

Reality *versus* Reality A Journey from Classroom to Corporate

Meenakshi Harraw Verma, MA, PGDTE, Ph.D. (Pursuing)
Dr. Asha Choubey, Ph.D.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:10 October 2013

Graduates for Global Market

Professional Courses are designed to prepare students as recruitable graduates for job market. Our IITs, NITs and many other institutions stand alone fulfilling the demands of the market by producing sound professionals not only for India but also for abroad. It is an honour to know that IITians are the first choice of Bill Gates, Founder of Microsoft. *Business Standard* reported that an MNNIT engineering graduate is offered 1.34 cr. from Facebook. As reported by *the Economic Times*, an IIT Kanpur student is offered 73 lakh per annum by Pocket Gems, a US based company. These may be exceptions but even other students from these institutions also show remarkable achievement in terms of their placement. Obviously, the credit goes to their communication skills as much as, if not more, it does to their technical skills and aptitude. They have the skills to show what they know. They are trained to grow not only as the best technocrats but effective communicators too. But there are other institutions, where the situation seems to be grim. Leaving aside a few old and well established institutions that admit high ranking students on the merit of the state entrance examination, all others produce a gloomy picture. Their placement records are poor and the basic reason behind poor placements is poor knowledge of the technical content and communication skills. They listen but do not understand, they know but cannot say. These students form a very large group and they become a liability not only to the institute but to the society as well. The irony of the situation is that quite a good amount of money is being invested on them to make them successful engineers.

Focus of This Paper

The present paper is a study of students' state and attitude, needs and preferences. The researcher has selected major engineering institutions of the Uttar Pradesh. These are the Institute of Engineering and Technology, Bundelkhand University, Jhansi (BU); University

Institute of Engineering and Technology, Chhatrapati Sahuji Maharaj University (CSJM), Kanpur; Motilal Nehru National Institute of Engineering & Technology, Allahabad (MNNIT); some of the privately run engineering institutions affiliated to Gautam Buddha Technical University (GBTU, erstwhile UPTU Lucknow) Lucknow; and Mahamaya Technical University (MTU), NOIDA to find out why students from Uttar Pradesh lack behind during campus recruitments and suggest remediation to improve their condition. BU and CSJM represent the state universities running campus programs and their admissions procedure is through the counseling on the basis of State Entrance Examination. These are the second high ranking institutes as the first preference of students remains five UPTU affiliated colleges (HBTI Kanpur, IET Lucknow, KNIT Sultanpur, MMMIT Gorakhpur, BIT Jhansi), and all top ranking private institutions as per the UPTU Rank list. In all, there are approximately 600 engineering institutions in the state. MNNIT is the institution of national repute which takes admissions on the basis of All India Engineering Entrance Examination (AIEEE) merit and reserves 50% seats for domicile students. It is known for its excellence in academics and for production of sufficiently merited/recruitable graduates at par with IITs.

Review of Literature

ELT (English Language Teaching) for engineers has become a much debated issue across the globe. Researchers are exploring the same issue in Indian context also. As India is a multilingual and multicultural country, the issue of ELT arises as one of the prominent issues related to engineering education. Today's engineers are required to cross the boundaries of the state and borders of the country. Therefore which, what and how of English language, in a particular domain is needed to be taught is a question that draws the attention of the researchers across the country.

Riemer (2002) stated that those engineering institutions which meet language requirements for the new global engineer will be ready to face the new millennium. Byram (2002) stated that foreign language learning has always been seen as a crucial need for the development of an economic potential of a nation. C. Indira in her paper on *The Engineering Student and the English Language: A Fresh look at Remediation* mentioned that "The aim of the English course in engineering colleges at present is to teach language skills (LSRW) through

natural acquisition of language. So the teaching or learning has no thought content to remember and reproduce in the examination. This makes the student assume that there is nothing to learn. The pass percentage in the city colleges is very high, always above 90%. But this does not reflect the linguistic competence or communicative competence. Even the students who manage to pass require remediation when he has to actually use language in real life situations.”

