

Challenges of Teaching English Communication Skills in NIT Srinagar

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Abstract

English Communication skills are indispensable for the engineering students; not just academically but also for their future careers. English communication skills course forms an important component of various engineering colleges, including National Institute of Technology (NIT) Srinagar. NIT Srinagar is a public technical institute in Kashmir, and is one among the fully funded institutes of the Central Government. The English Communication Skills paper is part of the syllabus in the B.Tech program under the title ‘Basic English and Communication Skills’ in the first semester and ‘Advanced English Communication Skills & Organizational Behavior’ in the second semester. Both of these are compulsory papers in the first two semesters of the following streams: Electrical Engineering, Electronics and Communication, Computer Science, Information Technology, Civil, Mechanical and Metallurgy & Material Science, and comprise of three credits each. The syllabus in the said college has been framed with specific aims and objectives. Apart from methods and teaching aids, the motivation and curiosity of the learners play a major role in the teaching learning process. In addition to lack of motivation among students, the teachers face many difficulties including the syllabus, educational and lingual background of the learners, medium of instruction at school level, among others. Amongst all this the teachers also need to continuously improve their English communicative skills. Given this backdrop, the present paper aims to study the challenges faced by teachers in NIT Srinagar.

Keywords: English Communication Skills, Engineering College, Syllabus, Challenges, Teachers, NIT Srinagar.

1. Introduction

English language has become a major medium for communication across borders globally; a deficiency in this area may result in barriers for an individuals' personal and professional development. To overcome this deficiency and to keep a check on the English language skills of an individual, time to time evaluation is required. It is concerned with assessing things like effectiveness of the teaching strategies, methods and techniques, etc. and is of paramount importance in improving the effectiveness and quality of any program. In the teaching learning situation, evaluation is a concept that deals not only with the classroom examination system but also with the syllabus, teaching methodology and difficulties faced in the teaching learning process. Prakasam.V. (2011) explains the problems of learning English in India: "In India it is not the language of our being or identity. It has come to be the language of doing, language of academics and the language of recognition. It is learnt, not really 'acquired' from 'the days of being in the womb'. English is heard everyday all around us, but English does not help us 'socialize' or 'mature' within our 'experience'. It helps us 'grow' outside our 'inner circle'. In spite of all our efforts, we cannot really get many 'coordinate bilinguals' with our academic or professional exposure to English. The point of reference will always be a native variety of English. That's why I call English National Foreign Language".

2. Importance of English for Engineering Students

English is the most widely spoken language in the world, and it serves as a common language for international communication. The importance of the English language for engineers cannot be overstated. Engineers often work on global projects, collaborate with colleagues from different countries, and communicate with clients and stakeholders worldwide. Proficiency in English language enables engineers to effectively convey their ideas, understand requirements, and collaborate with diverse teams.

Engineering involves extensive technical documentation, including reports, research papers, manuals, and specifications. English is the dominant language for publishing technical literature and research and as such engineers need to be proficient in English language to write

and understand technical documents, ensuring effective knowledge transfer and dissemination of engineering advancements. Proficiency in English helps engineers to access a vast pool of knowledge, stay updated with the latest advancements, and leverage existing research and best practices to enhance their work. English proficiency is essential for engineers seeking career growth and professional development.

Engineers who can effectively present their work, participate in discussions, and network with professionals from around the world have a competitive advantage in their field. Engineering projects often involve multidisciplinary teams comprising professionals from different backgrounds and cultures.

English serves as a common language for effective collaboration, ensuring that engineers can communicate their ideas, understand others' perspectives, and work together towards project success. While the importance of English for engineers is undeniable, it is essential to acknowledge that language proficiency alone does not guarantee engineering competence. Engineers also need a strong foundation in technical knowledge, problem-solving skills, and practical experience to excel in their field.

