



RESEARCH ARTICLE



NEED FOR AN INCLUSIVE ESL CURRICULUM INCORPORATING NECESSITIES, LACKS AND WANTS

S. MEENA RANI^{1*}, J. JAYACHANDRAN²

¹Research & Development Centre, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Department of English, Anna University College of Engineering, Villupuram, Tamil Nadu, India.



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ABSTRACT

Engineering graduates require a diverse set of skills to meet the challenges of the present competitive environment. Apart from Subject-specific technical knowledge, soft skills, core employability skills and communication skills are considered vital components for a sustained career development. The higher education system in India, has responded positively to the increased demand of the 21st century. Irrespective of the lack of language competence students gain admission to the engineering institutions and it becomes the responsibility of the institution to bridge the yawning gap between the limited language proficiency of the students and the increased demands of the industry. Although most engineering colleges offer courses in English language, the effectiveness of the same has been under scanner in view of the persistent and adverse comments regarding the employability skills of the engineering graduates. The situation warrants a fresh insight and impetus to focus on the English Language skills required by the industry and match it with the content and methods of teaching of the English Language teaching/training programmes. Added to this is the dire need to repair all the damages done to ESL programmes earlier and consolidate all learning that have taken place. Social, political, economical and geographical factors contribute to the lack of English language skills. The problem of number is another factor which needs to be addressed. Dealing with large classes of learners who lack minimum language proficiency is an arduous task. The task becomes even more critical with the poor quality of teaching and teachers in educational institutions.

Key words: ESL curriculum, English language proficiency, Regional medium learners, Technical Institutes, Needs analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Advancement in science and technology has penetrated into the rural areas and has created a fascination among the rural learners to pursue an engineering degree. The tales of highly paid engineering jobs lure both the parents and the students to get hold of an engineering degree at any cost. After four years of toiling and equipping themselves with technical knowledge and high aspiration when they attend the interview, their candidature is rejected for the sole reason that they lack communication skills. The dreams are shattered and the efforts made and the time spent becomes futile and the future remains bleak. The setback is irretrievable and has to negotiate for a low paid job. This is evident from the periodical reports and the latest is the National Employability Report for Engineering Graduates by Aspiring Minds. According to this report 73.63 percent engineering candidates lack English speaking and comprehension skills.

In the present scenario English is associated with employability. Proficiency in English is a prerequisite for a successful engineering career. And difficulty with the same is an important factor that impedes career prospects. Technological revolution and extreme global competition have created a demand for a higher skill level for engineering graduates. The development of linguistic proficiency in the learner is needed for the spontaneous and appropriate use of language in different situations. How well scientists and engineers present their work affects how well their ideas and designs are accepted. Companies expect engineers to possess a wide range of skills like problem solving, analytical, decision making etcetera apart from technical knowledge. The underlying factor is to develop the communication skill of the learners for which proficiency in a shared tongue is very much imperative. Communication and language skills are interdependent in nature and can be developed simultaneously through each other. As English is the de facto language of global communication, it is very much obvious that the engineering graduates are expected to possess a high level of English proficiency and also should be able to communicate effectively apart from their technical knowledge. As stated by M.J. Reimer,

"Engineers can relate the same theories of mathematics, of mechanics and technology, but the modern engineer must also be able to communicate effectively in a shared tongue."

English in India

English was imposed upon the Indians by Lord Macaulay with the sole purpose of serving the end of the British Administration in India. From being a language rooted in colonialism, it has transformed into a language of opportunity. English plays an important role in the domains of education, administration, business and political relations, judiciary, industry, etc. and is therefore a passport to social mobility, higher education, and better job opportunities (Narayanan.R, et al, 2007). In urban India, it is very common to see young person code-mixing and code-switching between English and other Indian languages.

India is a multilingual country and since people are reluctant to accept any Indian language as a common language the English is used as a link language. English is taught as a second language in the schools. The students of India can be categorized into two; one having the regional language as the medium of instruction and the other having English as the medium of instruction. Most of the students belonging to the first category are first generation learners and the environment and family background plays a vital role in success of learning process. For the rural students the English language is only at the book level. Also the proficiency level of English language, of the primary school teachers is not adequate. Standards of instruction and learning of English in rural schools are very low, reflected in the high failure rates in the matriculation stage in English and poor English communication skills of many undergraduate students. The plight of the students of many English medium schools is almost similar to that of the students learning through their mother tongue.

