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Necessity to Develop Employability Skills among Engineering Students through English Communication

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Abstract:

English is the lingua-franca of the present business world irrespective of social, educational or religious differences. NSDC (National Skills Development Corporation) research survey indicated gaps both in workplace skills as well as soft skills, with English being the most essential skill that complements core domain skills.¹ The Government of India study, National Employability Report-Graduates 2013, conducted by *Aspiring Minds*, a company involved in assessing various aspects of education, training and employment, revealed that nearly half of the Indian graduates are not adequately competent to be hired.² 47 % of graduated were found unemployable keeping in mind their English language communication competence and cognitive skills. Many policy-making bodies opine that the ability to communicate well in English can change the recruitment and employability scenario of India's youth. This study aims to examine the English communication skills required by the engineering students studying in India in specific to Narula Institute of Technology, Agarpara, West Bengal and the gap in the teaching methodologies. My study aims to highlight that, conventional education is inadequate to cater professional demands. It is only through specific result oriented; industry specific curriculum through which students can be made industry ready.

Keywords: Employability, English language skills, Communication competence, Language acquisition.

English language is the current language of international business, technology, aviation, diplomacy, banking, computing, medicines, engineering and tourism. About one fifth of people all over the world knows and can try communicating more or less in English. It is spoken by almost 2 billion people in the world and the number still on the increase. Every single university in the world is conducting scientific studies in English. Starting from radio or T.V. programs, content or address of mailing letters, emails, websites, medical prescriptions are written in English. English plays an important role in the world. Most people in the world agree with what Alexander V. Sandoval claims in his essay, 'The Importance of English' on www.eagleforum.com, "English is becoming the world's language of the 21st century. Most of the world's population, about 70% speak English or know it .And more than 80% of all stored

information in the world is written in English or translated into it. Foreign language skills, and in particular the English are a good tool in work, school, on vacation, when building a career or promote your own business. The man who speaks fluent in English, will not get lost in the world where there are people.” Proficiency in English is now a mandatory prerequisite in improving job prospects. Irrespective of the number of degrees and postgraduate degrees one might have, technical qualifications, industry experience etc, not being able to communicate effectively in English is perhaps the greatest barrier to career growth.

This impact of widening English use consequently finds itself filtering through all sectors of society. From the executive at the airline check-in desk to the person serving at the food court billing counters, being able to make one understood and being able to understand others in English is an essential competency of the job. In dialogue with students joining a language speaking course, ‘I need to improve my English to get a good job’ and ‘I won’t get a promotion unless my English gets better’, are often honestly articulated. Be it a chauffeur, a hairdresser, a bell boy or a waiter, salutations and courtesies in English are considered so essential that often a minimum skill in the language is non-negotiable with recruiters. To reiterate the words of Adesh, a small-time computer repair person "I am ready to enroll into a language school and learn English so that I can secure a better job," he says. "You are finished if you cannot speak in English”. English doesn't just get you a job. Growth prospects multiply with this increasingly important tool.

In other words, employability is a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all should possess in order to ensure they fit into the workplace. A look at the online sources says that ‘employability’ is known differently across the world, as shown in the table below:

Country	Term
United Kingdom	Core skills, key skills, common skills
United States	Basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know-how
Canada	Employability skills
Germany	Key qualifications
France	Transferable skills
Australia	Key competencies, employability skills, generic skills
New Zealand	Essential skills
Singapore	Critical enabling skills
Switzerland	Trans-disciplinary skills
Denmark	Process-independent qualifications

Study so far reveals that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills; only 25% is dependent on technical knowledge (Klaus, 2010). This shows that three quarters of an employee's success depends on non-technical skills. On similar lines, Wilhelm (2004) says that employers are increasingly looking for employees who are mature and socially well adjusted, and they rate soft skills as number one in importance for entry-level success on the job. Whether it is entry level or mid-level, it is a truism that transferable skills play a vital role in career success. According to Watts and Watts (2008), hard skills contribute only 15% to one's success whereas 85% of success is due to soft skills. Bronson (2007) views hard skills as specific, teachable abilities that can be defined and measured. By contrast, soft skills are less tangible and harder to quantify.

English has been an integral part of Indian curriculum for decades and it plays a major role in finding job placements in renowned organizations. Engineering is the biggest field of study in the world. First of all English is a tool that significantly affects engineering students in their academic life. While most of the theories in engineering are taught in English, it requires having good English communication competence. In academic life, engineering students have to deal with the countless English lectures, tutorials, labs, project reports and papers. The most convenient source of information i.e. Internet provides most of the information in English. During the job seeking process in interviews, GD's, it is but of crucial importance to achieve mastery in English proficiency. After securing the job they are required to work in groups since their task seldom be solved by an individual. So, being an engineer requires co-operating and communicating with different people from different parts of the world. English is used as the working language on large extent. In order to co-ordinate with the colleagues, both on-site and off-site, engineers have to speak fluent English. So, English communication competence plays an important role in the academic life and career of engineering students.

