Role of Vocabulary in Enhancing the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Skills of Engineering Graduates: Observations

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Abstract

This paper attempts to describe how vocabulary learning models can help improve the instruction of key language skills namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills for Engineering graduates. Development of these skills is an imperative if any professional has to be successful in his career in the highly globalised scenario. As development of vocabulary is also a key area of instruction, it is suggested that learning vocabulary is intertwined with the learning of the key language skills for better results. This paper limits to the proposal of the ideas.

Introduction

The spoken form of the language travels faster than the other forms. It is the spoken form of any language which facilitates the core activities involving public interaction. Coming to the place of English in the everyday life of an average Indian it is an undeniable fact that English gives an edge over other Indian languages. English has already consolidated its position as a perfect Global Language. In this scenario students in general and engineering students in particular need to master English to secure a good career. A student should have a reasonable repertoire of words that enables him to articulate his or her ideas.

Skill of Listening

Listening in English is attending to comprehending and interpreting oral English. Listening is necessary to develop the speaking skill. The learner listens to oral speech in English, then separates into segments the stretch of utterances he hears, groups them into words, phrases, and sentences, and, finally, he understands the message they carry. There are three approaches to listening: interactive (listening to a

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Role of Vocabulary in Enhancing the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Skills of Engineering Graduates: Observations   605

message and doing something as a consequence) and one-way communication or non-interactive (just listening and retaining the message, in activities such as conversations overheard, public address announcements, recorded messages, etc.) and self-talk. Listening to radio and watching TV and films, public performances, lectures, religious services, etc., generally reflect non-interactive listening. Responding to the commands given reflects interactive listening, which, in fact, is equally widespread in communicative situations. In the classroom, students listen in order to repeat and to understand.

The listening activities available in regular classroom environments in the Engineering colleges are either insufficient or ineffective. Another important factor is the learner's inability predominantly due to a unique kind of indifference to learn by listening. This trait is widely observed among students from rural background. This can be construed as one of the Language Learning Anxiety as stated by Horwitz, and Cope (1986) in their work Foreign Language Learning Anxiety. [1]

But research studies also have claimed a negative relationship between anxiety and achievement or performance has been confirmed in several subsequent studies involving all four language skills: speaking (Liu, 2006; Steinberg & Horwitz, 1986; Young, 1986), writing (Masny & Foxall, 1992), reading (Saito, Garza, & Horwitz, 1999) and listening (Elkhafaifi, 2005; Mills, Pajares & Herron, 2006). [2]. There are contradicting claims too. At the same time research has ways of reducing listening test anxiety, for example, by teaching listening strategies and letting students have more practice.

Vocabulary in Listening

The listening activities used in the classrooms are usually focused on improving the ability overall listening skill of the students. The same activities can be used to teach vocabulary items. If listening-texts, which have the targeted words can be played for the listening activities the learners get an opportunity to register the words in their mind. This kind of an activity helps to improve the level of recognition of the words by the students.

Commentary on sports events, video documentaries on engineering, technology, wild life, interviews with celebrities, etc., can be used as the listening material in the classrooms. In addition to the questions used to test the listening skill of the students a simple test to record the new words recognised by the learner can be conducted.

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Role of Vocabulary in Enhancing the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Skills of Engineering Graduates: Observations   606

This kind of an activity will complement the listening capabilities besides motivating the students to focus on new and important words. Moreover, this activity will help the learner to strengthen his or her ability to guess the meaning of the word from the context.

Skill of Speaking

There must be some kind of exposure to language input, so that the natural learning mechanisms have something to work on. Learners have to be exposed to English through clear pronunciation, slow pace, simple structures and common vocabulary. Many writers believe that it is interaction with other people that plays the most crucial role in enabling the acquisition to take place. Unfortunately, in Indian schools and colleges less attention is paid to speech training. Teachers rely too much on translation method. Spoken English is not used even inside the English classrooms. Therefore, speech retardation in English is not uncommon in Indian schools.

Language anxiety can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning. [3] Research findings also indicate correlation between performance and cognitive anxiety. [4]. Anxiety generally leads to worry [5]. The levels of worry may vary. The impact of this anxiety shows more impact on the speaking abilities of the students. The adverse generally hampers the vocabulary learning ability of the learners through speaking. Research suggests different ways to overcome this kind of an anxiety.

