Proficiency of English among Polytechnic and Engineering Students

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Abstract:

English has come to be accepted as a Language of worldwide importance. English is taught as a compulsory subject in Polytechnic and Engineering colleges as the sound knowledge of English Language helps the students to find jobs. It has been observed that majority of students even after completing their studies at college; fail to develop required proficiency of written and spoken English. This study has made an attempt to find out the proficiency level of Polytechnic and Engineering students from the district of Nagpur. For the purpose, self designed questionnaire has been used to find the level of proficiency in 15 different areas of English. This study is expected to speed up to introduce various reforms in the teaching of English for Engineers so that they can attain the required competency level. Various industries not only look for technical trained graduates but they look for the people who are well versed with soft skills as well. Orientation in communication skills lays a strong foundation for the development of soft skills. Proficiency in English Language plays a key role in the overall development of professional.

Keywords: *Engineering, English, Polytechnic, Proficiency, Written and Spoken English*

1. Introduction

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, while placing the bill of 'The Official Language Act, 1963' before the parliament session had emphatically stated, "If you push out English, does Hindi fully take its place? I hope it will. I am sure it will. But I wish to avoid the danger of one unifying factor being pushed out without another unifying factor fully taking its place."[1] Stressing the importance of English as a key to the store-house of knowledge Dr. Radhakrishnan in his University Commission Report (1949) says, "Unable to have access to this knowledge our standards of scholarship would fast deteriorate and our participation in the world movement of thought would become negligible."Today, our Constitution has recognized English as 'an associate official language of the union of India"[2]. A brief historical perspective throwing light on the process of English becoming a major language of education and administration in our country will definitely reveal the need to teach English language to school and college going students still more effectively.

The story of English in India has a long history narrating the intimate contact of 150 years with the British particularly in the fields of culture, administration and education. After having colonized India the English men needed clerks and administrators to carry out the business of their trade and Govt. administration. To fashion Indian youths into 'a class of people, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' Lord Macaulay, in his report, suggested the contemporary British Govt. to implant English system of education in India. British wanted cheap clerks and trained workers to carry on the business of their trade and rule in the country. "British achieved their aim not only by introducing English but by reinforcing it as a part of Indian culture".[3]For this purpose they supported the anglicized movements led by educated Indians. The declaration made by Lord Hardinge in 1844 that preference would be given to Indians educated in English schools in Govt.

services inspired some Indian educationists and social reformers to open such schools and colleges in India; and British Govt. allocated some funds for that purpose. British Govt. imparted status to English in all walks of life; thus, English became official language of courts, banks and administration in India. Those days there was no one rich language with Indians useful to unify all states. Therefore English, rich in all respects, became a popular means of communication. In pre- Independence era English occupied a privileged place for it was the language of administration, a medium of instruction at school, college and university level, and a compulsory language for employment. In school curriculum the task of a teacher was not to impart subject knowledge of a particular subject to the students but to use it to strengthen their ability of English communication.

With the attainment of Independence in 1947, the position of English in the academic curriculum and in the national life came to be seriously questioned. The absolute importance of English declined. C. Rajagopalachari said, "We in our anger against the British people should not throw away the baby (English language) with the bath water (English people)."[4] Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru observed, Indian languages have suffered psychologically and otherwise because of English, yet they have gained a great deal too from contacts with the wider world …however, English cannot be in India anything but a second language in future.[5]

Thus, the status of English, which was of high order during British rule, had gone under a great change after independence. English language which served as a great unifying force in the struggle for independence and in the awakening of masses from ignorance, as per the dictation of Constitution, came to be recognized as 'an official language of the union of India' until Hindi would be enriched so as to replace it (English). Keeping aside the controversial issue of the importance of English in Indian life, with the passage of time, importance of English is marked ever growing in the context of new developments in the fields of science, technology, industry, marketing and service sector. Today English is important to us for it is a national link language; it is the world's lingua-franca; it is a library language; and it is a compulsory language for prospects of employment in multi-national companies.

