

Mastering English Pronunciation to Ensure Employability

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Abstract

Unquestionably verbal skills play a pivotal role in getting employed in this highly competitive job market today. As English is an international language of communication, its role and relevance cannot be unduly exaggerated. Most students in our country give importance to mastering English as it is vital to get jobs. However, steps to achieve mastery of English pronunciation are not well explained and practised. This paper focuses on the importance of English language in the global market and on how to acquire appropriate communication skills, especially pronunciation skills, in that language. The discussion is carried out in the backdrop of need for better pronunciation for jobs in call centres in India.

Key Words: English, Communication, Pronunciation, Verbal skills, Professional English, Employability.

Introduction

English language has indisputably become indispensable and has become a dominating *lingua franca* of the world, especially, in the non-English countries like India, China, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, etc. The importance of English language has been increasing day by day.

Call Centres and Instant Employability of Graduates

Call centre industry in India continuously grows. It appears that American and British global organizations prefer outsourcing call centre services to India more than outsourcing the same to China, Philippines, Malaysia and other Asian countries. So, a graduate, who is just out of college, may get a job in a call centre if his or her English skills are impressive and effective. Proficiency in English language, especially pronunciation, is emphasized. In most of the call

centre interviews academic records of the candidates are not counted much, but extensive command over English language seems to be the deciding criterion.

The Role of English Language in Job Interviews

In the world of globalization, English is the only medium of communication in most of the interviews for graduates. So, it is necessary that a prospective employee is good at his/her verbal communication. We can articulate the message across clearly and effectively if we are proficient in English language and its pronunciation.

One may fail to correctly convey the message if it is spoken ambiguously with incorrect pronunciation. There are instances where many talented young people lost their job opportunities just because of lack of command over English language. Many graduates, especially young engineering graduates, find job interviews intimidating which leads them to poor performance in interviews. Employers favor the candidate who speaks “better” English. Thus, irrespective of the nature of the jobs, English has become an official language of communication in many well established organizations. Now, the job market in our country seems to tell us ‘better English, better job’. Proficiency in English is always an added advantage to any job aspirant.

The Role of English in Workplace

In most reputed organizations, English is the most important language of communication. Employees without good communication skills will never find a permanent place in an organization. *“Rudyard Kipling was fired as a reporter for the San Francisco Examiner. His dismissal letter was reported to have said, ‘I’m sorry, Mr. Kipling, but you just don’t know how to use the English language. This isn’t a kindergarten for amateur writers.’”* (The World's Greatest Book of Useless Information, Penguin Publishers, 2009). It doesn't matter whether you are a native speaker or a non-native speaker. You can't survive in your profession if you lack communication skills in English.

The Role of English in BPOs

BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world today. BPO is typically categorized into back office outsourcing, which includes

internal business functions such as human resources or finance and accounting, and front office outsourcing which includes customer-related services such as call centre services.

Call Centres

Call centre is the only domain in India where more job opportunities are available for fresh graduates. Not every art, science or engineering graduate gets jobs in their respective field, but everyone can get a job in a call centre as soon as they graduate from college. However, they must not only be proficient in English language but they must also be intelligible as well.

According to *Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary*, a call centre is, '*a large office in which a company's employees provide information to its customers, or sell or advertise its goods or services by telephone*'.

There are two types of call centres: inbound and outbound. In an inbound call centre, the call centre executives make outbound calls to customers on behalf of the organization or client. It could be for various purposes such as telemarketing, surveys, sales, fund raising calls and verification services, etc. Unlike outbound call centre, in an inbound call centre the executives exclusively handle the incoming calls (calls initiated by customers) related to the service.

In Indian call centres, since, most of the business projects are predominantly from England and America, it is mandatory to be well versed in English because English is the language of communication between the organisations and the customers. So it is necessary to speak English intelligibly to the native speakers of English and others.

British and American English Accent

George Bernard Shaw ironically remarked in an interview that, '*England and America are two countries separated by a common language*' (The Christian Science Monitor (Magazine) of Boston, Massachusetts in September 1942). Though it is a common language, it is spoken in several different accents, among which 'British Accent' and 'American Accent' are more widely prevalent. It is evident from the *Oxford English Advanced Learners' Dictionary* that, 'British accent is predominantly different from American accent though it shares the same alphabet, words, phrases and sentences'. So, as an executive, one must adopt the respective accent for the

audience in call centres. Among these two accents, it seems that majority of the non-native speakers wish to learn and speak the American accent because it is more dominant than the British accent due to globalization.

