

## **Developing the English Language Proficiency of Engineering Students with Rural Background**

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### **Abstract**

English, being a global language, has become the necessary tool for engineering students to get the best placement. Having understood the need for proficiency in English, students pay attention to master the skills once they get into professional colleges. While students from urban areas and with English medium background pick up the skills quickly, students with rural background lag behind. The lack of English language exposure makes rural students inexpressive and augments their inferiority complex. As a result, they become inattentive and spoil the teaching-learning atmosphere in the classroom. When language teachers pay special attention to such students, youngsters with rural background can participate in the learning process and get good placement. The responsibility of English language teachers is more as they have to complete the syllabus on time apart from developing the English proficiency of students. Based on the real class room experience of the author, this paper analyses how to develop the language proficiency of rural students on four aspects such as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

**Keywords:** LSRW Skills, podcast, download, target students, audio files.

### **Introduction**

Enrollment of students in engineering colleges all over Tamil Nadu has at least 50% rural youngsters. These students complete their higher secondary examination from schools which do not have even basic amenities. Such schools fail to impart language ability to students. Besides, language classes are utilized by subject teachers in schools. This deprives the students of language exposure. School curriculum tests the memory power of students rather than the application part of English language. Handicapped by this set up, rural students enter college in a fix. Unlike the school atmosphere, language teachers in engineering colleges try to make their

students proficient in English language. Usage of language in English classrooms frightens such students. They do not understand the content delivery or the pronunciation of English teachers. Consequently, they behave indifferently in English language classes.

College teachers have to plan meticulously to cater to the needs of the heterogeneous group of students. Generally, in English classes, urban students tend to dominate rural students. Observing the language skill of urban students, rural students get depressed and cling on to silence. Language teachers have to work hard to change this situation. Assigning the rural students with activities related to listening, speaking, reading and writing for few months will certainly improve their standard.

### **Listening**

The first skill to be imparted to rural students is listening because “Attention to active listening skills leads to better academic language competence” (Sasson, 37). Language teachers can rely on podcast files for improving the listening skill of students. “Podcasts are audio files, usually in mp3 format, that can be downloaded from the Internet” (Abraham, 154). English audio files help students understand correct pronunciation. They learn how to frame questions and answer them. Repeated listening to the same file makes them expressive. They correlate ideas, try to think in English and relate it to their personal lives. Ultimately, the familiarity gained through listening makes them speak in English.

### **Activity**

An elementary podcast on daily routine and its transcript were given to the target students. Students utilized their leisure time to listen to the audio files with their head set. This added clarity to listening and understanding.

**Method Adopted:** Teacher downloaded the apt audio file and transferred it to the students’ device.

**Pre-learning activity:** Teacher provided the students with information related to daily activities. Students were asked to list their routine activities.

**Post-learning activity:** Students were asked to substitute the transcript with their activities. They were trained to check language accuracy with the transcript.

### **Advantages**

Students learn English at their own pace; do self-learning; develop concentration; get rid of inhibitions, and gain confidence to use English language.

Listening skill is more important as it paves way to speak, read and write the language correctly. Language teachers can use their experience to develop this skill. Apart from dialogues, providing the students with easy to understand English songs makes this activity quite interesting. Captivated by the music and English pronunciation, rural students get motivated to sing English songs. They develop curiosity to download audio files pertaining to their interest. Thus self-learning takes place that makes the rural students confident to face the urban world.

### **Speaking**

Of all the skills, speaking holds prime importance in the lives of engineering students as their spoken skill decides their entry into multinational companies. Teachers should give “enough time for students to practice new language in a variety of ways and in a step-by-step process” (Baker, 14). Speaking activity becomes successful when students are trained to do proper listening. Repeated listening to audio files of different contexts facilitates students use the right word in the right context. They understand how to ask short questions and give answers. When students are asked to converse with each other using the dialogues that they listened to, they use audio files as their frame work, tailor it to their needs, and start speaking in simple English forgetting their status as Tamil medium or rural students.

### **Activity**

Podcasts related to exchanging greetings, introducing people, apologizing, accepting and rejecting an invitation etc. were given to the target students. This activity lasted for three weeks. Each week, students received seven files of different contexts along with the transcript. They listened to the files practicing how to use English language for different purposes.

### **Pre-learning Activity**

Teacher explained language usage in different situations and gave a list of spoken expressions. Students were asked to concentrate on such expressions, questions and answers.

### **Post-learning Activity**

Students recorded their own voice in their mobile phones, listened to it, compared it with the original version and made corrections wherever necessary. They played their recordings in the classroom, and other students listened to it. Students exchanged positive and negative comments. Teacher acted as facilitator, initiated the target students to speak the recorded conversation in the class room and they performed it with confidence.

### **Advantages**

Students learn useful expressions for speaking proper English, correct their pronunciation and accent, give proper stress and pause while speaking, get rid of vernacular influence, and gain confidence to speak English in front of urban students.

### **Limitation**

The enthusiastic participation of students in this activity creates noise in the classroom. Hence, the nearby classrooms get affected and the language teacher has to control the students without spoiling the learning ambience.