The knowledge of English will enable us to establish intellectual, cultural, economic, commercial and political relations with the rest of the world and its knowledge is essential for legal, technical and scientific education and research in almost all branches of learning. It is also necessary for writers who wish to reach a larger audience, for diplomats, editors, lawyers, politicians in fact almost everyone. Attitude of the people are also changing towards learning English. India needs a language of the outside world and English language stands relatively on a better position than any other foreign language like French, German, etc. At present many people like to send their children to English medium Schools and Colleges, which are established all around India. But the standard of English teaching in Schools and Colleges has deteriorated gradually. It has emerged as a matter of concern. From 1991 India has adopted the path of economic globalization. It has enabled many multinational companies to establish their branches in India. Increasing number of Indian Engineers have started finding jobs abroad. Therefore, it is necessary that the students who come out from Polytechnic and Engineering colleges must have high level of proficiency of English language.

2 Review of the literature
It is appropriate and relevant here to look at some of the earlier research studies that have been conducted in this area.

Rajendra Babu Vemuri, Sai Krishna Kota and D.Radhika have thrown light through their research study on "Need of enhancing employability skills through English for Engineers".[6]The number of technocrats graduating from Indian universities is very high. All these technocrats need to work in an international scenario and there is a great need to survive them in this global village. But lack of training in their respective fields as well as in English communication, they often have trouble in finding suitable placements. So language skills play an important role in every aspect of life

especially at the time of campus recruitments. It is observed that the mind boggling thing is our training modules in the syllabus could not reach the challenges which are required for employability in MNCs. So, it is very important to shed light upon a specific syllabus for engineering graduates to develop employability skills. Thus this paper aims at investigating required skills by MNCs and designing syllabus to meet industry requirements by suggesting a right direction.

V. Subbulakshmi, in her research study, "English for Engineering College"[7] has stressed on the need of developing specialized syllabi to meet the needs of Engineering students. Until 1990, all students in Tamil Nadu pursuing undergraduate courses, irrespective of the disciplines of their choice, took a course called Compulsory General English. This course was very similar to general ELT courses. In order to help students pursuing science courses, universities designed a distinct course modeled after the courses relating to English for Special Purposes. This course was a required course. Universities assumed that this ESP-type course would be more useful for the students pursuing science subjects. A separate need-based syllabus in English was designed to meet the specific needs of students pursuing Engineering. In this syllabus, emphasis was laid on science vocabulary and sentence structures more useful to technical students. Such syllabuses have now been followed for more than a decade in various Engineering colleges in Tamilnadu.

Y. Vijaya Babu and Dr.Pretti R Kumar in their research study have analyzed the need to develop strategies through ELCS Lab (English Language Communication Skills Lab) to enhance the proficiency of English among Engineering students[8]: The main objective of writing this research paper is to bring out the status of the engineering first year students in terms of obtaining communication skills through English Language Communication Skills Lab in the engineering colleges of JNTU affiliated engineering colleges of Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh, India. Today's 21st century is regarded as an era of globalization where science and technology achieved rapid strides, in the search for global language English would be undoubtedly accomplished the status of official language of the world. Since the time of colonialism, English has been spreading across the world, till today it's being occupied official status in terms of communication skills and soft skills. Nowadays English communication skills are considered vital, inevitable in terms of job searching in the neck deep competition of the professional world. Engineering education occupies larger part of professional career in changing the world of science and technology. Apart from that, the mastery of knowledge in core subjects they need to perform excellent abilities and efficient communication skills and soft skills like many developing nations, India too has taken to develop English communication skills and stands today as one of the largest English speaking countries in the world. As an outcome of interacting and teaching English language and communication skills for engineering students for the past many years, a new dimension has been explored to develop communication competence among the students with ELCGEP. (Formation of English Language Communication Groups Exchange Project). Thus the paper concluded with following findings: Strategies to develop Communication Skills through ELCS Labs among First Year Engineering, Students of JNTU Engineering Colleges of Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh presented a detailed study of advantages of the English language communication lab. The syllabus for engineering students and its objectives were given in the paper. The English language teacher is not just a teacher of grammar and sentence structure; the faculty of English language is expected to play an active role as a counselor, communication expert, soft skills trainer. The students also need to evolve to the heights in terms of accomplishing communication skills despite these many impediments.

Michael Lessard-Clouston carried out the research study that provides an overview of language learning strategies (LLS) for second and foreign language (L2/FL) teachers[9]. To do so it outlines the background of LLS and LLS training, discusses a three step approach teachers may follow in using LLS in their classes, and summarizes key reflections and questions for future research on this aspect of L2/FL education. It also lists helpful contacts and internet sites where readers may access up-to-date information on LLS teaching and research.

