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Teaching the Intangibles –The Role of the English Teacher

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With Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) many multinational firms have set up their facilities in India, leading to employment opportunities at every level and change in the recruitment process as well. Until recently, there was a general opinion that technical knowledge and certification are the prerequisites for an ideal candidate for well-paying jobs in these multinational corporations. But this is not true any longer as there is an unquestionable paradigm shift in the demands of the corporate world. As Carole (2002) puts it, “More and more corporations around the world recognize that, in order to gain a competitive advantage, they also need to make sure their people know how to handle themselves at work and how to relate with their customers and peers”. To achieve this magical transformation, soft skills are essential.

What are soft skills?

A distinction is maintained between soft skills and hard skills. While hard skills refer to technical and academic skills, soft skills refer to wide-ranging personal and interpersonal skills. Academic and technical skills can be more easily defined, observed and measured. However, the measurement of personal and interpersonal skills requires complex factors. These are difficult to define, observe and measure and hence they are intangible. Such skills involve items such as inter-personal etiquette, netiquette (appropriate practices and use of expressions and content in Internet and e-mail communications, etc.), appropriate lexical choice, use of style, meaning and sentences, etc. These also include tone of friendliness, optimism, and various techniques of persuasion.

It is well recognized that soft and hard skills go hand in hand in any individual who has proved to be successful in management and business deliberations.

The Indian Scenario

Recruiting agencies always report that the number of “employable” engineering, technology, science, business and management graduates in India continues to be low. This, indeed, is a paradoxical situation. There is enormous and spectacular growth in well-paying job opportunities, a huge number of engineering and other graduates are produced every year, but there is a severe dearth of employable graduates. The globalization of the industries and the consequent spurt in the job scene has suddenly found us wanting in the area of soft skills; in fact, the economic boom is now threatened because the effectiveness and growth of India’s talent pool has been seriously constrained due to a deepening soft skills crisis.

The recent NASSCOM report endorses this fact by stating that 75 % of the engineers are not employable since the focus is always on academics and theory. The report demands that equal importance be given to skill building and practical training to give the graduates a competitive edge.

Though the soft skills crisis is a universal phenomenon, the problems and reasons in the Indian subcontinent are peculiar because for the following reasons:

- Our educational system is so designed forcing students to concentrate more on rote-learning than on developing a spirit of enquiry, which is the most predominant factor to achieve success at work place. As Variyar (2009) points out, “A study across four engineering service industries in India revealed the top challenges as - Not asking enough questions, assuming customer/authority figure is always right, Being afraid to ask questions and assuming everything is understood based on whatever customer has told us.”
- During their high school education, many engineers would have neglected studying humanities, languages and arts as a result of parental and peer pressure to master science and mathematics, subjects that help clearing competitive entrance exams. In this process, an all-rounded development of complementary human intelligences and faculties like creativity and inter-personal skills is stunted. (Variyar 2009)
- The syllabus of most Indian Universities is not frequently updated and so they remain outdated resulting in a wide industry-academic gap. This is the crucial challenge that needs to be targeted. Now, the leading corporations have taken steps to train the teachers as well as introduce value-added courses for the students: Wipro 10x, CCNA by CISCO, and Infosys-Campus Connect are a few such initiatives. Some Universities have also already taken a right step by including soft skills as part of their curriculum, for instance, GE1352 – Communication Skills Lab by Anna University, Chennai.

Need of the Hour

The leaders of industry have reiterated that, in this changing milieu, they now seek potential candidates, i.e., graduates with sound technical knowledge as well as efficiency in soft skills. This can be achieved by giving the students adequate and appropriate training in soft skills, so that they are industry-ready and become productive from Day One.

Effective interaction needs to take place across all segments for the smooth running of any organization:

- Internal - Between employees of same cadre, between employees of different cadre.
- External - Between an organization and another, between worker and client.

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Hence, to overcome the soft skills crisis and to achieve desirable results, certain changes need to be made in the curriculum, the teaching methodology, the classroom management as well as the evaluation practices.

What Should Be Taught?

Honing soft skills should address the development of attitudes and attributes as well as improvement in communication skills. This will, in turn, result in the ability to communicate thoughts and ideas effectively and interact with the right attitude. For this, the following three aspects should be focused on:

- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Problem solving skills

Change in Curriculum

The present curriculum is so designed that it does not include practical knowledge of all the four language skills, namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking. These skills should be learned along with soft skills. A change is required in designing the curriculum, which should be oriented more towards equipping the student to manage and excel at the work place.