ESL for regional medium learners

The students who join the engineering institutes are expected to possess a certain level of English proficiency acquired through the school curriculum. But due to various factors the students fail to achieve the target in the school, especially those who learn through the regional medium. Because of various socio-economic and political reasons the regional language is being used as a medium of instruction in many schools in the rural area. Learning through mother tongue is easy, but it has its own limitations. Due importance is not given to English in the schools situated in rural areas. These students hardly get an opportunity to realize the value of the English language in this globalized era and learn the same effectively. English is not being taught

as a language, but rather as a subject, confined to the class sessions. Learners have no opportunity to practice the language outside the classroom. Even those students who had English as the medium of instruction are not able to communicate effectively in the target language. Instead of learning how to use the language, most of the time they are taught what to write in the examination and only the memory of the learners is tested. The creative use of the language is at a minimum. The students' motivation and the motivation received are only to pass the examination but not to acquire the language skills. The importance and the potential of the English language was neither emphasized by the teachers nor realized by the students. The English language remains completely alien to them.

Only a marginal number of students from elite schools in the urban areas are fluent in English. Even those school leavers of the English medium schools in the semi urban areas are not proficient enough in the English language. The higher secondary stage is the preparation for the university and a fairly high degree of proficiency is required. Irrespective of their language proficiency students get admission to the engineering colleges. School leavers who are not adequately trained in English are always at a handicap in the world of higher education that too when they choose a technical career. Proficiency in English is considered to be an important aspect of employment and the same is rarely improved by the technical English syllabus in the engineering colleges. The academic performance falls far below their innate potential. This increasing unemployment of engineers in India has been attributed to their limited communication skills and consequently, the teaching of English in engineering education has been under the scanner.

According to NASSCOM (National Association of Software and Services Company) President, Karnik, only 25 percent of technical graduates are suitable for employment in the outsourcing industry because of their lack of abilities to speak or write well in English. (Karnik, 2007 as cited in P'Rayan 2008:1). Most students are not 'industry ready' because they lack communication skills.

In view of these adverse comments and criticism regarding the inadequate English proficiency among the engineering graduates it becomes essential to examine the drawbacks of the present curriculum. The existing gap between the average language skills of the engineering graduates and the expectations of the extremely competitive industry can be bridged only by conducting an effective needs assessment. And it should be a multifaceted approach, taking into consideration the lacks (the present condition of the learners), the target (level to be achieved) and the means (the ways to achieve the target). Needs analysis is a mechanism to find the deficit of students for better material development, progress in the teaching learning process.

ESL Needs Analysis

All language learners (including those learning languages for general purposes) have unique needs and all sound language education programmes should be based on an analysis of the learners' needs. Needs analysis involves doing some kind of activities with a learner in order to find out what their learning needs are. A good understanding of learner needs can contribute to the successful course planning. The process also sometimes involves looking at the expectations and requirements of employers. Some of resources for conducting a needs analysis may include surveys and questionnaires, test scores, and interviews. The information gathered from needs analysis can be used to define the objectives of the curriculum which in turn will function as the foundation to develop the course materials.

Needs Analysis (NA) is an important means of carrying out research prior to designing and evaluating lessons/materials/syllabus and it helps draw a profile of students/course in order to determine and prioritise the needs for which students require English (L2). (Richards et al, 1992, cited in Jordan, 1997:20) The main purpose of conducting a needs analysis is, according to Gardner and Winslow (1983:76), "to produce information which, when acted upon makes courses better adapted to students' needs" and "part of the object of formal needs identification is to back up one's proposals with quantitative evidence of their importance". Furthermore, they added, "in many cases, concrete evidence of particular needs, such as these surveys produced, could be directly used as part of the course validation / approval procedure. "Needs analysis is a process of collecting and analyzing information about learners in order to set goals and contents of a language curriculum based on their needs (Kayi, 2008). The needs of the learner represent the gap between what the learners want to get out of the learning experience and his or her current state of knowledge, skill

and enthusiasm (Noessel, 2003). According to Nunan (1988), techniques and procedures for collecting information to be used in syllabus design are referred to as a needs analysis (Nunan, 1988a, p.13).