The number of engineering colleges in India has increased exponentially in the last decade. According to the news article in India Today, there are 6460 colleges in India (*Wikipedia*) and hundreds of thousands of engineering students graduate every year. This increase in the number of engineering graduates has caused serious turbulence in the job market and the employability of graduates has become the core issue in educational and industry sectors. Today's job market in India is quite demanding and challenging that the engineering graduates are expected to possess employable qualities when they appear for job interviews. Candidates are expected to voice their ideas in English without any ambiguity and fear. English communication skill is one of the most important employability requirements in modern India. Unfortunately, more number of engineering graduates in India finds it a taunting task to speak or write in English with fluency and accuracy. There is now a growing need world over to enhance employability of engineers by developing their communication skills. But with students struggling to become employable despite scoring well technically, raises the question whether there is a clear understanding of the types of communication skills that the industry needs? Has there been clear identification of the types of communication skills required by engineers for increased employability? And should the

curriculum of Communication Skills be focused on language alone or should it follow an integrated approach? Studies point out that engineers lack various important skills which go beyond communication skills, like skills of decision-making, problem solving, leadership, emotional intelligence, and social ethics as well the ability to work with people from different backgrounds. Various aspects of communication skills such as oral communication skills, interpersonal skills, written communication skills, effective listening skills, and confidence level in expression of ideas to an audience have been identified as important skills. An integration of communication and adaptive skills would help Engineers learn the functional aspects of the English language better.

English is taught in the first two semesters of engineering study in most of the government and private universities in India. The primary objective of this course is to improve the communication skills of students in all the four skills (LSRW). These courses are taught by professors with M.Phil or Ph.D qualifications. Most of these professors have completed their master's degree in English literature. ESP or CLT are not familiar terms among many English professors in India as most of them were not trained in ELT methodologies. Research in ELT methodologies is a new phenomenon in India as British Council has introduced professional development programs for English teachers working in schools (Padwad & Dixit, 2011). Though there have been many conferences and workshops on new methodologies of language teaching, the reality of classrooms present a different picture due to various reasons:

- 1) Lack of training for English professors.
- 2) Students of different levels in the same class.
- 3) Number of students in each class (60 per class).
- 4) Lack of time to complete the prescribed syllabus.
- 5) More importance on written exams (traditional method in India).
- 6) Pressure on teachers to produce high pass percentage in final exams.
- 7) Lack of quality text books.
- 8) Use of workbooks that compile the exercises from previous university question papers.
- 9) Lack of support from college managements.
- 10) English being treated as yet another subject to study.
- 11) Irrelevant syllabus design.
- 12) Lack of relevant methodologies (P'Ryan, 2008).

Note: 1. LSRW: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing 2. ELT: English language Teaching

3. ESP: English For Specific Purpose. 4. CLT: Communicative Language Teaching.

The traditional methods of teaching are still followed by many English professors in engineering colleges. In most cases, English professors are under pressure to complete the recommended syllabus within three months and assessments are done by written exams at the end of the semester. This method of assessment steals the luster of learning a language with motivation and makes the sessions bland and futile. As a result, many engineering students do not make much progress in learning new skills that are required to make them employable. In many colleges, a paper called 'Communication Skills & Personality Development' has been introduced in the third year and also in fourth year and students are made to listen to English conversations in communication labs. Students are trained to participate in group discussions to share their ideas. In spite of these efforts, lack of ability to communicate in English language has been an incessant challenge for many engineering students in India.

In most of the surveys conducted among the employers, communication skill in English has been identified as one of the prime setbacks of engineering graduates of India in finding jobs. A superior knowledge of English is the need of the hour as Indian economic activities are internationalized. According to a study conducted by 'Aspiring Minds' an education, employment and training assessment company, 25% of the engineering students doesn't have English comprehension skills. 55000 engineering graduates were examined based on a Aspiring Minds Computer Aptitude Test (AMCAT) in 2011 and the key findings indicated that more than 25% engineers do not possess the English comprehension skills to understand engineering school curriculum. The findings also state that only 57% engineers can write grammatically correct sentences in English. It was also found that around 42%-45% engineers display capabilities in English required for the knowledge-based industry and lastly not more than 27% engineers show capabilities in business English (Seetha, 2012). In response to the lack of knowledge regarding the English skills needed by Indian engineering graduates for job placements, this study investigates of the suitability of the English courses and the methodology adapted by English faculty during the first year of engineering course in colleges and private universities in India. The prime objective of these courses is to improve the communication skills of students so that they will be able to face their job interviews and to participate in group discussion which is part of the recruitment process in India.