Kuang-wu Lee conducted a research study on English Teachers' Barriers[10] to the Use of Computer-assisted Language Learning. Computers have been used for language teaching ever since the 1960's. This 40-year period can be divided into three main stages: behaviorist CALL, communicative CALL, and integrative CALL. Each stage corresponds to a certain level of technology and certain pedagogical theories. The reasons for using Computer-assisted Language Learning include: (a) experiential learning, (b) motivation, (c) enhance student achievement, (d) authentic materials for study, (e) greater interaction, (f) individualization, (g) independence from a single source of information, and (h) global understanding. The barriers inhibiting the practice of Computer-assisted Language Learning can be classified in the following common categories: (a) financial barriers, (b) availability of computer hardware and software, (c) technical and theoretical knowledge, and (d) acceptance of the technology.

Ingrid Fandrych has conducted a study to find out whether the modern word processor helps the student to overcome difficulties of spelling and grammar[11]. Modern word processors do not only include spell checks and dictionaries but also grammar checks. Do these facilities help second language students to compose correct sentences and texts? Will they even make the grammar component that has traditionally been part of Academic Writing courses redundant? This paper sets out to determine the usefulness of modern word processors in terms of their grammar and spelling assistance and discuss the consequences for second language learning and teaching. For this purpose, the most common word processors on the market at present (Word, WordPerfect) will be tested on a variety of texts ranging from students' essays to newspaper articles and literary and academic texts. It becomes clear from the above analyses that word processors cannot yet solve all the problems many users face when composing texts, especially if English is not their first language. It would certainly be premature to reduce the grammar component of Academic Writing courses and to rely instead on the grammar and spell checks of modern software.

Mark D. Offner has carried out many interesting study to find out whether Standard English can be developed for native and non-native speakers[12]. Throughout the years there has been much controversy concerning the question of whether a Standard English actually does exist and, if so, how should it be defined? A study of the wide variety of materials published on this issue reveals that the opinions and conclusions are as varied and far-reaching as the topic itself. From this it could be concluded that a Standard English does not exist simply because no consensus can be reached on this subject and because, in reality, there are a wide variety of English dialects presently in use. It might be asked whether it would be beneficial or even desirable to label and define some form as standard and attempt to spread this "superior" form to all non-native (as well as native) speakers as the only officially accepted form of English. In dealing with these questions this paper suggests that any attempt to define a Standard English is essentially futile and that the form English will take is naturally determined by usage and communicability - factors which are beyond control.

3. Hypothesis
Polytechnic and Engineering students have low level of proficiency of English.

4. Aim
This research study has been undertaken with the specific objective of finding the level of proficiency of English among the Polytechnic and Engineering students from the city of Nagpur.

5. Sample
The sample is collected by simple random sampling method. For this study the sample comprised five hundred students drawn from 10 polytechnic and engineering colleges from Nagpur. The ratio of male and female students remains the same. 50 students were taken from each college. All the students included in the sample were from polytechnic and engineering colleges from the city of Nagpur.

6. Tool for data collection

Self developed English proficiency questionnaire has been used to collect the data. This questionnaire contains 15 statements which have been designed to assess the level of the proficiency of English in different areas. Students are asked to rate themselves on five point scale. This questionnaire has been used to collect data to find out the proficiency level of English/ Communication skill of the students included in the sample. This questionnaire tests the proficiency of students in following areas:- Confidence level in public speaking, accuracy and correctness in public speaking, rich vocabulary and word power, fluency in speaking, group discussion skills, personal interview skills, presentation skills, effective use of body language, Clarity and organization of thought in public speaking, meaningful listening skills, drafting skills like business correspondence, letters, etc., ability of taking notes, ability to make précis, accuracy of usage of grammar, logical and analytical reasoning ability.

7. Results

A questionnaire containing 15 statements was given to 500 students of Polytechnic and Engineering courses drawn from 10 colleges situated in the city of Nagpur. These statements were designed to find out the degree to which the students have been benefited by the teaching of present syllabi with regard to different aspects of proficiency of English. The findings of this exercise are mentioned below.

