

English for First Generation Learners in Engineering Colleges

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Abstract

First generation learners in Tamilnadu face more difficulty in mastering English. First generation students in Engineering Colleges need additional exposure to English and appropriate graded steps to improve their mastery of English. This paper identifies some of the characteristics of First Generation Learners and suggests specially designed courses outside class hours and outside the regular curriculum when they begin their engineering studies.

Key words: First Generation Learners, English learning difficulties, additional course and practice sessions.

Introduction

In this paper we discuss the English-learning needs and skills of first generation learners who have enrolled in or have been admitted to engineering colleges in Tamilnadu. What we describe and suggest here may be applicable to the needs and skills of first generation learners who have enrolled in the engineering colleges in other states as well. Our examples are primarily from the domain of first generation learners in Tamilnadu. We also need to emphasize that there are quite a few college lecturers both in English and engineering subjects who are also first generation learners but have succeeded completing their studies and have begun their career as lecturers, etc. They also continue to aim at improving their English skills to meet the demands of classroom instruction.

Meaning of the Term *First Generation Learners*

The term *first generation learner* has a deeper meaning when it is applied to the students of Tamilnadu. Socio-economic status is an important factor here. First generation learners may be not only the first generation learners at the college level, but also they might have been first generation learners in the entire formal schooling system. In other words, even at the elementary level, they might have been the first generation learners from their families.

First Generation Learners in the United States

In the United States, the term is generally used only to refer to those who enter colleges for the first time from their families. In other words, there is some literacy and educational background in their families and the students enter colleges for the first time from their families. This need not be the case when it comes to first generation learners of Tamilnadu. For example, Statistical Analysis Report, June 1998 describes First Generation Students as “Undergraduates Whose Parents Never Enrolled in Postsecondary Education” (U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. *First-Generation Students: Undergraduates Whose Parents Never Enrolled in Postsecondary Education*, NCES 98-082, by Anne-Marie Nunez and Stephanie Cuccaro-Alamin. Project officer: C. Dennis Carroll. Washington DC: 1998.). The findings of this report are given in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 presents some of the features of First Generation College Students in the United States. (<http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/self-help-brochures/adjustment-to-college-life/first-generation-college-students/>). Many helpful programmes are offered for these students in many universities in the United States.

First Generation Learners in India

In India too, the problems of first generation learners are recognized. There are several reports which deal with the specific characteristics and needs of first generation learners. For example, the following links offer some brief insights into the difficulties faced by and remedial steps meant for first generation learners in India.

For example it is reported in **POSITION PAPER NATIONAL FOCUS GROUP ON SYSTEMIC REFORMS FOR CURRICULUM CHANGE** http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/Systemic_reforms_final.pdf “3.3 First

Generation Learners : Discouraged, Humiliated since many poor students are first generation learners

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their parents are unable to help them with their schoolwork. Children find it difficult to cope and are humiliated for being slow learners, dull students. They are classified as non-achievers. Repeatedly discouraged, they often end up failing in the examination. They are also punished for their inability to purchase textbooks, stationery, and uniforms and pay official and unofficial ‘school charges’. In addition, they are subject to corporal punishment. Eventually as is only to be expected, they get pushed out of the school system⁴.”

Many References in Indian Reports

There are references to first generation learners in many Indian reports. For additional information, you may like to check these links. Only a few links are given below. You can do your own search and identify many more links:

http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/EFA-Review-Report-final.pdf

http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/Systemic_reforms_final.pdf

http://www.ncert.nic.in/oth_anoun/npe86.pdf

http://www.ncert.nic.in/publication/journals/pdf_files/indian_education_abstracts/july_2008 IEA.pdf

<http://www.ncert.nic.in/html/pdf/schoolcurriculum/framework05/Currilular%20Areas.pdf>

In the Past Most Students were First Generation Learners!

First Generation Learners is not a new term. In India, most students were only first generation learners in the past! Very few had school and college education and value of formal schooling was not recognized adequately in all communities in the past. So, when first generation learners went to school and college, not much attention was given to them. Fortunately, it has become a political necessity in recent years to recognize and help this important segment of population – this is a delayed, wise step.

Some Possible Characteristics of First Generation Learners

Some of the characteristics noticed in the personality factors of first generation learners are as follows. Kindly note that such generalization does not do justice to the individuals as well as to the group, but identification of possible features helps us to develop adequate steps to help those who have difficulty in coping with their studies. The third author of this article (Thirumalai) was a first generation learner right from the elementary school days. He can certainly testify to the presence of

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these features when he was a student in all the stages of education in Tamilnadu. The students' socioeconomic situation could make the situation much worse and pathetic.

1. Inferiority complex, leading on to lack of participation, unwillingness and hesitation to be part of a group/team, internal conflict, satisfied with low level performance, ultimate defeat and self-destruction, etc. Fatalism.