To achieve optimum results the curriculum should be re-structured to include some of the following topics:

- **Effective Communication Skills** – *verbal, non-verbal, pronunciation and intonation, identifying and removing barriers to communication, acquisition of different styles of communication.*
- **Business Presentation Skills** – *negotiation, structuring effective presentation, assertiveness.*
- **Behavioural Traits** - *attitude, motivation , time and stress management, business ethics, leadership and inter personal skills and team building.*
- **Problem-solving Skills** - *creative, critical and analytical thinking, conflict handling, and decision-making.*

Role of English Teachers

Teachers should react to the changing scenario and equip themselves to meet the need of the hour. Especially, the English teachers, at this crucial juncture, should play a vital role in bridging the gap between what is now available in the form of curriculum and the demands of the corporate world.

This transformation can be achieved by moving away from the traditional method of teaching language skills to the communicative method of language teaching. Instead of focusing on grammatical rules, syntactic structures, rote memorization of vocabulary and using literary texts as teaching material, the present-day English teachers need to concentrate on improving language efficiency and soft skills by making use of real life situations as teaching material. For this, a more creative, analytical, logic-oriented and interactive method of teaching should be adopted.

In a nutshell, English teachers should become more of a facilitator, and less of an instructor.

To excel in this new role English teachers should adopt changes in the following:

- Methodology of teaching
- Classroom Management
- Assessment and Evaluation

Change in Teaching Methodology

Before adopting any methodology, the teacher should assess the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. This type of Needs analysis will guide, both the teacher and student, to consolidate and enhance the strengths and concentrate on and reduce the weaknesses inherent in the students.

Subsequently, the teacher should explore and experiment various methods of teaching to address the different needs. It should be interactive and communicative, where students are given ample scope and opportunities to participate, interact and communicate, rather than lecture oriented. The bottom line is to make students practice, practice and more practice.

An Array of issues, problem solving topics, and varied situations which the students are likely to encounter in their work place can be manipulated appropriately in a class room.

This can be accomplished by conducting individual/pair/group task based activities like debates, group discussions, case analyses, role plays, business games and so on. Media and video shows can also be effectively used to improve listening comprehension, critical analysis and for presenting model.

The teaching methodology should be so devised as to include conceptualized tasks, and thus provide integration of skills-related learning experiences. Whatever be the method, the teacher should create the right ambience and make the class room very informal, interesting, and interactive. The methodology should also offer the teachers scope to observe, listen, evaluate and provide feedback.

Classroom Management

Moving away from the practice of lecture method, the teacher has to ensure that the objectives of learning are realized in a class room. For this, in addition to planning and choosing the right methodology, execution also plays a vital role.

A competent teacher will manage properly the task/activity-based classroom and facilitate higher-order thinking by concentrating on the following two aspects:

- Students Participation
- Time management

We must remember that all our classes consist of mixed-ability population. This a very important common characteristic of most schools in India. Most often, then, in task-based interactive sessions, the teachers are confronted by mixed-ability classrooms, urging them to tread carefully as they need to match instructional approaches to the readiness, interests, learning speed/styles/attitudes, intelligence and communicative ability of all students. The activities should be completed in a given time-frame, no matter whatever differences are reflected in performing the assigned activity.

Assessment and Evaluation

Having described what soft skills are, the change in curriculum and the methodology, the issue of the complexity of assessment and evaluation becomes apparent. The Assessment of the students takes place on a continuous basis, involving the following:

- Interest/attitude
- Active participation
- Team spirit
- Assertiveness
- Presentation skills
- Communication skills
- Problem-solving Competence

Assessment and Evaluation can be accomplished at three levels: Self, Peer and Teacher. Assessment can be done by the Self and peer objectively by analyzing and comparing the performance. Feedback by teachers is significant because of teacher's rich experience.

Conclusion

To conclude, soft skills training is about enabling and empowerment. As Cologne (2002) states, "we (English teachers) should try to do our best in achieving two results simultaneously that are vital in view of the ever-changing 'face' of English: to enhance

our students' linguistic competence; and to prepare them for handling the extra-linguistic demands via soft skills.”

For achieving this, a transition is required at the levels of syllabus, teaching methodology and teacher's willingness to accept change. The wake-up call should be noticed by the teachers and impel them to adapt to the changing needs and expectations of the industry. Thus, the teachers of English should rise as a phoenix from the ashes of traditionalism and switch over to modernity with respect to change in Mindset, Material and Methodology.

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