An Integrated Approach to Teaching Language Skills

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Abstract - **Teaching English language to Engineering students of today stems from the demands that the job market places on them. English is no longer a subject to be taught but a skill to be acquired. Both teaching and learning have undergone a sea change today. Engineering studies is one of the largest opted fields of study among students in the state of Telangana. In today's world, employers seek graduates with sound communication skills, along with technical engineering knowledge. In a class, difficulties in pronunciation, grammar, syntax, vocabulary, etc. can be addressed through tasks where integrated skills approach of teaching language is encouraged. This paper highlights the importance of an integrated approach to teaching language skills through tasks based on real life situations employing various strategies and techniques. The teacher organizes activities and encourages cooperative learning among the students. This paper thus seeks to chronicle the need for this approach to be incorporated by English teachers in engineering colleges of today.**

Index Terms - **language skills, engineering students, communication, job opportunities, integrated approach, task based activities.**

INTRODUCTION

Engineering studies in the state of Telangana has acquired a new prominence today when compared to the last two decades of professional studies in the state. In the past, engineering colleges were few and so were the students who graduated from such colleges, in fact professional studies such as this were offered only by the universities. Engineering studies was brought to our country by the British solely for infrastructural needs. After independence, Indian leaders recognised the significance of engineering studies and established engineering institutions in national and regional areas. Only after the 1990's with the advent of computer technology, a steep rise in engineering studies was seen. Engineers were looked upon with great respect by the society. Engineers were considered as highly intelligent people and thus an engineering degree meant getting a lucrative job. Today, India produces around 25% of worlds engineers. Today India produces approximately 1.5 million engineers every year. The state of Telangana is also one of the states where engineering studies is a craze among students and parents alike.

With the onset of Globalization, Liberalization and Privatization and a sudden boom in the software industry, demand for engineers has steeply risen. Multinational companies, corporate sectors and industries created great opportunities for engineers. People realized the advantages of securing jobs in these companies. Soon engineering studies gained prominence in the education system and a craze for an engineering degree began to drive parents to seek admission in engineering colleges. Madheshwari et.al (2019), reported that

"Parents form the major stakeholders of engineering education. More than 60% of the students opined the parents' push behind their engineering option. When probed on "the choice of engineering for their ward's career", unanimously they chorused on the job opportunities and better career. In spite of the challenges in engineering education, such as high fee structure, unavailability of courses in dream institutions, distance from residence etc. parents prefer to enroll their wards in engineering education with one and only motive: a better career."

In the past, number of engineering institutions and universities were few, today we see around 309 engineering Institutions offering this course, and among these 286 are private and 23 public institutions (NIRF ranking). Thus engineering studies have gained tremendous importance making it one of the largest opted field of study among students in the state today.

PLACE OF ENGLISH IN ENGINEERING STUDIES

It is a well-established fact that English language is seen as a link between students and engineering studies given the fact that English language alone can give the students confidence to express ideas and thoughts clearly in engineering studies.

As Reimer, (2002) states: Communication skills are essential for an engineer who aspires to carry out his/her professional practice in the global areas. Engineering communication skills basically constitute several core elements such as the fluency in the English language and the fundamentals of visual communication (P.1).

It is considered a bridge between international business, technology, research and higher education. Both teaching and learning have undergone a sea change today because of the increased complexity of the nature of the job that the students are called to do. Great emphasis is laid on skill development. Along with technical engineering knowledge, proficiency in English language would definitely lead to success. In today's world, having good communication skills is a valuable asset for engineers as they have to deal with clients overseas as well. According to Thaky,(2014) English has been widely accepted as the most widespread language in the world. It is cited as the major language of international business, diplomacy and science and professionals. It is the prime means of communication and can often serve as the global language between two people from two different cultures, where in English is not the native tongue (P. 4).

Today's engineer has to not only communicate his ideas to his counterparts but also to business clients across the globe. (Joshi, 2013). An engineering student has to have good communication skills both in their studies and in their future careers. Communication skills is essential for an engineer who aspires to create a place in the global market. (Reimer, 2002) Thus the role of English language became significant in the curriculum of engineering studies.

Aspiring students have access to higher education only if they are proficient in English language. Thaky claims that "lack of sufficient communication skills serves only to undermine the image of the engineer." This meant that students had to be good in all the four skills namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. As Joshi,2013 reports it:

"Today's engineer has to communicate with more number of his counterparts across the globe, A large number of engineers have to now travel to many continents and work away from their home country. Also, among the scientists, technologists and business experts from culturally and linguistically different communities. English has become the predominant language for communication."