Sociolinguistic Model

Munby in 1978 developed an influential sociolinguistic model to define the content of purpose-specific language programmes. The communicative Needs Processor(CNP) , a model for needs analysis proposed by Munby, took into consideration the needs of the learners extensively and produced a list of the linguistic features of the target situation. The model comprised of communicative events (e.g. discussing everyday tasks and duties), purposive domain (e.g. educational), medium (e.g. spoken), mode (e.g. dialogue), channel of communication (e.g. face-to-face), setting of communication, main communicator/s, the person/s with whom the communicator/s communicate, dialect, attitudinal tone (e.g. informal), subject content and level of English ability required for the communication.

Munby's model was considered impractical, inflexible, complex as the model requires a large quantity of details (West, 1994). "[It] collects data about the learner rather than from the learner" (West, 1994, p. 9). McDonough (1984) observes that the procedures set out by Munby (1978) for this purpose in his communicative design, are so detailed that they seem a representation of the both explicit and comprehensive but with some limitations. According to Nunan(1988:24), Munby's approach is adequate for providing objective information for course specification" but it needs to be supplemented by subjective information about the learner. Though Munby's approach attracted lots of criticism the sociolinguistic variables remain important for effective communication.

Systemic Approach

A Systemic Approach was propounded by Richterich & Chancerel (1977) to identify foreign language needs of adult learners. The gap in the sociolinguistic approach in terms of flexibility is filled by this approach and it is more concerned towards learners. The learners are the centre of attention and their present situation (Jordan,1997) are thoroughly investigated. They suggested three sources of information for present situation analysis; the student themselves, the language teaching establishments and the institution. Also Richterich & Chancerel (1977) investigate learner needs before a course starts as well as during the course and by 'teaching establishments' such as their place of work and sponsoring bodies (Jordan, 1997). Like Munby's sociolinguistic model this approach too attracted criticism. The critics are of the view that instead of focusing on the learners, real life needs this approach over relies on the learners' perceptions of their needs. Over-reliance on learners' perceptions becomes an important issue for many learners are not clear about what they want (Long, 2005).

Learning-Centred Approach

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) recommend learning-centered approach to ESP. Unlike the other approaches which give more emphasis to language needs, learning-centered approach believes in identifying how learners learn. This approach is considered the best way to convey learners from the starting point to the target situation.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) divide the needs of the learners' into

Necessities: the type of need determined by the demands of the target situation, that is, what the learner has to know in order to function effectively.

Lacks: besides finding out the necessities, it is also important to know the existing knowledge (what the learner knows and does not know already) so that the gap between the target proficiency and the existing proficiency could be bridged.

Wants: the learners' wants and their views about the reasons why they need language should also be taken into account.

These can be discovered by a variety of means: by testing, by questioning and interviewing, by recalling previous performance, by consulting employers, teachers and others involved, by collecting data such as textbooks and manuals that the learners will have to read and analysing them, and by investigating the situations where the learners will need to use the language.

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the approach to ESP should be based on the learner's needs in their respective subject specialisation. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) further state that the teaching

of ESP has shifted from the linguistic aspects of the language to communication skills development and learning is very much aimed at specific learner's needs for mastering the language (pp. 18-19). According to Hutchinson and Waters it is very much essential to take into account the role of learners both in the design of the course and its implementation in the teaching and learning processes.

A wide range of information is gathered in needs analysis. According to Hutchinson and Waters needs are divided into target needs and learning needs. Further for the purpose of collecting data the needs are classified as present knowledge and required knowledge, and objective needs and subjective needs. , they roughly make a pair that "lacks fit into present knowledge, necessities fit into required knowledge, and wants fit into subjective needs".