2. Difficulty with appropriate etiquette demanded in “city” contexts, Dress and Table Manners, etc.

3. Difficulty with appropriate language.

4. Difficulty with appropriate Nonverbal Communication.

5. Lack of sensitivity to the context.

6. Fear and hesitation. Fuming with internal anger.

7. Finding an appropriate direction in career is harder for the First Generation Learners, especially when they come from little educated or illiterate families.

Language Skills in Mother Tongue and English

While the first generation learners may have adequate language skills in reading and writing in their mother tongue (Tamil), their performance using English may be somewhat less impressive.

In English, they may find it difficult to produce sentences to carry on their conversation. Subject Verb agreement may be a problem. Difficulty with the choice of gender as well contrast between singular and plural, etc. also is noticed. They may have difficulty with the choice of appropriate words. They may face difficulty in using tenses appropriately. Choice of adjectives and adverbs also is difficult for them. Such difficulties are noticed even in those students from families with past college level education. But the level of performance of the first generation learners may be significantly lower than the performance of the other group. While rural students in general may face difficulty, first generation learners from rural parts and from cities face greater difficulty in using English. In addition, most students have difficulty in handling English language textbooks and most see memorization as the best way to score marks. It is important that extensive empirical studies are undertaken to specify the lack of skills and other features in detail so that we may be able to devise suitable remedial steps.

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Stigmatization and Need for Caution: English For All

First Generation Learners may be easily stigmatized by others and this would not help these needy students to come forward and join any group work specifically designed for them. So, it is very important that colleges have courses with the title such as English for All, English for All Occasions, Let's Master English, or English for Budding Engineers, Enrich Your Skills in English, etc. and attract all the first year students to join the special course on their own. Such courses may be conducted outside the normal class hours and offered as additional training to gain competence in English.

Entry Level Test

We need to develop a relevant entry level test which would assess the current status of English competence of the students. The test may be based on the required competence for Plus 2 students in English. Some of the sections of the test could be subsections for all the four language skills, a section for identifying the mastery of words, mastery of basic grammatical processes, sentence construction, mastery of different types of sentences, comprehension, etc.

Additional Textbooks

We need to develop some simple textbooks with a number of graded lessons which will use the language of engineering. In other words this textbook will deal with common day to day experience materials within the realm of engineering and engineering-like fields. For example, there may be simple descriptions of a dam across river with measurements of various sorts described in the lesson. Or there may be a lesson which will describe how mixer could be used to make juice, etc. Or there may be a lesson which describes the functions and variety of *sim* cards, etc.

Type of Language and Content

In other words, these lessons will present common every day matter which involves some engineering techniques, performance, information, etc. The language thus will sound different and will use a non-emotional approach and could also use passive voice, etc. Use of English for various practical purposes will be introduced. Conceptual prose is mastered through this process. There is no need to use large number of technical terms, but when students begin their engineering subjects they

will have already some understanding of English used in engineering subjects. Simple and short sentences will help them to master the subjects and concepts more easily.

Exercises

Exercises may be offered to practice and acquire words that are directly relevant for the engineering and technology fields. Students will begin to write simple and short reports using conceptual language based on the model given to them.

This simple course offered outside class hours will help engineering students to slowly and steadily master the English they would need to write their reports in due course. The exposure to simple engineering materials written using simple and short sentences and making use of a limited number of words will create greater confidence in them to write better reports.

Additional Focus

The additional after class hour course we suggest may focus on the following:

1. Communication via English. For this conversational teams must be arranged. Every day there must be some practice to speak in English and this will be achieved if students are assigned to different conversation teams.

2. Appropriate Dress Code.
3. Appropriate facial expression.
4. Participation in group activities.
5. Keeping appointments on time.
6. Keeping the Desk/Table tidy.
7. Appropriate greetings.
8. Avoidance of body odor.
9. Toilet habits: frequency, cleanness, etc
10. Seating posture.
11. Gender relations.
12. Avoidance of hurtful humor, comments and gestures, etc.

An Exercise

We may prepare an Office, provide scenes, enact a variety of Office Activities. Let this be an office of engineers.

1. For this visit a variety of offices, both public and private, business, etc.
2. Practice with attention to details helps.
3. Develop sensitivity to context, learn from face and nonverbal expressions.
4. Develop skills in expression through language and non-language means.
5. Remember most of us came originally from First Generation Learners families. Be sympathetic, do not mock at or mimic First Generation Learners.

Learn to love others!

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http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/Systemic_reforms_final.pdf

http://mhrd.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/upload_document/EFA-Review-Report-final.pdf

http://www.ncert.nic.in/rightside/links/pdf/focus_group/Systemic_reforms_final.pdf

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