3. Technical English in NIT Srinagar

3.1 Course Description

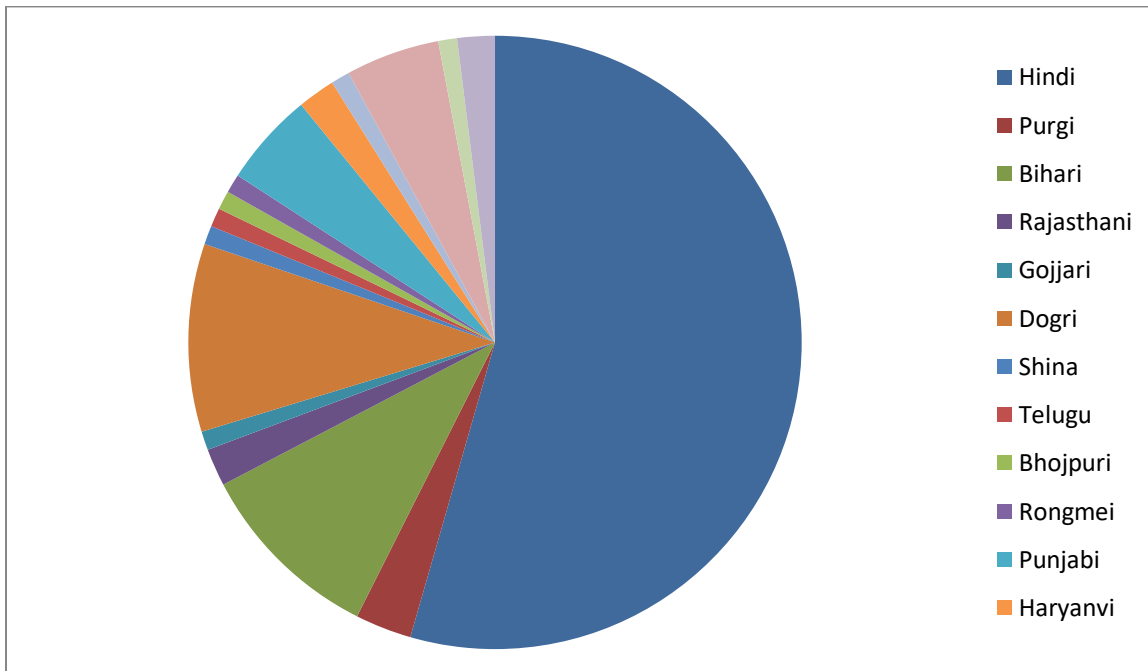
The English Communication Skills course is designed to develop basic reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills of the students. It is organized in a manner that the reading, vocabulary, grammar, and writing exercises are interconnected, contextual as well as non-contextual. It helps them to learn effective reading techniques enabling them to identify main ideas and to glean details from a text. The course facilitates an understanding of word structure and thereby enrichment in vocabulary. It also assists the students to acquire knowledge on formal writing skills. The presentation skills taught through the course intends to enhance the expressive skills of the students such that they are able to express their feelings, thoughts, and expressions effectively to the listeners.

3.2 Course Objectives

The English Communication Skills course in NIT Srinagar aims to help the students do the following:

1. Learn the techniques of effective reading and good comprehension.
2. Develop an understanding of word structure and word formation.
3. Enrich their vocabulary by learning antonyms, synonyms and the meaning and applications of words pertaining to various parts of speech.
4. Use grammatical elements such as articles, prepositions, tenses, modifiers and noun-pronoun and subject-verb agreement correctly.
5. Learn the structure and style of sentences and paragraphs.
6. Study the nature and style of formal letters.
7. Learn the nature and style of formal writing.
8. Focus on the sound system in English and learn correct pronunciation.
9. Focus and learn stress, rhythm, and intonation in English.
10. Develop their presentation skills.

4. Languages Spoken in NIT Srinagar



Students at NIT Srinagar represent a diverse multilingual background. As shown in the figure above, the majority of students in the sample have Hindi as their mother tongue. However, the linguistic diversity extends to other languages such as Gojjary, Kashmiri, Purgi, Dogri, Shina, Bihari, Telugu, Bhojpuri, Rongmei, Punjabi, Haryanvi, Kannada, Bengali, Rajasthani, and Marathi. This rich linguistic variety highlights the challenges and opportunities for fostering effective communication skills in such a multicultural academic setting

5. Methodology

To explore the challenges of English language teaching at NIT Srinagar, interviews, interactions, and observations were conducted with 150 students and 4 teachers. During these sessions, participants shared their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about English language education in the college. The interviews included open-ended questions on topics such as teaching methods, materials, activities, assessment patterns, teacher qualifications, and the language used as the medium of instruction. Both students and teachers were involved in this study to gain insight into the difficulties they face in English language classes

6. Challenges faced in teaching English Communication Skills

The challenges faced by teachers in teaching English communication skills to students in engineering colleges often stem from a combination of institutional, student-related, and pedagogical issues. Some of the key challenges are mentioned below:

i. Lack of Motivation: Teachers face a difficult task when the students are not wholly motivated to learn. Engineering students often prioritize technical skills over writing and communication skills perceiving it as less relevant to their future careers. They resist practicing and developing the language skills, as they do not see immediate relevance or value in them. They prepare for exams only for passing the semester and getting the certificates; as a result, they don't learn anything. This lack of motivation makes it challenging for teachers to engage students and encourage active participation in English classes. Teachers face difficulties in convincing students of the importance of these skills and motivating them to improve. According to Sharma. R. "English language teaching in India, you will agree with me,

has suffered a lot so much that our students who pass intermediate or degree examinations with English either as a compulsory or as an elective subject can neither speak nor write correct English, may be because the emphasis in our schools and colleges has always been on the conceptual content and the stylistic content has been neglected so far”.

ii. Insufficient Time and Curriculum Constraints: Engineering curricula are typically packed with technical subjects, leaving limited time for English language instruction and same is the case with NIT Srinagar. In NIT Srinagar, English Communicative skills are taught in the first two semesters when the students are getting settled with the new course and mainly focus on their main subjects. For the rest of the six semesters, this subject is not taught at all. So, it can be concluded that teachers are given very less time to teach English communicative skills and that is where the needs of the students are not fulfilled, and the engineers lack the required proficiency in English language. Teachers struggle to cover all the necessary language skills and competencies within the limited time, making it difficult to provide comprehensive language training

iii. Varying English Proficiency Levels: NIT Srinagar is a central government institution and therefore has students from diverse linguistic backgrounds, resulting in a wide range of English proficiency levels within a single classroom. Some students may have a lower level of English proficiency, making it challenging for them to understand and communicate in English effectively. This hinders their ability to comprehend technical concepts and participate in class discussions making it difficult for the teacher. Teachers have to cater to the needs of both advanced and struggling learners, which is challenging when designing lesson plans and delivering instructions.