To improve engineering students' language skills, a course in English was envisaged and was made a compulsory subject in the engineering curriculum. The core of engineering course is the teaching learning process. The deficit of well-trained language teachers resulted in students with poor communication skills because English was taught as a subject like other engineering subjects rather than as a language. This led to students not being able to do well during placement interviews at college. Companies want employees with good communication skills and technical skills. While majority of the students are good at technical knowledge, they lack proficiency in language skills. National Employability Report Engineers, 2019 survey revealed that "*employability statistics have not changed over a decade*", i.e., 80% of the Indian engineers are not employable in any job in the current knowledge economy. This became a serious concern among most of the colleges as placements started to decrease rapidly. "Many engineering graduates in India are found to be unemployable due to their poor communication skills and lack of confidence. There have been a lot of research papers that have recapped the importance of improving graduates' employability skills; however, the problem of poor communication skills grows unabated in India" (Clement A and T Murugravel,2015).

Students should be trained to articulate their ideas thoughts and feelings clearly and confidently, hence proper exposure to real life language use becomes imperative. The teacher should be able to provide a good learning environment for the students so that interaction is encouraged and learning takes place through meaningful contexts. In a language classroom, teachers build up an authentic environment for social interaction among learners (Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Long & Porter, 1985). Thus, a classroom should be turned into a workshop

where importance to skills development is given. Teaching in isolation through exercises and worksheets should be replaced with activities that encourage the learners to communicate freely. Activities based on real life situations should be planned by the teacher. For instance, telephone conversation, debates, group discussions, story writing etc, can help the students to interact and use the language more effectively. Thus syllabus and the materials used should be helpful in providing a real life experience to the learner in the classroom (Jack C. Richards and R.S. Rodgers, 2006). In executing such activities, the teacher has the advantage of honing more than one language skill of the students, just like it happens in real life. Thus language cannot be taught in isolation. An integrated approach to language learning can only help the students to communicate ideas without inhibition or fear as it resembles real life communication. Practice and training through the integrated approach can help students to become proficient in all four language skills. With enhanced skills set employment in reputed companies becomes easy.

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

The integrative approach is one that can give the learners a true language environment to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW) skills through a meaningful context.

Teachers of English should lay emphasis on learning language like it happens in everyday situations. This approach ensures the integration of all the four language skills. Listening and reading are called receptive skills and speaking and writing are called productive skills. An integration of receptive and productive skills is the easiest way to ensure that communication takes place in the classroom. The teacher should therefore plan the tasks that enable the students to use more than one skill.

Integrated approach can be done effectively through task based activities. The use of a variety of different kinds of tasks in language teaching is said to make language teaching more communicative … since it provides a purpose for a classroom activity which goes beyond the practice of language for its own sake. (Richards, Platt and Weber, 1986, p. 289). The teacher can use role-play simulations, telephone conversations, dialogue writing and many such activity based situations in the classroom to give the students a feel of real life environment. In task-based instruction, students participate in communicative tasks in English. Tasks are defined as activities that can stand alone as fundamental units and that requires comprehending, producing, manipulating, or interacting in authentic language while attention is principally paid to meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989). "A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can engage productive or receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes" (Nunan, 2006)

Through tasks given by the teacher, students work in teams or pairs thus encouraging team work and this calls for a great deal of interaction and collaboration among them. For instance, students participate in a skit where dialogue writing and enacting scenes, form an integral part, students work together to write and develop a review on an article in the newspaper or take part in many such joint activities. Emphasis is laid on the students' ability to use all the four language skills so as to accomplish the task. However tasks can vary depending on the levels of students' proficiency in the language and the teacher can increase the complexity for achieving higher levels of proficiency. Beginners can be given simple tasks such as introducing each other in teams sharing some important information about each other. More advanced students can be given a more intricate and detailed task such as a group presentation on current topics, for which the team has to research, edit and write a report before presenting it to the rest of the class. An integrated approach helps students to build content through real-life experience, making language more relevant and learning more meaningful. "The integrative approach is proposed to give a true language environment to learners to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW) skills in a meaningful context" (Murthy, 2015)

ADVANTAGES OF INTEGRATED APPROACH

Unlike the segregated approach where the teacher believes that each language skill should be taught separately, in isolation, integrated approach encourages the learners to have a real life experience.

