

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 10 October 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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Importance of Effective Communication Skills

Mrs. P. Samata, M.A. (English), M.Ed., M.Phil. (English), Ph.D. (English)

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English Comes in Handy

To begin with, I would like to relate an amusing story – Once, two mice were being chased by a cat. The two mice were – a mother mouse and a child mouse. After, quite an exhaustive chase, mother mouse in a bid to scare the cat away, started to shout like a Dog, “Bow, Bow”. Immediately the cat had to give up the chase thinking some dog is chasing her. Then in a very philosophical tone the mother mouse started explaining the child mouse that sometimes learning a second language comes in handy. Though English has come to us as a foreign language in the pre-independence period, in the post-independent India it has emerged as a powerful medium of communication. Today, it stands as an indispensable language.

Communication as a Skill

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Throughout history, people always reflected on the origins of communication. “Emperor Frederick - the 13th century ruler of the Holy Roman Empire - wanted to know what language had been spoken at the birth of mankind in the Garden of Eden. Was it Hebrew, Greek or Latin? He ordered an experiment in which the original circumstances would be recreated as closely as possible. A group of infants were to be isolated from hearing human speech from the moment of birth until they spoke their language. The babies were to be raised by nurses who were strictly charged to maintain complete silence when with the babies. The result? Every one of the babies died. The lack of communication can be lethal.” - Robert Bolton, People Skills. (Handbook on communication Skills)

Consider these instances as well: Let us remember the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. It shows that the people of the world come together to build a tower that would reach heaven. In a single stroke, their efforts came to naught because they were besieged by befuddled communication, resulting in breakdown of coordination. Intended message was frequently miscommunicated, misunderstood, mis-quoted or even missed altogether because of ineffective interpersonal communication skills. (Ibid).

But now, we live in a world-culture where there are very thin barriers between nations, regions, societies, and within communities. Cities are moving towards more cosmopolitan settings where multi-ethnic groups live together. It’s natural for the demand for an effective communicative world in such ever-emerging and ever-changing settings.

Communication is Needed Everywhere

Communication is everywhere; it is in the market place, in the business place, in the casual settings, at the kitchen table, with your children and even with yourself. The thrust of the present day world is no doubt, “Communication skills” and not just skill, but how effective you are in communicating yourself. I don’t think there is any household who does not think of the best

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school where the best communication skills are imparted to his or her child before taking admission.

Over the years, as a teacher educator my area of concern has been in this particular field. When I send my student teachers for Teaching Practice & Internship I impress upon them, especially the student teachers who undertake training in teaching of English, to make a difference in school.

Need for Change – Refresher Courses

Unfortunately, the education or teaching pattern currently, in almost all the educational institutions, is neither teacher-centric nor pupil-centric but is only examination-oriented.

There is need for faculty development program, or in other words, a kind of refresher course, orientation program or in-service training program on effective communication skills throughout one's career; a program not just for building a career but to prepare, acquire and teach ourselves first and then take it to our pupils. Intelligence, aptitude, and vigor won't add much if we haven't mastered the most potent tool for success which is communicating effectively. As teachers of English we need to ponder deep on this vital role we play in the use of English for effective communication both speaking as well as in writing.

The Need for Training

Yes, here I emphasize the need to train ourselves in all the skills of communication, as we all are aware that neither speaking goes without listening nor writing goes without reading. All the intricacies of all the skills need to be taken care of just as a cook takes care of all the ingredients to make a good dish.

Communication is Your Calling Card

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Your communication technique is your indisputable calling card. It instantly establishes who you are, how you feel, and what you expect from yourself and others. We often make our reputation with our ability to speak. Communication defines public image as much as action does. You can do all the good deeds you can think of, but if you fail to communicate effectively and positively, your reputation can be damaged.

We teachers of English do have to empower ourselves with the knowledge, skills, and abilities for effective classroom interactions. We constantly need to employ inventive techniques of planning, practising and delivering these skills to the students in the classroom.

Use of Nonverbal Messages

The next step in communication is using appropriate nonverbal messages that include gesture, posture and expressions which are unspoken and more difficult to interpret than verbal messages, but are just as important. This is particularly true when you think that someone is saying one thing but their body language tells us a different story. Nonverbal cues are often neglected during communication. Research reveals 90% of our communication takes place through non-verbal communication itself. Voice and body language are explored as an effective communication tool.

Use of Soft Skills

Something crucial that goes along with the language and communication skills to ensure that you not only relay your message and ideas effectively but that which carries the impact you desire is, indeed, soft skills. Soft skills are those personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. These include Skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior, an area that teachers need to focus on. Behavior and attitude operate together for most people.

