

Integrating Soft Skills with English Language Learning

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Abstract

21st Century Skills include learners to be Creators, Collaborators, Communicators and Critical Thinkers. It is important to be aware that 21st Century learners are digital natives and aspire to be (if not already) world-class learners. In India, education at most levels has become important in order to be employable. The fact that most young graduates are not job-ready despite possessing degrees is worrisome and stressful for both the job seekers and the employers. This trend is disturbing and needs addressing on a war footing. For years, educators have been talking about English Language Learning and training in Soft Skills being like two peas in a pod. Although they belong to the same skin yet they are two separate identities which have almost similar features and tastes. Honing English Language Skills and Soft Skills is becoming increasingly important in the 21st Century. This is because young graduates are technically sound but their soft skills are next to negligible. Most of them do not know how to conduct themselves in a group, how to communicate effectively or how to lead a team to reach a target. This paper intends to look at learners understanding of Soft Skills. It also further probes what these learners consider as important Soft Skills.

Keywords: Soft Skills, English, Learning, Graduates, 21st Century Skills

Introduction

Globalization and Industrialization have blended into several work fields. This is not an unhealthy mix up and intervention. It just validates the fact that times are changing and that we need to equip ourselves with the times. We, twenty-first century netizens now, are in a situation

where those who are ‘fit’ enough can make their lives sail smoothly. The word ‘fit’ does not refer to physical health alone. It also implies fitness in intellect, emotional stability, social graces, being able to adapt to situations, being able to register, process and exhibit favorable behavior etcetera. These are some of the traits of a twenty-first century being. The four basic twenty-first century skills include Collaboration and Teamwork, Creativity and Imagination, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving. On close examination, very little difference is found between Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Soft Skills required by the work force of today. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is based on the following principles:

- *It focuses more on using forms than studying about them.* Employers, these days, want their young employees to use English meaningfully in different contexts. It means that students should be trained to apply knowledge in practical situations.
- *It teaches grammar implicitly rather than explicitly.* Employers want new employees to speak and write in contexts meaningfully.
- *It aims at motivating the learners to write in their own style.* Employers want newly recruited employees to be original in thought and expression.

Need for the Study

It is quite evident in the sphere of education in India that the twenty-first century graduate learner is not sufficiently equipped with skills that can make one a potential asset to the employer. Despite having, enviable and admirable score cards, thorough technical or hard skills, the young graduate finds it extremely difficult to cope with stress levels that the work at hand requires. Besides, people skills, leadership traits, lateral thinking and creativity are just a few to name that are severely amiss. In the newspaper, The Business Line, in its 19 January 2018 edition had a headline that read, ‘80% of engineers in India unemployable: report.’ The report indicated a significant skill gap. It reported that the fifth edition of National Employability Report 2015-16 conducted by job skills matching platform Aspiring Minds had found that over 80 percent of engineers in India remain unemployable. This further indicated a significant skill gap.

India Today in its 13 June 2016 edition had an article titled, “Only 7 per cent engineering graduates employable: What's wrong with India's engineers?” The article under the subtitle reading

‘major problems with engineering education in India’ lists ten points. Among them, the ninth and tenth points are related to our concern. The ninth point is, ‘lack of proper English Skills.’ This further reads on to inform that 73.63 percent of candidates lacked in communication skills. The candidates also were found to possess a mere 57.96 percent of analytical and quantitative skills. These were some of the reasons for their unemployment. Even the IT sector requires employers who are fluent and well versed in English, as within around two years of experience on the job, they would have to communicate with international customers. Thus, if the quality of engineering graduates do not improve, IT sector hiring will also go down.’ The tenth point is, ‘disregard of essential soft skills.’ This part of the report began by reporting that ‘Soft skills have become very important in the present job industry, but they are routinely ignored in educational institutes.’

Therefore, the academia needs to become alert to the siren call of the times in education. It is evident that graduates have problems negotiating with the work place. In order to make this transition smooth and with the minimum bumps possible; we need to intelligently educate and offer a plethora of collective knowledge, rich experience and make learners aware of at least the basic soft skills so that they have an edge and are easily absorbable by the work force. This calls out for a paradigm shift in the education process itself. Curriculum and Syllabi have to cater to the need of the job market. In the same report in the Business Line, Varun Aggarwal, CTO, Aspiring Minds, said, “Engineering has become the de facto graduate degree for a large chunk of students today. However, along with improving the education standards, it is quintessential that we evolve our undergraduate programmes to make them more job-centric.” This implies further that is an immediate necessity for young graduates to show a variety of Soft Skills in the work place. This pressing, immediate requirement must be address by educators in institutions of Higher Education.