### **Reading**

As Francis Bacon says, “Reading maketh a man perfect” (Bacon, 472), a language teacher has to inculcate this habit in students. This skill enhances students’ knowledge and understanding of various fields. Students develop rich vocabulary, know how to frame and punctuate sentences. Besides, they understand how to express ideas figuratively and clearly. Reading motivates students to refer to dictionary, which in turn helps them identify synonyms, antonyms, sentence structure and spelling. Indeed, reading practice helps students write error free English.

### **Activity**

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Simple story books were given to the target students with one week duration to finish reading.

### **Pre-learning Activity**

Students were taught how to use dictionary.

### **Post-learning Activity**

Students were instructed to write summary or speak about any interesting aspect of the story. They were also asked to write new words with meanings on board. Students used those words in sentences of their own. The entire class participated in this activity.

### **Advantages**

Students develop concentration, nurture reading habit, gain vocabulary, understand the meanings of words, and get confidence to use words in sentences.

Reading practice will certainly make the students write good English. Students get maximum benefits when activities are “flexible and varied” (Grellet, 9). However, addiction to technology does not allow students to read. When teachers channelize their interest of technology towards collecting information related to different fields, students naturally tend to read more and more from online resources. This method is not only beneficial but also cost-effective. Teachers can divide the students into groups and ask them to collect information on various topics. Later, teacher can help them identify main ideas and supporting sentences in paragraphs. This makes students write good passages on various themes. Above all, this strategy bridges the gap between the rural and the urban students.

### **Writing**

“Composition is an art which doesn’t come with the birth of a man. It is acquired and consummated with a single track perseverance and a sense of commitment under the guidance of one’s mentor” (Gangal, 3). So, language teachers have to guide their students write meaningful and cohesive paragraphs on various themes.

Engineering students have to write proposals, reports and present scientific information precisely throughout their career. Institutions instruct the language teachers to impart this writing skill to students. But, making students write good English is difficult as they are in the influence of SMS language. Besides, rural students find it difficult to write even a single sentence thanks to their habit of memorizing paragraphs and essays to clear English paper in their school days. Yet, with the exposure to the three skills such as listening, speaking and reading that preceded the writing skill in language classes, rural students manage well with writing on topics like biography, ambition in life, and the unique qualities of their native land.

### **Activity**

Topics for writing proposals, reports and process description were given to the target students along with the sample copies of proposals, reports and process description passages.

### **Pre-learning Activity**

Students were taught simple sentence structures, subject-verb agreement, voice, and sentence connectors. Explanation for technical writing was also given.

### **Post-learning Activity**

Students were asked to write on topics such as an accident report, proposal for setting up an industrial unit and interpret information given in the form of graphics. Later, they were directed to type the manuscript in MS word and observe the mistakes that they have made. For this activity, language lab computers were used, wherein auto correction was disabled and suggestions to make corrections were enabled.

### **Advantages**

This activity enhances students' understanding of technical writing, usage of sentence patterns, the basics of writing grammatically correct sentences and they learn how to correct their mistakes.

## **Limitation**

It is time consuming as two teachers are needed to manage this activity. One has to take care of the students in the classroom and the other one has to guide the students who use the lab.

## **Response from Students to the Activities**

Initially, students had inhibition and were reluctant to respond to the new learning strategies. Teacher had to keep guard over the rural students as urban students made fun of the former's attempts. Special guidance was given to the target students out of the class hours. Teacher spoke to the urban students about the importance of the teaching methodology adopted for the rural students.

The counselling sessions changed the attitude of the target and urban students. The class room atmosphere changed within a week when the teacher spoke about the importance of acquiring LSRW skills to get placement. Consequently, students adopted themselves to the new teaching and learning atmosphere. Interestingly, urban students started helping rural students and gave full cooperation to the target students and the teacher.

## **Outcome**

Target students broke the myth that students with rural back ground cannot speak or write English with confidence. The methods adopted for teaching LSRW skills aroused the interest of students to a great extent that they started speaking to one another in English. They gained the ability to choose the right audio file for their needs, downloaded them and started self-learning.

Students installed dictionary application in their mobile phones and referred to it quite often. Daily, they wrote new words on the board and discussed how to use them in sentences. Students took story books from the English department library and started reading them for gaining language experience. They paid attention to write grammatically correct sentences.

Speaking activities were later taken to the level of performing role plays, presentations and group discussions effectively. The language teacher was able to bring in this remarkable change among the students within six months. So, during the second semester, language

activities related to intermediate and advanced levels were carried out to meet the demands of the heterogeneous group of learners.

### Summation

A language teacher can easily impart LSRW skills to the learners thanks to the advent of technology. In fact, technology creates interest among students to learn the foreign language with enthusiasm. Language teachers can help their students acquire LSRW skills when they use their experience and dedication. The only problem faced by the teachers while using technology is the criticism received from their colleagues. If language teachers are prepared to ignore the demerits and consider the merits of enabling the rural students use language effectively, the poor standard of English seen in our region will change dramatically.

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