Learner-Centered Approach

Berwick (1989) and Brindley (1989) have made significant contributions to needs analysis by introducing the learner-centered approach. They formulated three different aspects to identify the learners' needs: perceived vs. felt needs; product vs. process oriented interpretations; and objective vs. subjective needs. 'Perceived needs' are from the perspective of experts while 'felt needs' are from the perspective of learners (Berwick, 1989).). In the product-oriented interpretation, learners' needs are viewed as the language that learners require in target situations. In the process-oriented interpretation, the focus is on how individuals respond to their learning situation, involving affective and cognitive variables which affect learning (Brindley, 1989). Finally, objective needs are explored prior to a course, whereas subjective needs are addressed while the course is underway.

Though, the fundamentals of conducting need analysis have been propounded through various approaches by many scholars, whether these aspects are effectively considered at the outset of planning the ESL curriculum for the engineering students remains doubtful.

The Need to Address the Lacks

In recent past the ESL curriculum design for engineering discipline is more focused on enhancing the communication skills of the learners based on the industry expectation. But this effort has failed to ensure the mastery of the communication skill as evident from the adverse comments by various stake holders regarding the employability skills of the Engineering graduates especially lack of English proficiency and communication skills. Increased attention has been focused only on target situation but the target language proficiency of the students at the entry level seems to have been overlooked.

In short, there is always a wide gap in reality between the entry level proficiency (entry competence) of the first year college students of General English and the take-off point in the teaching of English at college level which invariably results in cumulative language deficit. (Benny George Samuel and Niraj Kendhe , 2013)

Needs analysis should be done prior to course design not only to determine what to accomplish and how to impart the skills but also to decide on where to begin from. Learners' proficiency should be ascertained before specifying the goals. At the outset the learners' strengths and weakness should be identified in order to frame an effective curriculum. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) point out it would be a great fault to design a course simply on the target objectives. Since the target situation alone is not a reliable indicator, they suggest that the learning situation, the learners' knowledge, skills, strategies, and motivation must also be taken into account. Also according to Nation and Macalister (2010) lacks analysis involves looking at where the learners are at the present.

The assessment of their English language competency gained during the Secondary or Higher Secondary levels would give valuable insights regarding the lacks of the learners at the entry level. And the same has to be done with students from both regional and English medium schools as they stand more or less on the same platform. As stated by John Kurrien, Director of the Centre for Learning Resources, the passing of the state exams was no indicator of actual writing ability.(as cited in David Graddol, 2010, English Next India : The future of English in India)

“English has traditionally been taught mainly in secondary schools, meaning that in some states the majority of children never attend an English lesson. Those who do are unlikely to acquire many functional skills in English.”

The lack as a challenging factor in implementing Technical English

The foremost barrier encountered in the effective implementation of the technical English syllabus is the lack of basic knowledge of English by the learners from rural background. A reasonable degree of language proficiency in English is expected to have been acquired by the time they leave the school so that higher order language skills could be promoted during higher education. Various factors like social, economical, political etcetera can be attributed for the failure of acquiring the expected level of proficiency at the school level. Language competence develops through language use. Most of the students are from government schools and they belong to service class families. More often they are first generation learners and hardly have anyone either in the family or in the surroundings to communicate with, in English. Their exposure to English is limited to the English class hours. Once they are placed in a heterogeneous background their inhibition comes to the fore and their self confidence take a beat. Heterogeneous not only mean learners with diverse proficiency level but also with mixed learning abilities, attitudes interest and cultural backgrounds. These students live in two separate worlds, at home and at the institution. And they find their worlds often conflicting with each other.

The first few months of engineering education for the students from regional medium schools are nothing short of maze. They encounter entirely different social and academic setup and find it hard to keep pace with others of better linguistic competence. Ambition and confidence gives way to inhibition and apprehension. Most of the students hardly get rid of the apprehension for first few months. The “Technical English” as theory paper is offered for the first two semesters when the students are desperately trying to cope with the new environment. Again English language is weighed down as another subject rather than a skill to be acquired.

The technical English offered for the first two semesters is not of much use for most of the vernacular medium students as they have not recovered from shock and anxiety. In most cases, learning English means rote learning of grammar rules and memorizing the textbook contents without even understanding which in no way aides them in improving their communicative competence. Whatever the little knowledge acquired in the English classes is not reinforced in the engineering subject classes as most of the subject teachers are prepared to perform their tasks only by mastering their own subject area but have not achieved competence in the use of English as the medium of instruction. Learning of English is restricted to the language classes.