Call Centre Jobs for Fresh Graduates

Once a person gets his or her job in a call centre, at every regular intervals their salary seems to increase based on his/her competency and performance in English. Through continuous better performance and excellent command over English, they will be promoted as team leaders within a short span. There are customers who would appreciate an employee's extraordinary command over English and may recommend their names to the management to give a promotion. I have come across many instances where executives were made team leaders and managers within a year or two mainly based on customers' recommendations about their adeptness in communication and solving customer's queries using English.

In call centres, based on better performance and communication skills, executives would be picked up and will be sent to foreign countries to work sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently. During the course of their call centre career, one may even reach top level positions within a few years with the salary ranging up to ten lakhs. But every prospect and growth in the industry is thoroughly based on performance and communication skills in English.

Areas of Obstruction

Mother tongue influence is the most important factor that prevents the majority of the second language learners from attaining proficiency in English language. In most of the Schools, Colleges and Universities, learners are taught and encouraged to pronouncing the words and sentences based on the written spelling of the words. Since there is wide difference between the spelling of words (in many cases) and the actual pronunciation of these words, it becomes necessary that students learn the pronunciation values using phonetic alphabet. However, phonetic values are usually ignored, and even some learned and eminent teachers may stress on pronouncing English words based on spelling as a strategy to learn English. In such circumstances the phonetic spelling may be completely neglected. Learners and speakers are not given adequate encouragement to learn International Standard English; most of the time they are discouraged from attaining proficiency in International Standard English.

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Learners' Profile

When I teach English communication, I would like to focus on final year students (diploma, Arts, Science, & Engineering) who want to get into call centre industry. Also, I want to focus on graduates who haven't got placement and want to earn some money temporarily. In addition I want to focus on graduates who want to become team leaders, managers and deputy managers, etc., through skilful performance and communication skills using English. I would look for graduates who may be poor in academic performance but have excellent command over English language.

Motivation

Without proper motivation nothing can ever be achieved. So, creating motivation is the first step for my learners to learn American English. Most of my students say that they get inspired and motivated the moment they hear me talking.

Learning Style

No standard or universal method has been advocated in our country to test the pronunciation skills. It is mainly because the importance of pronunciation skill has not been stressed upon as much as vocabulary and grammar in our academic curriculum both at school and collegiate levels.

However, the learning materials will be more effective and feasible if these are adopted in an innovative way. Though there are plenty of expensive books, internet materials and software are available everywhere. I used the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* software. I found this very useful and effective to teach American and British English pronunciation. This software has been used to teach and train correct pronunciation of English words. Use of IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) was found to be very helpful.

Assessment of Learners

Learners are assessed using a very simple, effective and instant method. The picture shown below is copied from the *Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary*. Multiple learning occurs while learning the pronunciation of a word. In this software learners can learn the

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meaning of words, pronunciation, and sample sentences along with the mastery of the word. The red colour speaker symbol is for the British pronunciation and the blue colour speaker symbol is for the American pronunciation. Once the learners click the red or blue colour symbols, they will hear a native voice pronouncing the words according to the International Phonetic Alphabet.



The screenshot shows a word entry for 'accomplished'. It includes two speaker icons: a red one for UK pronunciation and a blue one for US pronunciation. A third icon, a microphone inside a black circle, is circled in red. To the right of the icons are the phonetic transcriptions: /ə'kʌm.plɪʃt/ for UK and /-'kɑ:m-/ for US. The word is followed by the part of speech 'adjective' and the synonyms 'skilled' and 'skilled'. Below this, two example sentences are provided: 'She's a very accomplished pianist/painter/horsewoman.' and 'He was accomplished in all the arts.'

The circled symbol is the recorder. Once we hit that symbol we will get the following pop up:



The pop-up window has a green header with the text 'Pronunciation practice'. Below the header, the word 'extract' is displayed. There are three main sections, each with a 'Test' button and a play icon. The first section says 'Click *Test* to hear the British pronunciation.' The second section says 'Click *Test* to hear the American pronunciation.' The third section says 'Click *Record* once, say the word, then click *Stop*. Click *Listen* to hear your recording.' At the bottom of the third section, there are three icons: a microphone, a square, and a play button.

By clicking the record button we can record our voice and we can hear it back instantly and we can compare our pronunciation with the native speakers. We can keep practicing it until we get the right or appropriate pronunciation of any word in English. This method has been experimented in our communication skills lab and most learners found it not only simple but interesting.

Conclusion

In a recent survey of recruiters conducted by the **University of Pittsburgh's Katz Business School** from companies with more than 50,000 employees, it was found that

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'communication skills are cited as the single most important decisive factor in choosing managers' (Jasanoff, Sheila. *A Living Legacy: The Precautionary Ideal in American Law*. Island Press (2003). Therefore, for all those who aspire to have a profitable career, acquiring appropriate English language with appropriate accent is a very important step. With practical steps discussed in this paper, such learning is not, indeed, a Herculean task.

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