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Strategies to Enhance Communication Skills among the First Generation Students at the Tertiary Level

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Introduction

In this era of globalization, jobs are open for graduates who are proficient in communication skills. People can function efficiently in the academic and professional fields with proficiency in communication skills. Consequently, a course in communication skills is included in the undergraduate classes in most of the colleges and universities.

Learning to Speak

Communication skill fulfils a number of general and discipline-specific pedagogical functions. Learning to speak is an important goal in itself, for it equips First Generation

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students with skills that they can use for the rest of their lives. Despite the need, and the varied ways of including communication skills in curriculum, there appears a limited research available that provides a more precise understanding of the methods and approaches of teaching communication skills for undergraduate students. Communication skill covers a wide area, ranging from formal presentations to participation in teams and meetings.

Communication Skills of First Generation Learners

This paper tries to seek the possibilities to improve the communication skills of the First Generation Students of Undergraduate courses and describes the Strategies to enhance communication skills. The conclusion is arrived with some remarks on the strengths and the limitations of applying strategic methods especially among especially to First Generation Students.

Problems of First Generation Students in Communication Skills

Students studying in Higher Education are 50% First Generation in both Arts and Science as well as Engineering colleges. They don't have proper guidance to know the importance of English. Environment and family background are the reasons for the lack in Communication Skills. Students do not have the habit of reading English Newspapers and this is also one of the reasons for their communication problem. The First generation students face problems in four basic communication skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing.

Listening Skill

- Students suffer from their emotional weaknesses which hamper their ability to listen.
- They are not able to follow the correct pronunciation.
- If the speech is delivered fast they are not able to understand.
- Poor Vocabulary of students affects listening skills.

Speaking Skill

- The influence of mother tongue hampers students to speak English fluently.

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- They are shy and hesitant to talk; they have stage-fear and anxiety while talking English.
- They think in mother tongue and this could also affect their ability to speak in English.
- Poor listening in English is another reason for students' inability to speak in English fluently.
- Students are able to comprehend, but are unable to deliver the content.
- Poor Vocabulary of students affects speaking skill.

Reading Skill

- Lack of knowledge in sub-skills.
- Poor comprehension and Poor pronunciation.
- Poor Vocabulary of students affects Reading skill.
- Most of the students learn in Tamil medium up to school level and they feel it very difficult to read English texts.

Writing Skill

- Students have errors in spelling.
- They are not creative in writing skill.
- They have a lot of grammatical errors in written English.
- Poor Vocabulary of students affects their writing skill.

Communication Skills

For successful communication, the first generation students in higher education require more than the formal ability and a range of formulaic expressions to present something in a well structured language. Successful communication is context-dependent and therefore embedded in its particular discourse community, says Bizzell P(483)(The Social Construction of Written Communication).

Communication skills reflect the persistent and powerful role of language and communication in human society. According to Halliday P(18) (*Understanding intercultural Communication*), in the communication process, social reality is “created,

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maintained and modified”. Communication is an exchange of meaning and understanding. Meaning is central to communication.

Communication is symbolic because it involves not only words but also symbols and gestures that accompany the spoken words because symbolic action is not limited to verbal communication.

Communication is an interactive process. The two communication agents involved in the communication process are sender (S) and receiver (R). Both the communication agents exert a reciprocal influence on each other through interstimulation and response.

At its most basic level, communication skills are the spoken interaction between two or more people. The interaction is far more complex than it seems. Communication is composed of multiple elements which, when taken as a whole, result in the success or failure of the interaction. Not everyone is an effective communicator.

A Learned Rhetorical Skill

Communication is a unique and learned rhetorical skill that requires understanding what to say and how to say it. Unlike conversational speech, speech in more formal environments does not come naturally. Communication can take many forms, ranging from informal conversation that occurs spontaneously and, in most cases, for which the content cannot be planned, to participation in meetings, which occurs in a structured environment, usually with a set agenda.

As a speaker there are several elements of Communication of which one needs to be aware of in order to learn how to use them to his or her advantage. Apart from the language used for communication, there are several other elements which the speaker should learn to communicate effectively. The skills are eye contact, body language, style, understanding the audience, adapting to the audience, active and reflexive listening, politeness, precision and conciseness. At the tertiary level it is assumed that the learners

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know the basics of the language. At this level teaching speaking skills is irrelevant. What the teacher has to teach is the communication skills. For this he has to know the individual needs of the students.

Why First Generation Students?

The 'First Generation' students are those who happen to get educated for the first time in their family, and in fact, of all the generations in their family lineage. First generation students are defined as those "whose parents have not had any education or the minimum of it, something below graduation" P(23)(Dhawan in *English Communication Skills Today*). In those cases, where parents have different levels of education, the maximum education level of their parent determines how the students are categorized. These students are discouraged and broken to the extent of losing original identity. First-generation students take remedial courses as non-first-generation students when they begin their post-secondary education. First-generation students don't have the advantage as others have in the field of educational opportunities and other economic factors. First-generation students should obtain the financial aid since this plays a major role to pursue their education. Enhancing the communication skills of the First generation students is very important so that these students will be able to compete for jobs with confidence and present suitable performance while at work.

Strategies to Enhance for Communication Skills

- There are varieties of strategies that we will have to use to enhance the students communication skills of the students.
- Active Learning should be the goal of first generation students in a classroom. Passive listening to an instructor's lecture must be discouraged. Research shows that active learning improves students' understanding and retention of information and can be very effective to enhance higher order cognitive skills.
- Engaging first generation students in discussion deepens their learning and motivation and they will be able express their own views and hear their own voices. A good environment for interaction is the first step in encouraging first generation students to talk.

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- Games can be a rich learning factor for first generation students. Students today have grown up playing games. Games enable first generation students to solve real-world problems in a safe environment.
- Using humor in the classroom can enhance first generation students learning.
- Learner-Centered teaching means the student is at the center of learning. The first generation students assume the responsibility for learning while the instructor is responsible for facilitating the learning.
- Lecturing is the way most instructors today follow in classes. However, with today's first generation students, lecturing does not hold their attention for long, even lecturing does help convey information to first generation students.
- Problem-based Learning (PBL) is an instructional method that challenges first generation students to "learn to learn." P(7)(Daniel Kain - *Problem Based Learning for Teaching*) Working in groups helps students to seek solutions to real world problems.
- Team teaching allows first generation students and faculty to benefit from the healthy exchange of ideas in a setting defined by mutual respect and a shared interest in a topic
- Writing assignments for class can provide an opportunity for them to apply critical thinking skills as well as help them to learn course content.

Conclusion

To conclude, we need to enhance the capacity for First Generation Students in undergraduate courses and for this we need to teach communication skills to them. But such efforts will take time before we can claim empirical success in the field of second language instruction. More data is needed, using different quantitative and qualitative research methods. Case studies provide useful empirical data in this context. Hence, teachers need to continually examine the situation and relate it to learner participation, autonomy, and equality in their changing context.

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