The condition is not much different in Uttar Pradesh as well. Further, she states, “In Tamilnadu awareness of the necessity to look for materials specific to the engineering register came in the late 1970’s when ‘The Structure of Technical English’ by A.J. Herbert (1965) became a prescribed text book” (2010). In the perspective of ELT to engineering students, P. Malathy (2009) clearly identifies the need for teachers’ training. She mentioned that English language teachers in engineering colleges need a better and intensive acquaintance with the processes for the formation of technical terms. And then they should also know how to use these processes integrated into their teaching of English.

Stephen Krashen (1988) identified that Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drills....language acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language – natural communication – in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. He, further, stated that the best methods are those that supply comprehensible input in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear.

Mitsutomi (2012) stated that second language development follows a developmental process, which resembles that of the first language. Yet, adults, unlike children, are often more critical of themselves and have fears, which children do not experience.... Adult learning is a relatively conscious process.” Going through the above mentioned sources and classroom observations and discussions with a number of concerned people which include teachers, students and policy makers motivated me to study the gap existing in the present system of delivery of the content and its application by the learners later during their interviews and workplace activities with regard to the teaching of Professional Communication and Remedial English to first year engineering students in Uttar Pradesh.

Why Emphasis on Language Skill?

Why so much emphasis on English language skills? The answer to this question would be - because of the enhancing importance of English in the present day business and industry. Globalization has opened new avenues. Expertise in English language is seen as an added qualification in the present scenario. The meaning of English language proficiency is not limited today to general speaking and writing skills. It has further extended to using English for communication purposes at workplace in formal as well as informal settings.

Since English has gained the status of being the business language for corporate and industry, it has become essential for each and every student to gain communicative competence and performance competence to survive and succeed in the fast developing and changing business world. For engineering students, it becomes still more crucial to develop proficiency in speaking as well as in writing as they are the people to write technical and scientific documents – which mean specific words in specific place. Not to mention that precision and accuracy are the two key-words for all kinds of technical writing and it requires great diligence to develop precision and accuracy. Thus, engineering students require learning Business English which covers documentation, presentation and conversational skills.

ELT for engineers is not a matter of concern only in India, it has drawn the attention of the experts across the world. The DEEWR Project Report (The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) from Australia elaborates the concern, “This view of proficiency as the ability to organise language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of ‘English language proficiency’ from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure” (2012) .

To explore, illustrate, analyze and evaluate the real situation classroom observations and discussions with academicians and corporate people were held. Here are a few examples which allow us to review the status.

Case Study 1

A. A B.Tech first Year student (batch 2011) of a reputed state university had a tough time understanding lectures. He shared with one of his close friends that he would leave the course. He was depressed due to his awareness of lack of proficiency in English language. He was miserable and even scared of his seniors. He would hide himself for fear that he might be asked his introduction in English. Lack of proficiency in speaking takes a toll on one's self esteem.

Case Study 2

B. A B. Tech first year student (batch 2005) of a UPTU affiliated private engineering institution, left the course after first semester as he was unable to understand English. He was not able to write or speak even a single sentence – as simple as ‘My name is Varun Kumar.’ Even his teachers, after trying for six months, had given up on him. It proved that he is not gifted with a proclivity to either the technical or the communication skills. Neither did he have command on English. It remained ever questionable how he could pass through all the classes till intermediate and further was admitted to engineering.

Case Study 3

C. A B. Tech first year student (batch 2008), of a UPTU affiliated private engineering institution, was hesitant while speaking English. She was apprehensive of making mistakes. She was a victim of trait as well as state anxiety and would be nervous even when asked to introduce herself on stage. But after few activity based classes she developed confidence. After a month she was given a task to read any book of her choice and to deliver a presentation. She did well, though she was fumbling, but she continued for 20 minutes in spite of the fact that the given time was only 10 minutes. She requested to be allowed to complete. Her presentation was based on ‘*Wings of Fire*’ by APJ Abdul Kalam.