The role of English in business world is well-known and to handle international business deals English language skills play a vital role (M. Pandey & P. Pandey, 2014). Poor language skills will create a lot of confusion in business deals and hence companies in India choose candidates with higher level of proficiency in English. Besides this, majority of the scientific papers or magazines across the globe are written in English (P'Rayan, 2007). To become competent engineering graduates, students in India need to learn skills pertaining to job interviews,

presentations, group interaction, and telephone and teleconference communication. According to Riemer (2002), a global engineer must cross national and cultural borders and only English language skills can help the engineer to break those boundaries. The big question that is still not answered is whether engineering students in India are trained to upgrade their language skills that are relevant to workplace responsibilities and whether proper methodologies are followed in English sessions. This article addresses the following research questions:

- 1) Has the English course equipped the students in language skills?
- 2) Do the English professors train the students to face the challenges of industry?
- 3) How confident are the engineering students to face job interview sessions and group discussions?
- 4) Are the students happy that they are aptly trained for employability?

This study took place on-site at *Narula Institute of Technology, an Autonomous College Under the Aegis of JIS Group, Agarpara, Kolkata 700109, India*. This survey was administered only to the willing participants and 160 filled-in questionnaire forms were chosen out of the total 200 responses. The questions were designed to find out the students' learning experience and the methodologies of English language teaching and how confident they felt about the enrichment of language skills required during interviews and group discussions. The participants were from different parts of India and different cultural backgrounds. The participants spent around 10 minutes on an average. In addition, the participants were asked to write down their comments about the English course in their own words so that they would be able to express their ideas which would help this study.

Table1. Participants' demographic information (total number of participants: 160, nationality: Indians)

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age Group</u>	<u>Qualification and number of participants</u>	<u>Engineering Branches</u>	<u>States</u>
Male (85%)	18-24	B. Tech II Year (10.6) III Year (88.1%) IV Year (1.3%)	B.Tech (CSE, EE, IT, EIE)	Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal
Female (15%)	18-24			

Note: EE—Electrical Engineering, ECE— Electronics and Communication Engineering.

EIE – Electronics and Instrumentation Engineering IT—Information Technology

CSE—Computer Science Engineering

During and after completion of the surveys, the researcher interviewed around 25 engineering students to understand their learning experience and the methodologies used. A full list of interview questions is available in Appendix A.

Table 2. Responses of students about their learning experience

Questionnaire Item	Agree/Strongly agree (%)	Disagree/Strongly disagree (%)	Indecisive (%)
Learnt new language skills	39.4	45.6	15
Confident to face job interviews	17.5	58.7	23.8
Trained to participate in group discussion	50	30	20
Improved my presentation skills	29.3	43.2	27.5
Got sufficient opportunities to practice language and methodologies were student-centered.	33	40.1	26.9
LSRW skills were sharpened	37.5	38.1	24.4

Table 3. Responses about the methodologies used in the English classrooms

Questionnaire Item	Agree/Strongly agree (%)	Disagree/Strongly disagree (%)	Indecisive (%)
The methodology helped to understand real life application of English language	35.6	41.9	22.5
Workplace language skills were taught	40.6	36.2	23.8
New teaching methodologies	34.4	51.3	14.3

were used			
Authentic evaluation methods of presentation skills	30.6	45.7	23.7
Updated workplace information was shared	28.2	40	31.8
English sessions were different from engineering teaching	41.9	31.9	26.2

These findings suggested that teaching methodologies implemented needs to be transformed. When asked whether the students felt that the English course offered in first year served its purpose, 39.4% of respondents disagreed and 30% of students were indecisive.

Many students were not able to remember language activities conducted in their English classes and pointed out that most of the sessions were monotonous and mundane. Moreover, the sessions were found to be more teacher-oriented and there was less participation from students. Many students were found to be indifferent as the focus was more on filling up the answers in the recommended workbooks. This monotonous approach of reading and answering questions seemed to have stolen the enthusiasm from the learners. Moreover, the workbooks were found to be the compilation of past question papers of university exams without much content related to English for employability. This implies that engineering English should include more interactive sessions and language activities that would strengthen and sharpen communication skills of students as effective classroom interactive sessions help the learners to become effective communicators (Mateja Dagarin 2004). More specifically, the English professors need to be trained in Communicative Language Teaching and get exposed to the challenges faced by professionals in various industries. Mere changes in the syllabus will not be able to bring in desired changes unless the English teachers are motivated to enhance their teaching methodologies to bridge the gap between the college and the workplace. To create awareness about the importance of language skills in job interviews and workplace activities, the English teachers need to provide a lot of information from newspaper articles and websites. As students want to learn more about employability, it has become obligatory for the teachers to read and share facts about language proficiency required by companies. As many students feel less confident about their presentation skills, novel methods of training must be introduced in classes to boost self-confidence. Videos of great speakers and leaders along with structured training sessions will surely equip the engineering graduates to share their views effectively and convincingly. More specifically, care must be taken to encourage students with low self

