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## RESEARCH ARTICLE



### SOFT SKILLS-THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATORS

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#### ABSTRACT

In the fast-changing socio-cultural, socio-economic, educational and job-market scenario of the modern world, a growing pressure is being exerted on the students, the future employees and leaders to adapt themselves to the needs and standards of the corporate giants by enriching and arming themselves with the required skill sets viz., hard skills and soft skills. The corporate giants and industries, both private and public sector, are looking for talented generation who are ready to deliver from the day one of their joining. A display of proficiency in hard skills and versatility in soft skills is the need of the hour. If a student is found wanting in any one of these two concepts, he will be relegated to the lowest rank and cadre.

According to a recent study by the HRD, 60 % percent of our population will be at working age by 2020 whereas that of China, Japan, EU, and the USA will be around 40 %. The Indian government wishes to ensure good dosage of hard skills and soft skills so that the Indian human resource power can take control of the world. Lakhs of graduates are available, but are they suitable? This is the pertinent question. 360 0 appraisal process which includes a thorough screening on attitude, aptitude, accuracy, understanding levels, skill sets, organizational values, human values, adaptability and flexibility, is followed. Who among the teaching fraternity can shoulder this responsibility of moulding the students thus? Obviously, the onus once again rests on the shoulders of the English Language Educators to mix teaching of various soft skills with the regular teaching of English. Teachers of English, Lecturers and Professors are to ensure this right through the years of a child's 10+2+3 education process.

(Key words: industry-ready, human resource, shouldering responsibility)

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#### INTRODUCTION

LPG revolution in India set the tone for the remarkable trends right through the 1990s. This goaded the MNCs to venture into the Indian market leading to increased number of employment opportunities at every level. This, by far, led to the revolutionary changes in the recruitment process. An undeniable and unquestionable paradigm shift took place to the effect that the companies started searching for employees, who have sound technical knowledge besides possessing the skills of how to handle themselves, present themselves at work and how to relate with their co-workers and customers.

Founder of HCL and Chairman and CEO of HCL Infosystems Ltd., Ajai Chowdary says, "Indian IT industry is targeting multifold growth in exports in the next couple of years. This directly translates into an estimated demand of about 850000 IT professionals and 1.4 million ITeS-BPO personnel. Since Indian academia adds close to 3.5 million graduates and post graduates every year, on the face of it, this doesn't seem to be a major challenge. But a large number of these young professionals are not adequately equipped to face the highly competitive and very demanding corporate world. (From the foreword to the book 'The ACE of Soft Skills' written by Gopalaswamy Ramesh and Mahadevan Ramesh and published by Pearson group.)

Opportunities are also increasing in the manufacturing sector, airlines, retail stores, fast food chains, financial services, FMCG, aerospace, insurance, health care, hospitality, tourism, textiles and mobile communications etc that are thronging the Indian market. CII predicts the total requirement of workforce by 2022 at thirty crore. Man power is and will be available, but is it suitable and employable. Employment opportunities are on the rise and the demand for well-rounded personalities is on an all time high. How can a student get ready to meet this need and what role can we, as English teachers, play in it?

As teachers of English at various levels, are we game for teaching of soft skills, the DNA of success.

### THE WHAT

A 'skill' is defined as the ability to perform a task. Every human being is called upon to perform a number of routine tasks every day. Some are simple but others require special skills. A few skills are 'inborn' - but most skills have to be learnt or acquired. Skills are acquired through practice. We develop the ability to perform an activity by repeatedly making the effort to perform it.

Soft skills are skills that are oral, intangible, physical, psychological, psychosomatic, affective, socio-cultural, socio-economic and non-technical. Soft skills determine a person's ability to fit into a particular structure, such as a project team, a rock group, or a company.

At one end of the scale, there are simple motor skills such as walking or swimming, which require control of 'motor' (muscular) activity, but hardly any application of knowledge. At the other end are the cognitive or mental skills, involving complex applications of knowledge but little motor activity, such as the skills used in solving mathematical problems. In between these two are the psycho-motor skills, which require applications of knowledge as well as control of motor activity. It is to this category that the soft skills belong.