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Our attitudes lead us to certain behavior. If we have positive attitudes we tend to act positively, see options, and seek solutions to problems. If we have negative attitudes we may often feel defeated, assume the worst outcomes, and give up without exploring alternatives. Our own behavior can affect those around us. We try to impress upon people who are around us, and they, in their turn, try to impress upon us. This is achieved by observing both their verbal and non-verbal behavior.

Soft Skills and Role Models

Public officials, teachers, supervisors, parents, and even fellow workers can be role models. We learn from our role models. These are the people whose behavior we choose to copy because we value what they do and how they do it. We learn how to be a supervisor from those supervisors we have had. We learn to be parents from our own. Soft skills play a vital role for professional success; they help one to excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in this age of information and knowledge.

Standard Pronunciation as Part of Communication Skills

Dealing with LSRW, the skills and sub-skills of English Language Teaching, that which keeps coming to our mind is the term, 'Standard Pronunciation'. Recently some of the senior colleagues and I in the fraternity of education were given an opportunity to deliberate on curriculum revision, and to bring in our recommendations, specially the syllabi of Teaching Methodology of English and Teaching Methodology of Special English in B.Ed. curriculum, where there was a debate on the inclusion of phonetics and its scope. Finally and unanimously, we recommended the study of symbols and sounds followed by varieties of activities based on standard pronunciation.

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We believe that English needs to be spoken in a manner that is comprehensible to our listeners whether they are from this country or abroad. There is a striking contrast between the way we write English and the manner we speak in English. In most cases, so long as people understand what we say, we give very little importance to the quality and originality of the spoken form of English.

English Diction

English without proper diction is like food without salt. So, competence in the choice and use of words appropriate for the context and meaning we wish to communicate is very important. Old words, not currently in use in modern English, should be avoided. Undue use of old idioms is another thing that we really need to avoid. Words used in technical contexts and in government records and words described and recognized as part of the *officialese* should be avoided. This area takes some effort to master since even our textbooks are not free from such errors.

Phonetic Skills

A carpenter can only produce the finest piece out of a wood if only he knows his tools well. So an English teacher cannot ignore the knowledge and use of phonetics in teaching English, because phonetics brings art and life into communication.

Innovative Methods of Teaching

Finally, we often have to keep ourselves updated with the innovative methods of teaching English. Practically, here we ask the students to write lesson-plans integrating technology, i.e., planning a unit plan template, implementation plan, and then involving students to prepare their own presentations using power point presentation, etc.,

To Conclude

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Well... I would like to conclude with a philosophical thought and also a humorous anecdote that throws light on effective communication skills.

We all believe that this world is a beautiful place filled with beautiful people. And therefore, let us start by unfolding the beauty and unleashing the potential contained within each of us and envelope the world in a halo of positive energy. I strongly believe that every individual is beautiful from within and has potential; to unfold that beauty is the ability to relate, communicate and bond with our kind.

Here is a humorous story that throws light on effective communication skills

A man feared his wife could not hear as well as she used to and thought that she might need a hearing aid. Not quite sure how to approach her, he visited a doctor to discuss the problem. The doctor thought for a while and explained that he could perform a simple test to evaluate the extent of hearing loss.

That evening, his wife was in the kitchen cooking dinner when the husband came in. He thought to himself, "I'm about 40 feet away, let's see what happens." Then in a normal tone he asked, 'Honey, what's for dinner?'

No response.

So the husband moved to closer to the kitchen, about 20 feet from his wife and repeats, "Honey, what's for dinner?"

There was still no response.

He then walked up to the kitchen door, about 10 feet away. "Honey, what's for dinner?"

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Again there was no response.

As a last attempt, he walked right up behind her and asked, “Honey, what’s for dinner?”

To which the wife answered, “Sam, for the fourth time, we are having CHICKEN!”

The learning point in this anecdote is easy to see – always consider closing any communication gap that may arise before coming to conclusions. (Mathew). By consciously taking the effort to indulge in effective conversation, we can really go a long way in forming better relationships in the workplace and in our personal life.

Hence, there is a need to integrate all these skills. Otherwise our students will be dead just as the babies were in Frederick’s story. I emphasize once again the need to

- develop the ability to pleasantly and professionally interact with students, faculty, and with the fellow people out in the world and to
- develop the ability to establish and maintain good working relationships at various levels within and outside the organization,

Thus the career-focused professionals like all of us need to equip with all those powerful communication strategies and interpersonal skills we need in making our teaching and learning experiences better.

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Mrs. P. Samata, M.A. (English), M.Ed., M.Phil. (English), Ph.D. (English)
Principal
Islamia College of Education
Yakutpura
Hyderabad – 500023
Andhra Pradesh
India
samatashines@yahoo.co.in

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