

English for Engineering Students in Tamilnadu - Listening: Speech Recognition Complexities

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Abstract

This brief note discusses making arrangements for engineering students to develop adequate listening skill in English. They have the need to understand a number of varieties of English they may come across while studying and at work. Most of these students come from small towns and rural areas where English is not spoken on a regular basis. Listening to English utterances is almost nonexistent. Writing in English may be used in offices more than speaking and listening (English used in the latter two categories may be mixed with local language). Reading in English is also not very strong. Most of these students get exposed to listening in English only through classroom activities. Person to person conversational listening is also not frequent and adequate. The note offers some suggestions to improve speech recognition skills of engineering students in Tamilnadu.

Key words: Varieties of English, listening, writing, speaking, reading, rural students, classroom English.

Classroom Use as the Major Part of English Usage in College

Most students in engineering colleges in Tamilnadu come from small towns and rural areas. Most engineering colleges are also located in rural parts, adjacent to small towns and major cities in Tamilnadu. Opportunities to learn and use English are available for individual students mainly through classroom instruction and classroom activity. Even students coming from English medium schools have difficulty in engaging themselves in conversation through English. Progressively over the years they overcome their shyness and hesitation or reluctance to

speak in English. Yet their performance at the end of their senior year in the engineering college is not adequate for work situations in private companies.

Nature of Classroom Listening

Classroom listening is, more often than not, unidirectional. Students listen to the lecture or small and extensive talks delivered by the lecturer/teacher, with some intervening questions raised both by the students and the teacher. Answers are sometimes expected from the students, but not all the students are expected to raise questions, answer questions, or even express some opinions. Only a small number of students participate, but all the students are expected to listen and follow the dialogue mostly in English. Both the teacher and the students are often from the same linguistic background – home language or mother tongue of these individuals may be the same. So, the manner in which English is uttered and listened to, understood and interpreted is similar.

Person to Person Listening

The above mentioned exposure to English listening in classrooms may be adequate for the moment. But students may have to go outside the state of Tamilnadu for work or work in companies within Tamilnadu where there may be a number of non-Tamil engineers. The students thus will be required to develop and master interpersonal conversational listening which would demand recognition of speech features employed in English spoken by people from other states. There are many similarities between the varieties of English spoken within India, but at the same time there are many peculiarities in every regional English spoken in India. The type of English spoken by Tamil speakers is different from the type of English spoken by the Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada speakers. Likewise English spoken by Hindi native speakers has its own peculiarities. In other words, listening here includes the skill to recognize and comprehend the peculiarities of English of the region in which the engineering students may be employed. Personal oral interviews, face to face communication with other employees and officials, and day to day communication with others in the region through English will require some speech recognition skill. Failure to listen and comprehend correctly what is spoken could lead to some problems.

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Listening Contexts

We suggest that we consider the following contexts to help develop or identify materials to improve listening in English:

1. Listening in Tamil versus Listening in English.
2. Listening in Tamil-English Context.
3. Listening in Pan-Indian English Context.
4. Listening in International Context.
5. Listening to Native English Varieties such as American Standard English, British Standard English, Australian Standard English.

Since there are really not many Tamil-English context movies, or even Tamil-English context news broadcasts, students in engineering colleges in Tamilnadu have to depend upon All India Radio news, leading TV channels such as NDTV, etc. to develop and sharpen their listening skill using Indian materials. Continuous and regular watching TV news should help students to acquire skill in listening and comprehending Pan Indian English. Unfortunately, most news is politics-oriented. There are a few non-news features , such as Indian mythological stories for children. Cartoon English uses rather rapid delivery and has its own idiom. Yet, TV and radio programmes in English should help engineering students to achieve elementary speech recognition.

Although we may argue that primary focus should be on listening, not necessarily listening to varieties of speech materials based on regions or nations, ultimately we need to take care of developing skillful listening of both native English and international varieties.

Group Listening

Classroom listening is some sort of group listening. But in most group listening, we are part of a gathering in which some invitees deliver their lectures, etc. This happens in colleges on many occasions such as college anniversary, hostel day, special celebrations, convocation gathering, inaugural and valedictory addresses in conferences and seminars, etc. Students

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constitute the audience. Some students may listen and some others may be busy with their smart phones, even texting during the address. There is some disruptive behavior noticed all around, and yet the speech continues. Listening to such speeches demand some dedicated listening. If the speaker is well known and has been a person of inspiration, all attention is given to the address delivered. Emotion may play an important part here. What is listened to and retained would depend upon the “devotion” of the listener to the topic under consideration as well as the speaker.

Some Basic Elements

In the context under discussion(engineering students in Tamilnadu), listening needs to focus on at least a few basic elements, to begin with: Tense, Gender, Singular/Plural, Proper names (masculine/feminine), Lexical choice, Technical terms and engineering and technology jargon. There are other items as well which we will take up for discussion in our future notes. Students should be taught to recognize correctly the connotation (literal and idiomatic meanings) of utterances they listen to. Tone must be interpreted correctly. Note that the correct use of tense, gender, lexical denotation and connotation continues to be a problem with first year as well as junior and senior year engineering students in Tamilnadu.

Listening is not simply hearing. It involves some higher order skills. Recognition of sounds and dialectal features are only one aspect of the listening skill. Since after graduation students may have to deal with the varieties and comprehend them correctly it is important to give some exposure to these speech recognition aspects.

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