

The Problem of Rural Area Engineering Students in Learning English in India

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Abstract

English is an international language, spoken in many countries either as a native language or as a second language or as both. English language plays a major role in India. A person from south India does not speak Hindi, so to communicate with the people of other states he depends on English for communication. Most of the engineering colleges are also located in rural parts, adjacent to small towns and major cities in Tamil Nadu. Many students in engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu come from small towns and rural areas where English is not spoken on a regular basis. This paper explains the problem of rural engineering students and the factors required for enabling the students to acquire English Language skills to become competitive with others.

Keywords: English, Rural Students, Engineering students, Higher Education, Suicide Data, Language Skills, psychological problem, Poor Exposure, Poverty.

1. Introduction

India's higher education system is the world's third largest in terms of students, next to China and the United States. India has distinct advantage over China in using English as the primary language of higher education and research and as second language in schools. India educates approximately 11 % of its youth in higher education compared to 20 % in China [1]. With the IT Revolution, most of the MNC's and corporates using their software in English and their operating system is also in English Language. English is said to be the world's most important language having communicative and educative value.

According to recent surveys, approximately 4% of the Indian population use English which represents 35 million of people. It means India is the largest English speaking community outside USA and the UK. Dipti Gupta [2] explains the necessity of English teaching to the engineering students so as to develop adequate and comprehensive English language skills (LSRW). Failure to do so will literally mar their future profession. Ms. Mane Varsharani [3] says that English language is the current *lingua franca* of the international business, technology, aviation, diplomacy, etc. Darha H. Joshi [4] emphasizes the role of English language for engineering students in their prospective careers. It is well known that English language entered into India only after the arrival of the English men. Soon after their arrival it began to exercise its

influence on the intellectual life of the people and reduced the communication gap between the rulers and the people of India.

2. Habitual Learning and Adult Learning

Language learning is a natural process for the native speakers. The approach to this learning process is called the 'Behavioristic Approach' or natural learning or 'Habitual Learning'. But, for the students of other languages, deliberate efforts are required to learn a foreign language which requires a 'Mentalistic Approach'. The students of rural and semi-urban areas in India face such problems because English is not their mother-tongue. Their learning of English is called 'Adult Learning'. One of the greatest advantages of Engineering studies is that the students can find placement while they are studying in final year. Therefore, English Communication skill and fluency are important in studies and also in their career. Our present Engineering students need to enhance their Communication skills in English as well as soft skills to thrive in the competitive world and seek jobs in corporate sectors.

3. Recent Students' Suicide Data Because of Poor English Skills

A 19 year-old engineering student, who was studying in a private engineering college at Sivakasi, near Madurai, was upset over his poor English skills and committed suicide by jumping in front of a train in 2013 [5].

A 21 year-old student of an engineering college committed suicide as he was upset over not being able to understand the subjects which were taught in English in a private engineering college at Madukkarai, Coimbatore in 2013 [6].

A 3rd year B.Tech. CSE student from Patna Nagar in Bihar studying in a Private university at Vellore allegedly committed suicide by hanging himself in his hostel [7]. He was depressed after failing in the recently held examination. The failure may be due to poor English skills.

A 2nd year mechanical engineering student, a native of Jamshedpur in Jharkhand state, committed suicide inside a common bathroom in the hostel in the early hours of the morning in the same university [8].

A Dalit Research Scholar studying history at Jawaharlal Nehru University, finished his life [9]. He left no suicide note but his writings over the past few years captured the way he experienced this structural bias. He took JNU entrance exam thrice for M.A. and twice for M.Phil. / Ph.D. In the same post, he described the reason why he had to appear repeatedly: "First two times I did not learn English properly. But I tried because I just did not want to give up". He adds, cryptically, how a professor in a previous interview before he got through in the MPhil. / Ph.D. course, mentioned his "simple language". There is a telling sentence, where he describes sitting below the statue of Nehru in the JNU campus, "Why you don't want to educate me?" Perhaps what he really meant to say was 'Why does my English pose such a big hindrance to my education?' English language was his agony, which he could finally overcome at least at the interview time.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:4 April 2018

D. Nagarathinam, Ph.D. and R. Vani, M.A., M.Phil. (Eds.) *New Perspectives in ELT - 2018*

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4. Let Us look at the Problems in Rural Areas

A study conducted by the School Education Department in November 2013 revealed that around 40% of students studying between Classes VI and VIII in government schools in Madurai East, North and Melur blocks could not read or write in Tamil [10]. Pooja Kulkarni, Project Director, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, said that only 65% of students could read Tamil and 52% could write Tamil in Madurai East. The corresponding figures for Madurai North Blocks were 63% and 61%. In Melur it was 67% and 66% respectively. Further pointing out that the State average for Tamil reading skill, among primary students was 72%., she said that three districts – Theni, Sivaganga and Pudukottai – were below the state average [10].