Language as is spoken in natural surroundings is always integrated and this approach helps the learner to interact with others as is done in real life. In the integrated approach the classroom environment becomes less inhibited and less foreign to the learner. Integrated approach challenges the learners to communicate meaningfully, creatively and intelligently. The teacher on the other hand tries to create a natural classroom environment. The learner's progress in all the skills can be tracked by the teacher during a single activity. The task based activities motivate the students to be actively involved and participate without fear or any inhibition since the emphasis is on team work or pair work.

The ultimate goal of communication is to be able to build good relations with others and English language is the means of achieving this goal. The integrated approach lays emphasis on a collaborative learning which is the key to success. Activities such as Role plays, telephone conversations, skits, debates, group discussion, to mention a few encourages collaborative learning where the students get to learn the qualities of a good team player and help each other to finish the task at hand. Just like in real life, students get to experience challenges in accomplishing the task in the class making it more a natural way of language acquisition. This approach emphasis that English is not only for academic interest and content learning but also that it is a means of social interactions as well. Activities designed by the teacher should reflect situations that are real to everyday living, helping the students to approach life more confidently. Error correction is part of the ongoing process of teaching and learning. Peer correction can also be a way of making the whole task appear natural. This approach is therefore a more practical way of enhancing language skills of the students.

ELEMENTS OF INTEGRATED APPROACH

Some of the elements of integrated approach are: Firstly language skills like listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing should be taught concurrently and not separately (Cooper 1993). Hence teacher can integrate listening with speaking and reading with writing so that learners can benefit from tasks that focus on such integration of skills, for example, taking instructions from a telephone conversation and noting it down. Forming teams and scripting a skit can be a few examples of integrating speaking and writing skills activities for the class. Secondly, the textbook can also be a tool for training students to aquire good language skills. The students' previous knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and structures can be put to proper use during the execution of the task. This shows that content learning can also be taught through language skills and not just as a subject. Integrated approach makes learning more relevant and learning more meaningful as it makes the learner involve in thinking process by focusing on prior knowledge. Making content available for English language learners has several advantages. Language used in the content areas helps students to discover, organize, retrieve and elaborate upon what they are learning (Vacca, 2000). Integrated approach can fulfil to a large extent the different levels of the learning pyramid in 'blooms taxonomy'- which is a benchmark for developing tests and assessments. The tests that the student takes should systematically asses the teaching learning process from the lower degree like remembering, understanding and applying to the higher degree such as analysing, evaluating and creating.

In the integrated approach, emphasis is given to practical exposure to the language use than merely teaching it as a subject. The rationale behind using this approach is to make the students realize that the elements of language learnt in the classroom have a relation with the real life communication that the student ought to perform every day.

Thirdly the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator and a trainer of the language. Tasks should be properly designed and carefully executed so as to accomplish the purpose of equipping students with good language skills. For instance the teacher sets the ground for group discussion as an activity to be carried out by the students. Initially the teacher gives instructions and the students carefully listen to all the details. The students form teams and note down important points related to the topic, students are allowed to surf the internet to find facts and ideas. This is the preparation time. In the actual formal group discussion each student interacts with each other, so as to express their points and add to the discussion. While the group discussion is in progress, the teacher makes note of all the errors made by the students. After 20 minutes the teacher asks the team

to conclude the discussion and gives feedback on each of the student's performance. This way all the four skills are integrated through a task. Finally error correction is part of learning; students learn from peers while interacting with them in the course of the task. Teacher's feedback at the end of every task helps students to improve further.

An effective use of the language laboratory can help in making the learning process more interesting to the students. "The use of language laboratory gained ground rapidly in the United Kingdom in 1960. Language laboratory affords opportunity for the students to hear the language spoken and to practice speaking the language themselves with correct in intonation, pronunciation, accent and fluency. The Language Laboratory sessions also include word games, quizzes, extemporary speaking, debates, skits etc." (Mercy, 2016). Sufficient drills of the sounds and structure of the language in laboratory where audio visuals are used is given to improve the pronunciation of the learners. Thus the learner is given a wide variety of activities to improve and enhance their skills in language learning.

CONCLUSION

English language can be learnt and taught well if integrated approach is followed in classroom teaching- learning process. Integration of language skills is an effective way of helping the learner communicate properly and with confidence as the student experiences a real –life situation while participating in tasks in the classroom. Through this approach the teaching learning process is made more meaningful and purposeful. The classrooms are turned into workshops for students to carryout tasks that bear a resemblance to everyday living. This approach not only makes it possible to bring out multiple skills of the learners but also motivates them to actively participate in the class.

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