Literature Review

In the article, “Teaching Soft Skills to Engineering Students: A Case Study of BITS, Pilani”, (2017), Sushila Shekhawat and Geetha Bakilapadavu report that, “Engineering education in India largely focus on imparting knowledge in the respective technical areas.’ It is without doubt important but “apart from technical expertise, they have to work with people from varied backgrounds.” It is essentially because of this people skills are very much required. Also, no man

is an island and therefore imbibing people skills will only get one more acceptance and will assist to get along with many more people. To be able to persuade convincingly, to possess a positive attitude to team mates and to the work at hand just go on to polish career advancement further.

In their article, 'The Role of Pedagogical Intervention in Improving the Oral Proficiency of Engineering students,' Mekala S states, "in the globalised context, the need for spoken proficiency in English has become a determinant factor (2017). They state that, "the role of English is very crucial, and it is needed for mobility and social and economic advancement (Mekala S, 2017, p 7)

Venkatesan Iyengar R (2017) in his article, "People Matter: Networking and Career Development" says that there was a time when hard skills alone were sufficient to secure a job or even a promotion. But today soft skills help propel career growth at a rapid pace.

Chayan Jain in the article, "What does your body say about you," (2016) states "everyone must know what others actually mean when they say something and what their body silently conveys to other people at different time." Speaking in public is often a daunting task to many. However, one may be trained in an essential skill. It also is an essential trait of a leader.

Revathi Turaga in her article, "On Managing Emotions" (2016) writes that managing one's emotions and ensuring that one's responses are balanced is vital in today's organizational context." Many more companies are focusing on the emotional quotient of the candidate." She also quotes Maddy Malhotra who said "Running a marathon with a backpack is tough and may hinder you from winning the race. Do not let the baggage from your past heavy with fear, guilt, and anger-slow you down.

George Livingston in his article, "The Role of Story in Enhancing Critical Thinking and Group Discussion Skills", writes "critical thinking is expected in work settings". According to Knutson (2012), "critical thinking is important for engineers because it aids in preparation, investigation and making presentations. It saves time while making quality decisions." He also

writes that in work settings, the skill of discussing in groups is much sort. It (teaches critical thinking through inductive method rather than deductive method.”

Some of the basic Soft Skills required to be employable are shown in the diagram below.



Soft skills are a collective ability for excellence. Writing about Soft Skills in her article, ‘Need and Importance of Soft skills in Students,’ Rani (2010) says that, ‘Soft skills are learned behaviours which require training and focused application. Soft skills will enable students with a strong conceptual and practical framework to build, develop and manage teams. They play an important role in the development of the students’ overall personality, thereby enhancing their career prospects.’ With this as a focus it becomes important for institutions of Higher Education to form graduates who are well equipped to fulfil market requirements and demands as the market does not focus on academic achievement and credentials alone. West (1998) says that, ‘A university education should lay the foundations for a lifelong commitment by graduates to learning and professional development.’ This further implies that graduates, year after year, seem to be lacking what the market requires in order to facilitate professional practice. Employers seek a diverse range of skills and attributes in newly hired graduates in order to maintain a competitive advantage. Birrell (2006) states that many countries are facing a skills shortage. The students

cannot be blamed for this lack as they depend on Institutions to groom them completely. Of course institutions of Higher Education in the 21st century are not supposed to become training institutes or placement agencies but must be spaces for intellectual enhancement and places which foster, nurture and nourish minds to think, ideate and to contribute new knowledge to the already existing body of knowledge. Having stated this, it does not mean that students should not be groomed to meet the challenges of a career. In this situation, when students tend to give their core subjects more importance it becomes a challenge for the English teacher to make them realize the subtle nuances required to make them ready to meet the world. Thus, the English teacher must equip the learners with sufficient Soft Skills in a very subtle way and make the students realize the importance of soft skills

Objective of the Study

The intention to conduct the survey was the following:

01. To learn if learners know what Soft Skills were
02. To learn if learners know if they possessed any Soft Skills
03. To learn if learners could identify for themselves what were the most important Soft Skills
04. To learn if learners knew what Soft Skills were required of them to get a job
05. To learn what Soft Skills the learners wanted to be trained in

Methodology

A questionnaire was designed with five open-ended questions. It was distributed among seventy-one (N = 71). The study was conducted in Bengaluru. All the students belonged to the same class and were between the ages of 17 – 19 years. They were all first-year degree students reading for a bachelor's degree in Communicative English, Psychology and English Literature. Most of these students were not first-generation graduates. Most of them come from economically sound backgrounds. Most of them also come from English Medium Schools. They are comfortable in using the English language. After the questionnaire was administered to them, the data was then analyzed and put into percentages.