Table Showing the Percentage of Proficiency of English in Different Areas

Sr.	Area of proficiency in English	Attainment in percentage
1.	Confidence level in public speaking	47%
2.	Accuracy and correctness in public speaking	23%
3.	Rich vocabulary and word power	25%
4.	Fluency in speaking	12%
5.	Group discussion skills	32%
6.	Personal interview skills	27%
7.	Presentation skills	35%
8.	Effective use of body language.	36%
9.	Clarity and organization of thought in public speaking	20%
10.	Meaningful listening skills	28%
11.	Drafting skills like business correspondence, letters, etc.	33%
12.	Ability of taking notes	40%
13.	Ability to make précis	43%
14.	Accuracy of usage of grammar	37%
15.	Logical and analytical reasoning ability	42%
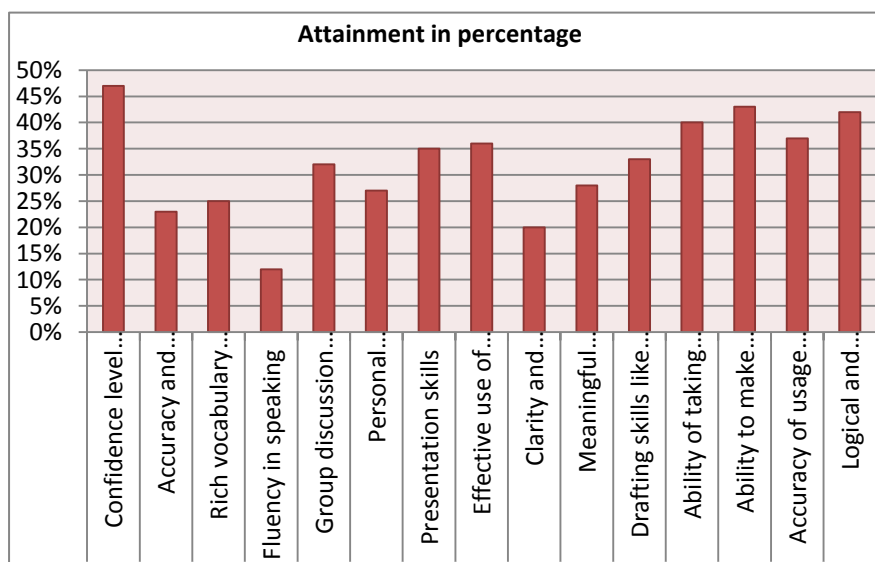
The above diagram and table show that students have the lowest proficiency level in fluency area i.e. 12%. It is followed by clarity and organization of thought in public speaking with 20%, accuracy and correctness in public speaking with 23% and rich vocabulary and word power with 25%. In this research study, the highest proficiency level has been scored by the students in confidence level in public

speaking with 47%. The other three areas of proficiency where students have scored relatively higher include ability to make precise 43%, logical and analytical ability with 42% and ability of taking notes with 40%.

It is interesting to note that in all the fifteen areas which have been included in this study to find out the proficiency of English among students, in no area of proficiency, students have scored more than 47%. The overall proficiency level of the students is 32%. This shows that the present syllabi of English in Polytechnic and Engineering colleges have failed to achieve their objectives. It is necessary to introduce modifications in the syllabi to make them relevant. This requires serious thinking and meticulous planning on the part of all those who are directly or indirectly associated with the teaching of English.

8. Conclusion

Teaching ESL students in a large number is a challenging responsibility. There are differing academic levels, there are difficulties in maintaining adequate number of resources, there may be students from different parts of the country who speak different languages; and it is exerting meeting the emotional and social needs each ESL student. Even though challenging working with ESL students is an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Above all the process of teaching and learning ESL/EFL can be effective when both the teacher and learner are involved in the process and derive fun out of it. This is the only way to keep the motivation and interest levels high. When this is achieved all the problems of teaching and learning ESL/ EFL get resolved and better results are attained. There are number of factors that can be held responsible for the low level of proficiency of English among Polytechnic and Engineering students. These factors include lack of participation from stack holders in the process of curriculum development, inadequate contents of English curriculum, faulty and ineffective evaluation/examination system and many other obstacles which adversely affect the proficiency of English/Communication skills among Polytechnic and Engineering students. The results obtained from the sample of 500 students has confirmed the hypothesis of this study that the students of polytechnic and Engineering courses failed to achieve the expected level of proficiency in different areas of English communication.

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