Vocabulary in Speaking

To overcome speech retardation, it is suggested to create speaking activities that has substantial interest quotient in it. The biggest challenge of modern day school and college is the large size of the class. So, any activity designed should be targeted at classrooms consisting more than 70 students. In large heterogeneous classes the activities designed should be very creative.

Students who have challenges in speaking on topics or situations given to them in the classroom can be given relatively easier tasks. Keeping the topics very close to the purview of the learner will produce positive results. For instance the situations or topics given for students can be drawn from fields like people, places, things and events.

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Role of Vocabulary in Enhancing the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Skills of Engineering Graduates: Observations   607

In addition to the training given to the students to improve their spoken skills focus can be laid on their ability to use targeted words in their speech. A model activity can be created using the words from academic word list where the students are asked to express their views using words from a band of words.

A simple speaking activity where the student is required to describe any electronic gadget he or she uses can be used in classroom. This kind of an activity will not be challenging to the students since they have basic information about the topic they are going to speak upon. Moreover, it will have the interest quotient because students may show interest to speak about their loved gadgets. The students can be instructed to use words from academic word lists like assessment, comprehensive, emerge, incompatible, modified etc., so that they get an opportunity to gain confidence of using words they never used in their speech before. This kind of an activity will be advantageous because it enhances the quality of the articulation of the students besides help them in acquiring new words.

Skill of Reading

Reading is mainly a decoding process. The encoder encodes the message and the decoder decodes it and understands it. Reading activity involves perception, recall, reasoning, evaluating, imagining, organizing, application and problem solving. The goal of all reading is the comprehension of meaning. This is the most important of all the language skills since it is fundamentally a vocabulary driven activity.

Vocabulary in Reading

Most of the times reading becomes a challenging task for students who come from rural background, to be precise who have very limited exposure to English language. Word identification research has provided information abouthow words are understood as well as how their phonological form isinitially identified from print. Word meanings and sometimes their pronunciations are necessarily context dependent; The benefits of context seem to be mainly on the amount of time a reader spends on a given word the duration of fixation with only slight effects on the probability of a word fixation[6]. Research so far has suggested various methods to improve the vocabulary acquisition abilities of the learners. Most of the works focused on improving the contextual guessing abilities of the students to improve their vocabulary. Antonacci & O'Callaghan suggest four examples that provide rich and varied

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language experiences. They are (1) interactive read-alouds of outstanding children's literature, (2) dialogic-based instructional activities, (3) independent reading, (4) interactive writing, and (5) creating a print-rich environment where the "walls are dripping with words." [7] Extensive reading is one such method that aids the learner to cultivate the habit of extensive reading which sequentially can make vocabulary learning effective.

Extensive reading activities that suit the kind of learners group should be developed to gain results. The primary focus should be to keep the activity very simple and at the same time interesting. The best way of doing this is to choose texts that have substantial interest quotient.

Another important point is to inculcate in the learners the habit of self reading or mind reading the texts without any external assistance. This will improve the confidence levels and thereby the learner autonomy. The learner autonomy will substantially improve the ability of the learners to guess the meanings of the unknown words from the contexts. The choice of the text chosen will directly impact the learner's interest in the activity and thereby determines the number of new words he or she acquires and retains.

How extensive reading can be made an activity for the students from rural background is now an important area for research. In a scenario where ample time cannot be earmarked for language learning as part of the every schedule, extensive reading activity can be considered as a suitable alternative to the regular classroom reading activities.

Skill of Writing

Interaction through the written message is the goal of writing. Motivating students to write is a challenging task for the teacher. Decades of observations make teachers to understand that student aptitudes vary widely in writing. Many students do not actively participate in writing activities for their lack of fluency in expression, insufficient lexical command and poor grammatical accuracy.

Writing is a complex skill. A piece of writing becomes meaningful when it conveys the intended message to the reader. It requires many skills. Some of them being the ability of the writer to recall appropriate words and put them in sentences, link sentences with appropriate sentence connectors and sequence signals, evaluate the significance of a word or a sentence in the overall context of the written

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Graduates: Observations   609

passage and use the form and register appropriate for the subject matter and the audience. Many a times the students fail to produce reasonably intelligible pieces of writing sue to higher levels of apprehension. Research has established that apprehension clearly impacts performance [8] [9].