iv. Medium of Instruction: The English language classroom in NIT Srinagar offers heterogeneous background which includes English medium students and non-English medium students. Teachers face lot of difficulties to cater to the needs of any one particular section of their class. Focusing on one group of students disturbs the other group. The students with non-

English background may have a limited vocabulary in English, which makes it difficult for them to understand engineering concepts and express themselves accurately causing teachers to spend extra time building their vocabulary and providing explanations of technical terms. Therefore, the teachers at NIT Srinagar face great difficulties in managing both the groups keeping in consideration the time constraint.

v. Fear of Making Mistakes: Many students were exposed only to their mother tongues in their schools. They did not get adequate opportunities either to listen or speak in English. They listened to English only in the English class. Other subjects were taught in their regional languages as the medium of instruction. Because of the social and economic backgrounds, they did not get enough exposure to English. Such students experience anxiety or fear of embarrassment when speaking in English, which in turn poses a challenge to the teachers. These students struggle with English grammar and sentence structure, leading to errors in their writing and speaking, giving the teachers a hard time.

Teachers need to go beyond the syllabus within the limited class hours to focus on grammar instructions and provide ample practice opportunities to help students improve their language skills simultaneously. Teachers also need to equip themselves to meet the demands of students who studied through the regional language medium in higher secondary schools.

vi. Class Roll: The class sizes in NIT Srinagar are significantly large, making active student participation in classwork nearly impossible. The student-to-teacher ratio is disproportionate, with around 90 to 100 students in the communication skills class. This overcrowding makes it challenging for teachers to create a conducive teaching-learning environment. Consequently, providing individual attention to students, which is crucial during activities, becomes unfeasible.

vii. Limited Exposure to English: Many engineering students may have limited exposure to English outside of the classroom, especially if they come from non-English speaking backgrounds. This lack of exposure can hinder their language acquisition and make it

challenging for teachers to create an immersive English learning environment.

viii. Assessment and Evaluation: Assessing and evaluating English language proficiency in an engineering context is very challenging. Traditional assessment methods may not effectively capture the specific language skills required for engineering communication. Teachers need to develop innovative assessment strategies that align with the unique needs of engineering students.

ix. Cultural Differences: NIT Srinagar admits students from multilingual and multi-cultural backgrounds. Students from different cultural backgrounds have different cultural norms and communication styles, which can affect their language learning experience. Teachers have to be aware of these differences and adapt their teaching methods to accommodate diverse cultural perspectives. Some students lack confidence and have a fear of speaking. Students who are not confident in their English-speaking abilities may be hesitant to participate in class discussions or ask questions. Teachers need to create a supportive and non-judgmental environment that encourages students to speak up and practice their English skills.

7. Recommendations

To address these difficulties, teachers at NIT Srinagar must implement strategies such as providing extra language support, offering individualized feedback, incorporating language activities into technical subjects, and creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Students who did not have English as the medium of instruction may have had limited exposure to the language outside of the classroom. Teachers must encourage students to engage with English through reading books, watching movies, listening to podcasts, and participating in language exchange programs.

The college authorities may also conduct diagnostic tests at the beginning of the course in order to scrutinize the learners according to their proficiency levels. Teaching English to engineering students who are already overloaded with technical coursework can be challenging, teachers need to find ways to integrate language instruction into the engineering curriculum and make efficient use of limited class time.

Students may have varying learning styles, abilities, and motivations, teachers need to employ differentiated instruction strategies to cater to the diverse needs of the students and provide additional support to those who require it.

Additional resources such as tutorials or workshops for students who need extra help must be provided, while challenging advanced learners with more complex tasks. Teachers need to employ various strategies such as incorporating real-world engineering examples into language instruction, integrating technical writing and communication tasks into engineering projects, providing individualized support for students with different proficiency levels, and creating a supportive and interactive classroom environment.

Collaboration with engineering faculty and industry professionals can also help bridge the gap between technical and language instruction. Teachers should also emphasize the importance of English language skills for engineering careers and future professional success. Showcase success stories of engineers who have excelled in their field due to strong English communication skills.

By implementing these strategies, teachers can create a supportive and engaging learning environment that helps engineering students develop their English language skills while recognizing the relevance of these skills in their future careers.

8. Conclusion:

Teaching English Communication Skills at NIT Srinagar poses challenges due to various factors. Some of these challenges include limited time available for English instruction within the engineering curriculum, lack of motivation among students who may prioritize technical subjects, the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students, limited exposure to language, the fear of making mistakes among students, and the influence of previous language instruction received at school. These factors can make it challenging for English teachers to effectively engage students and facilitate language learning in this specific context resulting in the poor communication skills of the engineers.

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