confidence and colleges must arrange separate training sessions as weak students may feel inferior in front of their counterparts who are proficient in English language skills.

Table 4. Students’ suggestions for first year English course in engineering colleges and .shows the topics that are considered important by engineering students:

Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Ability to collect information	Simple Conversations, Reasoning,	Passage comprehension, Newspaper reading Short stories, Analysis	Creating documents such as letters, directions, manuals, reports, graphs, and flow charts.
Group Discussion(Listening to others)	Telephone Etiquette	Critical Reasoning exercises	CV Writing
Watching Movies	Small formal presentations, Group Discussion	Companies’ websites, HR policies	Email Writing
Listening to Audio Tracks (Accented and Neutral Accent)	Self-introduction Job Interview Skills	Interpreting charts, schedules and graphs	Filling out forms

This study examined the English language skills required by the engineering students studying in India and the gap between the teaching methodology and the harsh reality of students’ language skills. The findings pointed to the big gap between the teaching methodologies and the confidence levels of engineering students and how this scenario affects the employment opportunities of thousands of engineering students in India. In addition, the study revealed the training need for English professors to train the engineering students for employability. The findings in this study expose the necessity for meticulous professional development programs for English professors working in engineering colleges. Moreover, the teachers must work closely with the students to understand their needs and chart out an effective methodology for training them. The professors must go beyond textbooks and break the barriers of teaching process.

Appendix A. Questionnaire Survey

- 1) I learned new language skills in my first year English classes.
- 2) I feel confident to face my interview due to the English training offered to me in first year.
- 3) I was trained to participate in group discussions without inhibitions.
- 4) My presentation skills were improved due to the methodology followed in English classes.
- 5) English classes were student-centered and I got many opportunities to practice my language.
- 6) My LSRW skills were sharpened after the first year course.
- 7) My English faculty helped me understand the real life applications of English language.
- 8) My English professor taught me the language skills I require in my workplace.
- 9) My professor introduced new teaching techniques to make the sessions interesting.
- 10) Due to my professor's authentic evaluation methods, I understood my weaknesses and strengths of my presentation and group discussion skills.
- 11) My professor was able to share a lot of updated information about the workplace scenario.
- 12) English sessions were different from engineering sessions.
- 13) Course objectives were accomplished.

A curriculum that maximizes the learning of all students is one that recognizes and celebrates diversity and engages all students in intellectually challenging learning experiences. It provides students with clear guidelines on what they are learning how they will be assessed, the objective and outcome. It involves a range of teaching strategies to meet different teaching needs and explicit teaching to scaffold students' learning so that they develop and consolidate the required knowledge and skills to meet the anticipated future demands of work and citizenship. To ensure that the intended learning goals for all learners are met the essential components of planning, pedagogy, assessment and reporting need to be addressed. We recommend that all students should be provided with the opportunity and learning ambience so that they can engage with and participate in the learning English language and master competence at the appropriate grade level specified and mandated in curriculum documents. Although theoretical knowledge of engineering along with technical competency is what is sought and taught in the Faculty of Engineering, it appears that this should be coupled with communication. The importance of communication skills is also highlighted in research conducted in industry and engineering job markets, more specifically, with regard to the Employability Skills Profile (ESP). Based on the

findings of the study conducted by us it is recommended that a bench mark proficiency level should be made mandatory for students wishing to join graduate engineering courses. This will induce the students to acquire higher level of proficiency in all areas of language skills. It may be considered to select one of the band scores of IELTS or any other equivalent international English language proficiency Testing System to set it as the bench mark for entry into graduate engineering courses. Later in the college the curriculum may be designed to provide and facilitate involvement of learners more in interactive sessions in classrooms so that they are able to strengthen their communicative competence. Additionally, teaching technical and business communication should be at a much higher level than at what the English syllabi in the engineering colleges offer at present. Thus, course and curriculum designing and activities would help to achieve the goals and objectives of language study. It is also recommended that teachers are given enough opportunity for professional development so that they improve their own standard and gain knowledge on effective teaching strategies that can be implemented at classroom level in the engineering institutional context.

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