5. Illiterate Parents

The unlettered and semi-lettered parents live hand to mouth with their insufficient income. How can we expect them to think about their children's education? It doesn't show their indifference but their inability to give much care for their children.

Students from rural areas do not realize the importance of English as a language of communication whereas this is the most important aspect of the global language. They lack the confidence to speak in English; expression in the language is also weak. First reason is that they have been taught English through Grammar-Translation Method. This method makes them depend on their mother tongue. Lack of parental involvement: This may be just specific to our area, but there is lack of focus on education, as many people have the opinion that they were fine with little school, or "They learn everything that they need to know by working on the farm". So there is nominal assistance from parents with anything related to school. There is also a low rate of students going to college, as many of the parents discourage higher education. There are also days where a student will get pulled out of school to help them in their farm.

5a. Remedies

Now-a-days, everyone in rural areas wants the kids to study in an English medium school. Generally the teachers who go from cities to these villages speak comparatively refined language. It has been our personal experience that children feel shy or scared in such a situation. So, a key here is to let them express themselves in their local language. First let them be comfortable.

In the rural and semi-urban areas, the study of English language begins at the KG level, it continues up to Senior Secondary or first Degree level. Even in the Professional Courses, the teaching of English as a communication skill is an integral part of the curriculum or the course obligations.

There is a Good Couplet that says:

"With English you're a hero!

Without English you're a zero!"

6. Psychological Problems

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:4 April 2018

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The major problem faced by rural students is psychological problem. The first and foremost problem is hesitation and the next is shyness. Hesitation is a state of doubt or uncertainty. Strategies can only act as a pill to motivate the students to come out of their hesitancy. In order to overcome these problems, allow the students to speak broken language initially and do not criticize them. Make them acquire fluency and accuracy. To overcome hesitation, broken English can be allowed in the class room. Make them have fluency rather than accuracy. Like the Urban students, they don't get suitable surroundings. So it is the duty of a teacher to create conducive environment for the students. Teachers should encourage the rural learners to be confident and feel that English is also a language like their mother tongue.

Investment in giving English language proficiency to young students in the rural areas of the country can go a long way in empowering them to acquire gainful employment and thus help them bring prosperity not only to themselves but also to their families, their community and the village at large.

7. Poor Exposure

The students, as soon as they get into the colleges, feel that they are highly relaxed from the rigidity and the enforcement of the discipline in their schools. They nurture a false opinion that this is an ideal age to enjoy the life, which may not really be true when they leave the college.

India is one of the developing countries that has been contributing in large measure to migration of people to foreign countries, particularly the developed Western countries. Millions of Indians have migrated to Western countries from rural areas. Among these, many are now well-off in business and other professions and have earned a name for themselves in the host country. Any one of the English proficiency tests like IELTS, TOEFL, is the requirement to apply for student visa. A large number of candidates appear in these tests of English with a view to go abroad.

There are many reasons why people from developing countries seek to migrate to developed countries. For the majority the biggest motivation is economic and social benefit to the individuals and their families. Most of these migrants happen to be young people who have just finished schooling or pursuing graduation.

The appearance of large number of candidates from rural areas in International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and in similar other tests of English, is an indication of the eagerness of rural candidates to migrate to other countries to improve their economic conditions. Cambridge IELTS is conducted by the British Council and the IDP Australia for the benefit of those seeking to go abroad. As proficiency in English happens to be an essential requirement for even a student visa, a large number of candidates appear in these tests of English with a view to go abroad. "Nearly 90% of the students from rural and town-based engineering colleges have trouble in communicating even two sentences fluently in English," said Albert P Ryan, professor of English & Head, Higher education at KCG College of Technology [12]. According to a study

carried out in towns like Tiruvannamalai and Trichy, colleges which boasted about 85% pass percentage did not have students who could converse fluently in English, he said [12].

