the literary texts merge linguistic competence with communicative competence. Literature opens the world of communication and improves the sensibilities. This paper concludes with an appeal to the board of studies to include literature/literary materials to engineering students to learn language in a hassle free environment.

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