Case Study 4

X. A first year engineering student (batch 2007), a UPTU affiliated private engineering institution, was given to deliver an extempore speech on ‘Smile’. She could not speak. The teacher gave her sentences to imitate and she faced great difficulty even while repeating. When

asked to write the sentences on blackboard, she would ask the teacher to repeat them over and over again. She would fumble on words such as cheerful and fragrance.

Case Study 5

Y. A pass out student of a private institution affiliated to MTU, who appeared in the campus recruitment drives and further have companies like TCS and Cognizant during off campus drive, shared, “When I went for my off campus drive in TCS, I noticed that the major difference in me and students from other states was the level of our communication skills. We were not even at par with those students in terms of communication skills and sometimes we use to feel and asked ourselves, “Are we really educated?” Communication skills is in demand so much so that technical skills take a second position. Those who are good at presenting themselves and convincing the recruiter take the lead.

A Grave Situation

It is a grave situation that prevails. It is really difficult to expect such students to get good jobs. That is why during campus placement drives, such students rank very low and often get rejected by the companies on the ground of their poor communication skills even if they qualify the aptitude test. Academicians, educationists and corporate personnel indicate that communication skills in English function as a major and deciding factor at the time of recruitment. Candidates who cannot communicate well find no takers. They think the curriculum prescribed for the students during their four year course should be strengthened to enhance their communicative skills. It should be designed more according to the requirement of the Industry. It is easier to teach communication skills than to acquire it. Therefore, it has to be so developed as to enable students to practice more. They also emphasize on the integration of the English or communication skills syllabus with the syllabus of other core papers. Here are the excerpts of the talks held with a few of them.

Academicians, Educationists and Industrialists’ Views on English curriculum and Competency of students

Prof. P Chakrabarti, Director MNNIT says, "Our students have sound technical knowledge. But it being a government institution, we get students from all strata of society; some from very poor families. Thus, general feedback from companies is that students are technically very sound, but have poor professional skills. We need to address that issue" (*Business Standard*).

Dr. Pashupati Jha, IIT Roorkee said that a large number of students at the entry level have poor knowledge of English but IIT system is so build on that they have to improve their language skills in the very first semester itself as they have to deliver two seminars per semester, one presentation, one project presentation. The medium of instruction is compulsorily English, faculty do not talk in any language other than English with the students. Besides pursuing a paper in technical writing, students have to work hard for their seminars, presentations and project reports. He works with faculty and peer group to enhance his language skills and by the time he enters his second year, he is a much improved candidate in terms of language proficiency. Their curriculum of English is spread over four years in the form of elective papers. This helps them study English throughout four years of engineering which naturally equips them with language skills.

Dr. Umesh Gautam, Chancellor, Invertis University, Bareilly considers communication skills in English as the prime need of a student to achieve success at work. He thinks that syllabus alone cannot help a student to improve his communication skills. Learning of communication skills has to be incorporated in the whole engineering curriculum. He further states that English classrooms and teachers need to be more equipped to help students enhance their communication skills. For the learners of English, implicit grammar needs to be preferred in comparison to explicit grammar. When Invertis was affiliated to UPTU, besides following the curriculum as prescribed by the university, the institute used to offer specialized classes under Employability Enhancement Programme (EEP) for its second, third and final year students. These were the activity based classes emphasizing largely upon spoken skills, but given space to Listening, Writing, Reading, Grammar and vocabulary along with language games and communication activities. The success of these classes was largely dependent on the skill of teachers. Exciting results were found where the class had an effective teacher, but where the teacher was not effective, students discarded these classes.

Mr. Mayank Singhal, Head Corporate Resource Centre, Invertis University, Bareilly said that for engineering graduates besides aptitude, a company looks for effective communication skills in English. High levels of aptitude might help an engineering graduate to secure a job but poor communication skills might be a handicap.

