

Communication and Disruption in English Classroom

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Abstract

This paper discusses the usefulness of group communication to develop better performance in English among the students of engineering colleges in Tamilnadu. It raises the question whether the emphasis on speaking in full and complete sentences is an appropriate goal. It points out that code-mixing code-switching or shifting is not very common when we want to use English for communication. Other issues discussed include the need for getting closer to Standard English, use of English in group meetings, speaking English using written English, advantages of group communication in learning to use English in engineering colleges, and disruptive acts during group communication.

Key words: Code mixing, code-switching, communication through speaking, group communication, disruptive acts, collaborative team activity to learn to use English.

Speak in Full Sentences Only?

Does communication mean speaking in full sentences? Traditionally, English teachers wanted their students to speak in complete and full sentences. Composing a complete sentence does take time and it involves mastery of grammar and related features of speaking such as appropriate pause between sentences, appropriate pause using phrases within sentences, etc. Since our ultimate goal in most cases is to master writing in English, such an insistence is understandable. The performance of a student in English is still largely assessed by the level of mastery of writing in English.

Communication through Speaking

On the other hand, communication through speech may or may not contain complete sentences. Even broken sentences are understood using the context in which these are uttered.

Even wrong use of a word may be corrected suitably and understood properly. Manner of

delivery of sentences, phrases, along with intonation, comes to dominate communication. This does not mean that we accept speaking ungrammatical sentences or ungrammatical English. A strategy that encourages fluency and slowly switches over to correct grammar in several stages with examples and practice may be the best thing to adopt.

Code-mixing and Code-switching

Code-mixing and code-switching with English words, phrases and sentences are very common while using Tamil or another Indian language for communication. However, these are relatively less resorted to when a student or teacher tries to communicate through English. This distinction between the use of Tamil or any other Indian language and the use of English may be strengthened in English classrooms in engineering colleges. Teachers of English and other subjects, which are taught using the medium of English, should be able to speak English fluently. We highly recommend that the teachers speak to one another only through English. Such practice could be made an implicit norm for all the teachers of engineering colleges, all of which seem to use English as the medium of instruction.

Getting Closer to Standard English

Since our engineering graduates may seek employment everywhere in the world, our communication through English must get closer to Standard English used in nations wherein English is viewed as the native language. Accent will continue to be a problem, but let us remember that even within the above mentioned native English speaking countries, there is an abundance of dialects, each having its own accent. Some ethnic groups such as African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics have all been there right from the beginning of the modern history of USA, and yet they all continued to have their own accent even today. So, such accents are recognized and understood largely as native accents.

Our Possible Goals for English Learning in Engineering Colleges

On the other hand, the accent/s of South Asians studying, working and settling down in USA pose problems of comprehension. Our strategy here in the engineering colleges should be to enable comprehension of native English with great ease, and then learn strategies to speak slowly and steadily, pronouncing each word with clarity, and not hurriedly as common among

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:1 January 2016

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many of us while speaking English in India. Possibly less complicated sentences, short sentences, and willingness to repeat the utterances still more slowly, etc., may be practiced.

Speaking English Using Written English

We believe that we in India will continue to speak in written English, although some do aim at and get the ability to speak in spoken style adopted in Native English speaking countries. Since English was introduced as part of formal schooling in British India, we have focused on learning written English and using it as our spoken format. Interestingly, East India Company as well as subsequent British India Government/s, and the Native English speaking missionaries who established and ran schools, did not focus on importing in large numbers the native English speaking teachers. This was not the case in many other nations wherein even now there is preference for native speakers of English as teachers of English. Thus we have a long history of teaching English by non-native speakers of English. We've managed well, we should say, and yet there is always room for improvement. Especially now there is some deterioration of knowledge of English in spite of the fact that most of us want to learn and use English.

No Substitute for Practice

There is no substitute for constant practice. We need to continuously focus on reading pronunciation, intonations, distinction between some sounds which create confusion in the minds of listeners as well as speakers. For example, z and j. Pronunciation of letters such as g, x, t, d, etc. which have different values in Indian languages, or sound that are not found in Indian languages. Information on such problems and issues are readily available. We must first recognize the fact that these problems or issues are faced both by our teachers and students. Summer training and workshops every year in English skills must be made a requirement for our teachers so that their performance in English would continuously improve. Online training is also a good possibility. Their motivation to improve their quality of performance in using English must be encouraged, if possible through some suitable incentives.

Several Styles of Performance

There are a large number of Indian engineers employed in other countries. We notice several styles of performance of these engineers in group meetings in their companies: Some

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Indians keep silent and nod in acceptance, and ask only a few questions, or make a few observations. On the other hand, some Indians are given to jump at the opportunity and continue to ask questions. Some go to the extent of arguments.

It is important our students seek a balance and perform well by raising only relevant questions, making only relevant comments and observations, and by discussing issues with clear examples and illustrations. There is no need to imitate what American participants may do in a group meeting; we can still retain our own posture and yet win accolades.

We would like to emphasize that it is easier for students of engineering colleges to learn and use English with great competence. Most colleges offer their subjects of study through English medium only. And so with cooperation from all, especially, from the teachers of engineering and technology subjects, we can improve the communication skills of our students, even if they are first generation learners or from rural communities where there is not much exposure to English.

Group Communication Training

Group communication training, not individual based learning drills, is our recommendation here. Most of the time, in the past, we have focused on individual performance through loud reading, repetition and question-answer methods, etc. in the classroom to help our students in high schools and even in colleges to produce sentences and speak on chosen topics with coherence. Grammatical correctness dominated and guided our approach. We believe it is time now to form groups and get the students communicate with one another in English. From simple topics of conversation to progressively more complex topics of professional subjects may be identified. Students in groups will begin to speak to one another with no interference from the teacher.

The teacher also could be a visitor to the group and he or she could join the conversation. But the teacher should not make any corrections of the utterances and may participate in the conversation briefly and leave the group soon. This may help the teacher to assess the progress of team deliberations.

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Collaborative Team Activity Norms

This group communication is a sort of collaborative team activity which engineers will be called upon to perform in their career. Meetings to discuss issues to develop and execute projects and/or meetings to solve problems, etc. are very common.

The norms that such meetings impose on the participants may be adopted for group communication as well. In such meetings, some may not participate actively, some may simply accept and follow what is offered as conclusion, some may dominate the discussions, some individuals may be always argumentative and thus disruptive.

In addition, there may also be disruption in the form of late arrival and early departure, cell phone talk, texting, always looking into the smart phone, whispering, exchanging private notes through bits of paper, making signs while someone else is speaking, etc. Disruption is disruption, a sign of indiscipline, lack of respect for others, disinterestedness, pride, sarcasm, superiority complex, “I knew it already attitude”, etc. Teachers will easily add to the list of disruptive activities listed here. It appears to us that every new class brings with it some additional and innovative disruptive activities in the classroom. So, it is likely that group work for communication will also have its due share of these disruptive activities.

We need to emphasize the fact that group communication using English is an absolute requirement for their future career. Group communication in the college provides the students with some seriousness of purpose giving them opportunities to improve their use of English even as it provides them with skills to participate and even lead group activities.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:1 January 2016

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