The main aim of developing the skill of writing is to train the student in expressing himself effectively in good English.

Vocabulary in Writing

If students are to write spontaneously, opportunities to acquire confidence in writing must be provided to them. When the receiver of the communication is not physically present, writing is used. Except professional people like writers, journalists, lawyers, teachers etc., others have very few occasions to resort to this mode of communication.

Routine activities of writing an application letter, a cover letter etc. have become easy for the availability of templates in the internet. But in the current scenario where any professional has to persuade his or her client through writing, it acquires importance. For instance, a software engineer needs to know how to document the work he has done. Similarly, a structural engineer is needed to present his view in writing about a decision. So, writing activities targeted at improving the skills of using set of words pertaining to a situation are suggested

The focus should be on the academic word list, content words and the cohesive devices. Students can be trained on using an appropriate word from the academic word for a particular situation. Guided writing activity using word cues can be tried in the classroom writing exercises.

Comparative Estimate of Four-skills

Full mastery of a language requires both the receptive and productive abilities. Though they are related to each other, efficiency in one aspect does not necessarily lead to efficiency in another. Each of the four skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing requires due attention. But, in reality, in the English classroom, speaking in English is totally absent and writing is very poor. Students read only to memorize words and sentences in order to answer questions. Reading on their own with understanding is unheard of

in ordinary English classrooms. Listening and speaking are more difficult when compared to other skills in the case of second language learning. In Indian environment there is no social compulsion to listen and speak in the English language. Academic writing is absent and only mechanical writing is used. Students never feel the necessity for writing on their own. They memorize and reproduce it in English, during the examinations. It seems that reading is more easily learnable than the other three skills. As listening and speaking are more difficult compared to other skills, Spoken English should be an essential part of English language teaching.

In India, The Ministry of Education Study Group of 1971 while recommending courses to meet the needs of students, has not ignored the fact that training in Spoken English is essential part of English language teaching. The utility of a course in English cannot be ignored considering the large number of situations in which Indian students are required to use English.

- Students aspiring for higher education in India and abroad have to clear tests which examine the language proficiency of the students.
- Listening to various national and international experts is going to be the norm of many technology jobs
- In the field of scientific and technical education, there would always be need for Spoken English so far as lecturing and talking to the students in the class is concerned. Moreover, doctors, engineers, and technicians will continue having recourse to Spoken English while explaining some scientific fact, phenomenon, or operation to their assistants. Spoken English is essential to participate in debates, group discussions and other academic and cultural activities.
- Focused listening to peers and superiors is an integral part to many a jobs. Especially for people who occupy key decision making roles listening is of paramount importance.
- At interviews, whether held by department of the Government or by a business firm, the candidate is expected to show fluency in Spoken English.
- The usefulness of effective speaking skills for a successful professional cannot be underestimated. While the regional or local language will suffice for professional contacts locally, it has become inevitable that one should have good command of Spoken English for interactions not only within

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Role of Vocabulary in Enhancing the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Skills of Engineering Graduates: Observations   611

one's own professional group, but also between different specialist groups and between experts and lay people.

- Spoken English is necessary to communicate one's ideas and attitudes – agreeing, disagreeing, convincing, narrating, requesting, ordering, explaining and apologizing.

- More and more students are leaving the country in search of jobs in other countries of the world after their educational career. So their success by and large depends on their effective communication through English.

- Vast amount of knowledge created every day makes reading an inescapable requirement for the professional.

- Writing reports, appraisals, letters, presenting data in readable format etc are some of the writing activities that any professional has to master.

Conclusion

Achieving a workable model to attain mastery over the four skills as discussed above is the motive of this study. The neglect by the curriculum developers and instructors and unsound English Language Teaching methodologies adopted by teachers especially at high school level pressed the Language Skills to the bottom in the list of priorities.

The price was heavy for this mistake. Now it is time to counter it. A better model has to be created and be used to replace the existing system. The models discussed in this study are capable of standing as a competitive alternative which can help overcome all the teaching and learning difficulties. Trying out the methods and models discussed in this study is believed to produce the required results that may support or oppose the claims made. Research is due in corroborating every claim with supporting statistical proof.

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Role of Vocabulary in Enhancing the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Skills of Engineering
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Role of Vocabulary in Enhancing the Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening Skills of Engineering Graduates: Observations   613

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Graduates: Observations   614