Mr. Sanjeev Arora, Chairman, Millenium Institute, Saharanpur laments the condition of students who are coming for engineering courses. Not to speak of their proficiency in English they cannot even introduce themselves. The future of such students is grim. He feels that UP Board students from rural background form a large group of disadvantaged learners who aspire to pursue an ambitious course like engineering but fail to either understand or express their knowledge. He feels that a very strong and effective syllabus should be prepared for such students which should be different from the current syllabus because the needs of such learners are entirely different from the needs of the average learners. Such students need to develop competency in basic language skills before studying the advanced communication theories. He also feels that at present, teachers with special training in communication skills teaching or language teaching are not available. Most institutions have to fill in the seats with the candidates who simply possess an MA degree in Literature from any university. They have no specific training in Communication Skills/Language/Technical Writing Teaching. Lack of knowledge, objective and expertise is what the institutes have to face but can't do anything about it.

Reality

There lies a number of examples if one goes ahead to explore the reality of these technical institutions. On the importance of Communication Skills for engineers, Thomas N. Huckin and Leslie A. Olsen state: "Scientists and engineers may be technically brilliant and creative, but unless they can convince co-workers, clients, and supervisors of their worth, their technical skills will be unnoticed, unappreciated, and unused (1991). In a word [*sic*], if technical people cannot communicate to others what they are doing and why it is important, it is they and their excellent technical skills that will be superfluous. From this perspective, communication skills are not just handy; they are critical tools for success, even survival, in "real world" environments".

Hardings (2007) stated that more and more people are using English in a growing number of occupational contexts. The general skills that a general English teacher uses e.g. being communicative, using authentic materials and analyzing English in a practical way are also applicable to ESP. He also suggested that teachers should :

- Think about what is needed and don't just follow an off-the-shelf course or course book;
- Understand the nature of their students' subject area;
- Work out their language needs in relation to their skills;
- Use contexts, texts, situations from their subject area;
- Use authentic materials;
- Make the tasks as authentic as possible; Motivate the students with variety, relevance and fun;
- Take the classroom into the real world and bring the real world into the classroom.

Recommendations

Specific and well defined content and trained teachers become two prerequisites for teaching English to engineers. It is evident that there is a dearth of perfect or near to perfect role models to teach English language and communication skills. Unless certain steps are taken in the direction of improvement of the syllabus and teaching plan of the Professional Communication, the sole paper being taught in the first year only, it would be difficult to raise the status of the students. On the basis of the study, certain recommendations are as follows –

- i) Screening and streaming of the students should be done as the first step in this regard. Below average and average students have to be screened out in one group and above average students with sound knowledge of language skills should be put in another group. This is required because at the entry level of engineering, students are not tested for their language or communication skills. They are tested only for the physics, chemistry and mathematics and that too through objective question-answer pattern and later on face difficulty in understanding the core engineering curriculum because the lectures are delivered in English.

- ii) The syllabus needs to be extended to two categories-Basic and Advance. Basic Course for the students who lack even the basic knowledge of the four language skills, i.e. the group one. Advance Course for all the students including group one and two both. The basic course should include the language skills development exercises while advanced course should include communication theories and strategies.
- iii) The basic course may be prescribed in the first semester only to the selective students.
- iv) Advanced course may be prescribed in second and the third semester.
- v) Advance course needs to be more activity oriented than lecture oriented and it should have good number of presentations in the form of extempore speeches, group discussions, meetings, seminars etc.
- vi) Fourth, fifth and sixth semester students may be given choice of elective papers based on literature/fiction/poetry/drama/. This will enable them to learn language through literature. Engineering students hardly have any paper which teaches them about emotions and character building. In a formal workplace setting, general discussions and informal talks also take place and literature is the best tool to prepare students for effective conversation.
- vii) The English teachers should be provided pre-service training essentially so that they can be equipped with the skills to deal with the technical writing, scientific vocabulary and communication skills papers. It is apparent that most teachers are MA in English literature with no background of technical writing skills.
- viii) Along with a master degree, a PGDTE course from EFLU, Hyderabad should be mandatory for the faculty of English or communication skills in technical institutions.
- ix) The practical examination should not be restricted to internal assessment. The present system of internal assessment frees teachers and students from rigorous practice of communication skills activities. Bundelkhand University, Jhansi and CSJM University, Kanpur present a better example in this regards, where students have to appear for the viva voce for internal/periodical assessment. They are asked to introduce themselves, answer questions related to job interviews, write their resume and participate in Group Discussions. This practice makes the students work on themselves. It was observed that they work with their peers to prepare for the internal assessment viva voce.