The English language use for rest of the semesters is limited to memorize and reproduce the specialized subject content only for the examination purpose. The English as the language of the content material of engineering subjects and examinations being written only in English in no way improves the language skill of the learners. The importance and the potential of the English language are not realized by the students.

Communication skills laboratory conducted in the third year of the course is nothing but a ritual. Most of the learners are only passive spectators as still the English as a Foreign Language remains very much foreign to them. Oral presentation becomes recitations and group discussions turn out to be dialogue deliveries. Translating the ideas into meaningful sentences eludes them because of inadequate discourse practice. The creative and spontaneous use of the language becomes impossible because of inadequate knowledge and use of language.

The Technical English curriculum has been designed in a broader perspective. It encompasses almost all the technical institutions of Tamil Nadu. Except for very few institutions the classroom situation is either heterogeneous in nature with learners of mixed ability or with almost all the learners low in English language competence. In a heterogeneous classroom with students of different level of proficiencies, the vernacular medium students’ special needs could not be addressed. The subject content is considered too difficult by the learners from rural areas having low level of English proficiency and too dull by learners with high level of proficiency. The students can be segregated depending on their proficiency level, so that they can be placed in

groups of homogeneous language proficiency and the teachers can plan language content relevant to learners' proficiency level. As (P.Ramani, 1994) says,

"The needs at the organizational level are particularly important for relating language experiences and training to the needs of the learners. Particular organizations have particular problems, which have to be diagnosed. The problems pertaining to a rural institution will be different from the problems faced by an institution in a metropolitan city. Even in a metropolitan city, learners from the regional medium background face problems which are different from those felt by English medium learners."

Language teaching and design that do not consider particular groups of students is likely to be either inefficient or inadequate (Long, 2005).

Most vernacular medium students lack the basic knowledge of English language. This situation necessitates simultaneous training on both the rules and use of the language. According to Krashen the language acquisition takes place on both conscious and sub conscious level. The learners can learn the rules of the language consciously and acquire the language skills unconsciously by putting the language in use. As (P.Ramani, 1994) says,

"We cannot use a language unless we learn the rules and we can learn the rules only through using the language"

As envisaged by Krashen sufficient quantity of exposure is the condition for the process of acquisition to take place. And the same principle has been reinforced by Rod Ellis (1993) "Language learning, whatever way it occurs in a naturalistic or in an instructed context, takes time and laborious process" (Rod Ellis 1993 & 2008). The learners from the vernacular medium do not get enough time and exposure to master language skills.

Another major hurdle is the poor teaching techniques followed by the teachers. Undoubtedly there is a compulsion on the teachers to complete the syllabus within the stipulated time and to give good results. The teaching is done only to exhibit the students' memory rather than facilitating them to acquire the language skills. In many cases, it is observed that a student can pass the examination without having practical command over the language. The traditional way of teaching is still being in practice. The teachers are not trained adequately to cater to the special needs of ESL learners. Teaching isolated grammatical items without active engagement in communicative practice proves futile. Innovative practices are still at its infancy otherwise restricted to research purpose. Very few institutions offer special courses on communication and soft skills. But it is essential for all the engineering graduates to develop a diverse set of skills to enhance their employment opportunity through a uniform curriculum.

Suggestions

Regional medium learners face multiple challenges in engineering colleges in the initial stage because of their inadequate language skills. It becomes essential to determine, what Hutchinson and Waters (1987) call "lacks" (the condition of the learner at the entry level) of these group of regional medium learners. After assessment of the existing levels of the learners, a consolidation of, what the learners ought to have acquired during primary and secondary level, should be done during the first semester. Later the learners should be gradually trained on other vital skills such as soft skills, core employability skills and communication skills. The course could be extended from two semesters to maximum six semesters there by enabling the learners to have enough exposure to the target language. The teachers should be trained adequately by way of pre-service and in-service training programmes in order to enhance their professional competence and cater to the emerging needs of the ESL learners.

CONCLUSION

Thus there is a definite need to design an inclusive ESL curriculum incorporating, the soft skill, core employability skill and communication skill that suits the industry expectations, and match it with the content and methods of teaching of the English Language teaching/training programmes.

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