At a time when the ideology of 'Customer is the king' is ruling the roost and maintaining good relationship with the customer is the sure shot way to success, the employers are expecting a prospective employee of the 21st century to be physically fit, psychologically sound, emotionally balanced, cool in approach for handling men and matters, willing to learn, adaptable to cross-cultural environment, solve problems through creative and proactive thinking, be assertive, have corporate grooming, understand verbal communication and decipher non-verbal communication correctly and respond appropriately, communicate effectively, interact fruitfully, and be ready for contributing individually and in a team. If one possesses these qualities, one is industry-ready.

According to Gopala Swamy Ramesh and Mahadevan Ramesh, "Soft skills are skills required to succeed in one's environment. If one possesses soft skills, but he doesn't succeed, then those skills are useless. To succeed in today's – tomorrow's – competitive environment, the acquisition, cultivation and fine tuning of soft skills is highly essential. Good soft skills have roots in strong and healthy attitude, of feeling good about self, being able to relate better and be polite and assertive in approach." It only means that mere possession of soft skills will lead one nowhere. One must tactfully and successfully use them for achieving success. One should practice soft skills with integrity, humility, fidelity, good temperance, courage, patience, simplicity and modesty.

Soft skill isn't an equivalent term for EQ. It is more than that. They can also be called Life Skills, People Skills, Human Relationship Skills and everyone needs them in good measure to get a job and also to retain it; to survive in the world (Survival of the Fittest... in Soft Skills) and to market him/herself.

One can acquire soft skills right from the days of cuddling, caring, grooming to the days of schooling, college education, and peer influence through education, observation, and adaption. These skills are very much in

demand because they are associated with the management of men and matters besides managing self. (Nishitesh and Bhaskar Reddi,p.6)

In short, besides the test of IQ, EQ(Emotional Quotient), LQ(Leisure Quotient) and KQ(Knowledge Quotient), SSQ(Soft Skills Quotient) needs to be measured and tested. According to a study undertaken by the Measuring and Assessing Soft Skills Project (MASS, <http://www.mass-project.org/>), " It is important to point out that for a person to demonstrate skill in a job, function or role, s/he not only needs to master a series of conceptual (knowing), procedural (knowing how to do something (know-how)) and attitudinal (knowing how to be) knowledge, but must also, firstly, be motivated to act (wanting to do something) and secondly, be endowed with personal characteristics (cognitive skills, emotional intelligence and personality traits) and with contextual characteristics minimally appropriate and favorable to the performance to be carried out.

The modern world expects cool and competent engineers who can acquit themselves well in the workplace along with possession of hard or technical skills and latest knowledge in emerging areas. The industry wants not just sharp analytical skills, but young people with rounded personalities.

#### **A LIST OF SOFT SKILLS**

Although it is difficult to give an exhaustive list of soft skills, let us look at the following list proposed by Goeran Nieragden under four heads:

Interaction

attitude awareness

conflict handling

co-operation

diversity tolerance

(n)etiquette

interlocutor orientation

teamwork willingness

Communication

delegating skills

listening skills

presentation skills

Self-Management

compensation strategies

decision making

learning willingness

self-assessment

self-discipline

self-marketing

stress resistance

Organization

problem solving

systems thinking

troubleshooting

(Source: Goeran Nieragden, 'The Soft Skills of Business English', Article 28, September 2000)

#### **THE NECESSITY Vs THE REALITY**

The crux of the matter is there is a dearth of 'employable' engineers or other graduates in India. Qualified human resource is available but the pertinent question is about its viability and employability. This is the paradox. Let us look at the Indian context. Engineering colleges are increasing in number and the number of students graduating is increasing, but employability quotient of these engineering graduates is at its lowest. They are not yet ready to venture into the corporate field.

The Indian context presents us with many glaring problems with the present system of education. We have the rote learning method and theoretical approach as against the much needed method of spirit of enquiry and

practical exposure. Moreover, the craze for dollar dreams has left us with no choice but to embrace the system of education which aims at mastering subjects like mathematics and sciences and neglecting humanities, arts and languages which actually form the strongest base of soft skills. It may be fitting in place to remember that we have an outdated syllabus and so we need to go in for a new syllabus which helps in creating industry-institute synergy. An important note in this context is an initiative to this effect was already taken up by the Infosys (Campus Connect Programme), Wipro (Mission 10 X), CISCO (CCNA), HCL (CDC). Even various state governments have taken up these kinds of projects. Universities like Anna University, Gitam, JNTUH, JNTUK have made soft skills part of the curriculum).

