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Role of Communication Skills Laboratory in Empowering the Communicative Competence in Engineering Students

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ABSTRACT

Scientists and engineers may be technically brilliant and creative, but unless they have communicative skills, their technical skills will be unnoticed. Today's engineer has to communicate with more number of his / her counterparts across the globe and has to travel to many continents and work away from their home country. So developing communication skills has become the need of the hour. "Engineering English" has been growing its prominence everywhere and the professional students of science and technology need to acquire these skills according to the global demands of the present century. As a result many technical universities have introduced English Language Communication Skills Laboratory in its curriculum. It acts as a platform for learning, practicing and producing language skills through interactive lessons. The present paper, in this context, highlights the importance, objectives and syllabus of English communication lab. Besides, the paper expressed a few barriers and some useful recommendations to overcome these barriers also.

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INTRODUCTION

English Language Communication Skills Laboratory, a course for undergraduate engineering and technology students studying at colleges, plays a significant role in enhancing the skills of engineering students. It comprises of the four skills of learning – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in addition to their theory. The subject title is "Communication Skills", a theory subject and "Communication Skills Lab", a practical subject. The lab training is given with the assistance of Networked Computers and specially designed software.

Its Importance

An engineering student's success in the "on campus recruitment" is mainly based on their demonstrations of communication skills. An English language Communication Skills Lab (CS Lab) is a facility where a student can learn a language with the help and guidance of a teacher through a system, to improve his / her speaking and listening capacity. The Communication Skills Lab can receive inputs from recorded tapes, audios and videos, CDs, etc. The lab develops among the students a habit of listening and speaking with accurate pronunciation. Students can record their own voice and play back for self evaluation. It acts as a platform for learning, practicing and producing language skills through interactive lessons and communicative mode of teaching. Language laboratories are for drills and for listening comprehension. It is also used for consolidating the learning. Communication Skills may have the following objectives, purposes, functions to work upon.

Its Objectives

The Communication Skills Lab focuses on the production and practice of sounds of language and familiarizes the students with the use of English in everyday situations and contexts.

1. To expose the students to a variety of self-instructional, learner-friendly modes of language learning.
2. To help the students cultivate the habit of reading passages from the computer monitor, thus providing them with the required facility to face computer-based competitive exams such GRE, TOEFL, GMAT etc.,.
3. To enable them to learn better pronunciation through stress on word accent, intonation, and rhythm.
4. To train them to use language effectively to face interviews, group discussions, public speaking.

5. To initiate them into greater use of the computer in resume preparation, report writing, format-making etc.,.
6. To maintain good linguistic competence- through accuracy in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.
7. To enrich the discourse competence, to prepare the learner to be able to produce contextualized written text and speech.

The components of the course are:

- Introduction to the sounds of English-Vowels, Diphthongs and Consonants phonetic sounds
- Introduction to Stress and Intonation
- Situational Dialogues / Role Play
- Oral Presentations- Prepared and Extempore
- 'Just a minute' Sessions (JAM)
- Describing Objects/ Situations/ People
- Debates
- Telephonic Conversation
- Giving Direction

Activities in Communication Skills Lab:

The scope of activities in the language lab can be categorized into three levels

1. Individual activity
2. Pair activity
3. Group activity

1. Individual activity: Following activities can be performed by the students at individual level.

- S.D.(Self-Introduction & Description)
- JAM (Just A Minute session)
- Oral presentations-prepared and extempore
- Describing objects –persons-places etc.

2. Pair activity: Following activities can be performed by the students in pairs.

- Exchange of dialogue
- Role-play
- Telephoning conversation

3.Group activity: A number of students can participate in groups and are benefitted by the following activities:

- Debate
- Group discussion
- Seminar
- PPT (power point presentation),
- Conferences etc

Role of Communication Skills Lab in Empowering Communication Competence in Students

In the Indian context, an engineering student's success in the "on campus recruitment" is mainly based on their demonstrations of communication skills. A Communication Skills Lab (CS Lab) is a facility where a student can learn a language with the help and guidance of a teacher through a system, to improve his / her speaking and listening capacity. The Communication Skills Lab can receive inputs from recorded tapes, audios and videos, CDs, etc. A proficient teacher in the English language is the only external requirement to monitor the students during the learning process. He can divide the students into small groups to either listen or respond to the instructor's programme material or interact with each other in conversational exercises. These labs have advanced remote monitoring facility, which enables the teacher to monitor all the students through a master control.