Data Analysis

Statement 1

The first statement in the questionnaire was to find out if the learners knew what Soft Skills are. This was an important question to ask because when students were randomly asked what they thought was Soft Skill; the reactions were surprising. Individually many of them immediately said that they did not know what Soft Skills were. However, when they saw the questionnaire, they would have got some idea of what was being asked.

On analysis it was evident that:

70% of the learners seemed to have some idea of what Soft Skills were. It must also be noted that many students had varied interpretations for the same question since the questionnaire was open ended.

20 % of the learners were unsure of what Soft Skills were.

10% of the learners clearly stated that they did not know what Soft Skills were.

Statement 2

The second statement was a probing question, which intended to find out if the learners knew if they possessed any Soft Skills.

On analysis it was evident that:

75% of the learners stated that they possessed Soft Skills.

15% of the learners stated that they did not know that they possessed any Soft Skills.

10% of the learners stated that they were unsure if they possessed any Soft Skills.

On analysis this shows that many learners, although belonging to a cosmopolitan city, were not very sure of the Soft Skills that they possessed. This is despite the fact that they had spent at least 4 months in the institution and had mixed fairly well on campus.

Statement 3

The third statement required the students to list the Soft Skills according to what they thought were important soft skills. This is how they listed the Soft Skills:

1. Listening Skills	23.94%
2. Speaking Skills	09.85%
3. Inter personal Skills	09.85%
4. Leadership Skills	09.85%
5. Presentation Skills	01.40%
6. Conflict management	00.00%
7. Time management	04.22%
8. Stress management	11.26%
9. Writing skills	00.00%
10. Persuasion Skills	00.00%
11. Negotiation Skills	00.00%
12. Public speaking	00.00%
13. Decision making	09.85%
14. Etiquette	19.71%

On analysis, it was surprisingly evident that the learners thought that Listening Skills (23.94%) was the most important Soft Skills. Learners, therefore, believe that there should be more stress paid to honing listening skills. There must be more training on listening.

The second important skill they thought was important was Etiquette (19.71%). This implied that learners are fully aware that how they appear before people matter and that they need to be trained in it. They know that public appearances matter.

The third important Soft Skill stressed upon was Stress management (11.26%).

Time Management Skills (04.22%) and Presentation Skills (01.40%) were also considered important by a few learners.

It was again surprising to note that Interpersonal Skills, Decision Making Skills, Speaking Skills, Leadership Skills had the same percentage of students (00.00%) placing them accordingly.

Statement 4

The fourth question was to seek information about how aware the learners are about the Soft Skills that they possessed. It also proved to find out if they possessed the Soft Skills required to get a job.

37% of the learners stated that they possessed Soft Skills and that they were job ready.

39% of the learners stated that they did not have the required Soft Skills and were not ready for a job.

24% of the learners stated that they were unsure if they possessed the required Soft Skills and therefore unsure if they were ready to take on a job.

Statement 5

The fifth statement wanted to know what Soft Skills the learners would like training in. The top four Soft Skills that the learners would like to get training in are:

01. Time Management
02. Stress Management
03. Public Speaking
04. Decision Making

This finding was in stark contrast to statement 3. But nonetheless it becomes evident from the responses received that the four Soft Skills mentioned above needed special attention and inclusion in the syllabus.

Scope of Study

The scope of this paper was limited to only one class of learners. It may be used for more number of students doing various courses and then the difference may be analyzed. The

questionnaire could be more specific and more information could be sort so that curriculum and syllabi may be infused with these important Soft Skills.

Conclusion

The researcher, therefore, by analysing the data has found that even though the students at the undergraduate degree level think that they know what Soft Skills are, they also think that there is plenty of room for improvement. The few that do not know what Soft Skills are, can begin honing their skills while studying. Some learners feel that listening is a Soft Skill that needs to be developed in the classroom and that it is an essential skill. This paves the way for the teacher to intervene and help the students hone their skills better. Soft Skills are necessary and Undergraduate students will be better equipped and more confident to meet the challenges of the world when they step in to the work place.

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