- x) Their curriculum should prepare them for face-to-face communication, telephonic communication, video conferencing, oral presentations and meetings etc.
- xi) By the seventh semester, the students should be trained in writing formal emails, SMSs and business letters and reports. The present syllabus only teaches the nature of a business letter/report/proposal, its types and methods of writing but hardly any practice in all these is done. Students need to be exposed to the real business environment.

What Lies Ahead

Unless measures are taken to improve the poor conditions of the students in these institutions, we cannot expect quality education or quality product from them. Keeping in view the words of John Ruskin, “The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it”, we need to put the students to hard labour, so that they get all possible opportunities to remove the flaws related to their written and spoken skills and become professionals who can handle their work independently and confidently. In the light of the above, it has become the need of the hour to provide our students with a modified and more structured syllabus of Professional Communication and Remedial English. Instead of making it a burden on them, it is needed to be integrated with the curriculum of their mainstream engineering content.

=====

References

Byram, M. “Language Teaching as Political Action.” Ed. Bax M. *Reflections on Language and Language Learning*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing, 2002. Print.

C. Indira C., Meenakshisundaram. “The Engineering Student and the English Language: A Fresh Look at Remediation.” *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*. VOL. 6 No. 2. July 2010. Web. 10 June 2012.

Harding, K. *English for Specific Purposes*. Oxford:Oxford University Press. 2007. Print.

Huckin, Thomas N. and Olsen, Leslie A. *Technical Writing and Professional Communication For Nonnative Speakers of English*. McGraw-Hill International Editions. 1991. Print.

Krashen, Stephen D. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Prentice-Hall International, 1988. Print.

Malathy, P. Teaching Technical Jargon through Word formation to the Students of Engineering and Technology: Problems and some Perspectives on Strategies.” *Language in India*. Vol. 9:6. June 2009. Web. June 9 2012.

Mitsutomi, Marjo. “Some Fundamental Principles Of Language Teaching And Learning”. Web. June 16, 2012.

Pathak, Kalpana. “NIT-Allahabad Student Bags Rs.1.34 Cr Facebook Offer.” *Business Standard*. March 30, 2012. Web. June 30, 2012.

Riemer, M.J. “English and Communication Skills for the Global Engineer.” *Global Journal of Engineering Education*. Vol. 6:1. 2002. Web. April 13, 2012.

Ruskin, John. Brainy Quotes. Web. May 23, 2012.
<<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/johnruskin135097.html>>

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). *Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency For International Students In Australian Universities : Final Report*. 2008. Web. 23 May 2012.

The Economic Times. “IIT Kanpur student bags highest campus placement of Rs 73 lakh from Pocket Gems.” 16 December, 2011. Web. May 11 2012.

=====
Meenakshi Harraw Verma
Associate Professor
Department of Communication
Invertis University
Bareilly 243123
Uttar Pradesh
India
meenakshi.v68@gmail.com

Dr. Asha Choubey
Associate Professor
Department of Humanities
Institute of Engineering & Technology
MJP Rohilkhand University
Bareilly 243123
Uttar Pradesh
India
asha.choubey@yahoo.com