8. Mother Tongue Influence

Mother tongue of students from rural areas is highly influential in both inside and outside the classroom. Even the faculty members of other disciplines teach their subjects only in Tamil. English teachers often follow only the translation method. The pupils hear English only in the English hour. Most educationists stress on the use of the local language/mother tongue to impart early education as it improves the child's ability to grasp and learn concepts. However, there is no running away from the fact that teaching English as a language has become a key determinant for future success and mobility of a child. English is not a subject and it is a language. The language skills can't be taught, they can be learnt by practice only. One who practices it with interest can learn English. Final year students from rural areas face real challenges in colleges when they go for Campus interview particularly in Group Discussion in MNC 's, because of lack of exposure to English.

9. Economic Resources

Lack of resources: This is compounded by our state's abysmal track record with education funding, but in several schools the resources (books, supplies, etc.) come from the teachers. We can fill a requisition form for many things, but more often than not, it just sits in a stack and by the time it gets through it's past. It's just easier to buy whatever we want as teachers! Many of our students don't have internet access at home, or reliable cell phone service. As a result, it's very difficult to give the students homework, as many of them don't have the ability to look out for resources at home, post their work, or get into contact to get help.

9a. English Language Communication Laboratory: The English language communication laboratory plays an important role in the English language learning process. English Language *Communication Skills Laboratory* is a compulsory course for all the Third-year students of engineering and technology studying in colleges affiliated to the Anna University, Tamil Nadu. ELCS Lab was introduced in the year 2006. The main objective of the ELCS Lab is to develop students' communication skills and prepare them for placement / campus recruitment while they are all in Final year. The ELCS Lab training is given with the assistance of Computer Network along with specially designed software. The objectives of the lab training are given below:

- * To equip students of engineering and technology with LSRW skills.
- * To help them develop their soft skills which will make the transition from college to work place smoother and help them to excel in their jobs.
- * To enhance students' performance at Placement interviews particularly in Group Discussions and other recruitment exercises.

10. Poverty

This is probably the biggest obstacle. Some of our students live at homes with limited food, or only intermittent access to running water/ electricity. This comes with a whole host of challenges, not only in school work, but also in limited ability to participate in extra-curricular

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activities. Every year, I have to purchase clothes for my Forensics students to compete in, because many of them would simply be in jeans and a T shirt.

11. Environmental

Out of school hours: The children are engaged by their parents to help in their trade and agriculture, rearing cattle, etc.

Child Labour: It is quite common in the villages to boost income to meet both ends. The Child Labour Act doesn't work here.

Besides the hopeless and helpless parents, the siblings of the children, the immediate and the distant family members, neighbors, friends are too helpless. The ill-equipped schools, staffed with less qualified and inexperienced freshers, pupil-teacher ratio, plural teaching all. No language teacher, child Labour, the children engaged in their parents trade and agriculture, the destructive agents of the youths - cinema, TV, Journals, Drug-Addition, lack of the hope for job opportunities are the major problems and stumbling blocks to teach English in the rural areas in India.

12. Distractions: Drugs and tobacco addiction are affecting the slow learners. When the don'ts in the cinema, media are repeatedly screened or shown they become attractive. The outside atmosphere rather pollutes their mind and they seek the destructive paths. Students are the part and parcel of this society.

In a recently conducted English Proficiency Test at I.I.T, Madras [10], about 13 % of the first year B.Tech. and B.Tech.(Dual) students failed to crack the test. Of the total 820 students, 106 students found it difficult to clear it. [10]. Every year, the Department of English conducts an English proficiency test for the first year B.Tech. and B.Tech.(Dual) programme to identify students who have difficulty in English and help them improve their skills during the course of study. In the similar way, the rural colleges need to identify the poor students by conducting the English proficiency test and conduct special coaching classes to improve their skills during the course of study.

13. Conclusion

The above mentioned problems are not impossible to solve before the ideal or great teachers to motivate and inspire the students - the pillars of the future generation.

“A poor teacher complains;
A great / ideal teacher inspires the students”.

English language learning is to be incorporated in their studies and compulsory English language learning programme for every year is also to be incorporated in each and every year during their course of study.

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