Advantages of Communication Skills Lab:

- CS Lab enhances the listening skills of students.
- Students are attentive in the lab than in the theory class.
- CS Lab gives freedom to students to learn at their own pace.
- English Language Communication Lab builds self confidence.
- CS Lab develops the skill of presentation with power point.
- Learning stress pattern, phonetics and grammar in CS Lab is useful.
- Active participation in CS Lab results in effective spoken language.

- CS lab cultivates the habit of reading passages from the computer monitor.
- CS lab meets the employers' demand - communicative competence in English.
- Students like to devote their leisure time to carry out practical work in CS Lab
- CS Lab helps the students to acquire comprehension skills after listening to a text.
- CS Lab trains students to face interviews, group discussions and public speaking.
- Both fluent and less fluent students improve their effectiveness with the help of CS lab.
- As students are asked to work in pairs & groups, they can speak English with confidence.
- The shy learners can get more benefits as they are monitored individually by the monitor.
- CS Lab motivates the learners to read English news papers and listen to B.B.C and T.V English news.
- CS Lab motivates the language teacher to incorporate computer technology in the language teaching.
- Students can practice the sounds according to "Received pronunciation" in CS Lab.
- CS Lab trains the students in soft skills, interpersonal skills, decision making, business communication and pre-placement training.

The Role of English Language Teacher

- The first and foremost important thing that the teacher of English has to do is to help the students in overcoming their fears about communication and motivate them to develop more positive perceptions of communication activities.
- He is expected to play the roles such as – counselor, motivator, communication skills trainer etc.
- The English language teachers must also be aware of the latest technologies, methods and approaches of language teaching, explore new ideas and having a certain amount of specialization in the concerned subject.
- It is the responsibility of the teacher to drag the students' attention and concentration skills to the maximum extent and make them good listeners.
- The English language teachers can also organize mock interviews, oral presentations to motivate and sharpen the speaking skills of the learners.
- The English language teacher should encourage his students to read good material and develop their visual perception skills.
- The English language teacher should conduct writing workshops on letter, report, resume, poster and project writing and provide remedial feedback to the learners to brush up their writing skills.

Major barriers encountered by the teachers

1. Lack of well-equipped lab with listening components.
2. Lack of spoken English environment outside the lab.
3. Lack of TV, LCD, CDs, DVD and Internet.
4. Examination oriented Teaching.
5. Setting up of ELC Lab is very expensive.
6. Lack of curiosity in learning phonetics and stress pattern.
7. Lack of technical skills among the English teachers.
8. Unawareness of the current trends of ELT.
9. Lack of preference given to English.
10. Lack of special training for English Lecturers

Recommendations to overcome these barriers

1. The English teacher should be competent enough to play different roles such as an English teacher, a communication skills consultant and a soft skills trainer.
2. English teacher should help the students to cultivate the habit of reading from the computer monitor, thus providing them with the required facility to face computer –based competitive exams such GRE, TOEFL, GMT etc.
3. The management should be aware of CS lab's vision and provide well-equipped language labs with many listening components.
4. Teachers should be provided opportunities on regular basis to participate in teaching training courses, seminars and workshops.
5. English teachers who can conduct multiple classroom activities for developing communication skills like presentations, group discussions, and role-play activities are to be recruiter.

6. The external examination method is not enough to measure one's depth of knowledge because very few examiners are sincere in judging student's English proficiency while conducting university practical exam.

CONCLUSION

In the present competitive era teaching English to the Engineering and Technology students is a great challenge. Communication skills among these said students can be developed by rigorous training programmes and lots of practice work. It requires persistent efforts. Due to the unprecedented importance given to good communication skills, it has become imperative on the part of students to master them. As teachers of English, it is incumbent upon us to help students discover the astonishing power of the English language and it is our bounden duty to play a pivotal role in developing the four skills of English language among the students of Engineering and Technology. CS lab is an elevating tool in learning these important language skills through technology in the present generation. It will be more effective if CS lab is introduced from the elementary level.

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