At a deeper level, let us not forget the fact that students of the past didn't require special training in soft skills whereas the present generation is seriously wanting in this realm. The waning of the joint family system has added to the mire of problems of the students of this century. In the joint family system, despite the disadvantages, the kids, teenagers and adults used to live together, work together, respect one another, adjust themselves to the changing needs of the family together, reach amicable solution, and be together against all odds. Thus their character and attitudes were formed naturally and the same features would naturally suit them to the job requirements of the companies. In the nuclear families, despite the advantages, the single child or two children grows and grows but only in age and physique. Very seldom does he grow psychologically, socially, emotionally. He is lost to himself and he is lost in himself.

#### **ROLE OF ENGLISH TEACHERS AND ENGLISH TEACHER EDUCATORS**

India is a major provider of IT professionals to countries like the USA, yet most of the Indian students are known for a glaring lack of soft skills, particularly in the communications domain. As English teachers we need to attempt to reduce the yawning gap between industry requirements and the present inadequate skill levels of students and enhance their employability and job-readiness.

The first step in improving soft skills of students is to raise their awareness about the importance of soft skills and the consequences of shortcomings in this regard.

Soft skills aren't always taught, but most of the time they are caught. Hence, it is natural for the teachers of English to take upon themselves the responsibility of innovating and adopting new roles to meet the fresh challenge. Some captivating and inspiring material could be used for this purpose. An intensely interactive teaching method and a range of new materials like cartoons, stories, anecdotes of great leaders and successful people, tidbits on cricket and films, advertisements, sports commentaries, clippings from films, and newspapers would involve learners directly in the teaching-learning process. Simulation in class of a business office model would teach workplace culture effectively, takes learners closer to his life roles.

All teachers of English must equip themselves to meet the needs of the hour. The English teacher, especially, should play a crucial role to bridge the gap between the institute and the industry. Of all the teachers teaching various subjects right through 10+2+3 years of education, the English teacher should be the change he wants to see in his students. He has to walk the talk. He should stop being an instructor and transform himself into a facilitator. Traditional methods of teaching language skills should be done away with and communicative method needs to be adopted. Instead of focusing on Wren and Martin method, syntax, rote memorization of vocabulary and study of literary texts of yore as study material, they need to concentrate on improving language efficiency and soft skills by making use of real life situations as teaching materials. The traditional lecture mode would make the teachers obsolete, the sessions boring, and also impractical.

The English language teacher has to be a facilitator, not an instructor. At the end of the day, it is not the teacher who becomes more powerful. It is the students who should be empowered. Teaching 'interpersonal skills' is not about making oneself more powerful. It is about making one's students more powerful. After a lesson on communication skills, if the teacher becomes a better communicator, understands the body language better, participates in discussions better, it is of no use to the students. If the student hasn't become better after a class of one hour, it only means the English teacher has missed the bus.

The English language teachers who act as facilitators for not only language learning but also for the soft skills/ personality development programs can use either the training materials commercially available in the market, or use the multimedia to design their own modules, or even adapt some as the situation requires.

They need to understand that creating and using effective support material has a threefold advantage: in sustaining the learner interest, aiding in the learners' ability to retain and recalling the information, and, applying it to their experience. However, while using the audio visual forms, caution should be taken to avoid possible distractions that will destroy the intended learning. Using simple aids that will act as supplements to the primary message is the best approach.

The English teacher should embrace a student – centered learning. He has to treat the student as the king of the class. He has to create a congenial atmosphere for interaction and exchange of ideas. This should not be taken to mean that teachers let go of their right and duty to monitor and organize the goings-on in the classroom. Rather, their 'interventions' should be a careful, situation-adopted combination of facilitative and authoritative contributions. They must hold the balance between releasing tension, encouraging self-exploration, and providing both challenges and strategies. One needs competence and experience to do this job, but one also needs commitment, enthusiasm, patience and role-consciousness to do it well. In short, the English teacher needs soft skills; not only, but quite urgently if he would like to teach them to others.

He should try to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each learner. The teacher should present the students with real problems of real people from life. Generally, the students of engineering and science will not have exposure to real life situation. They should be allowed to analyze study, brainstorm, propose and come out with workable solutions, in teams.

Most of the Indian classrooms are heterogeneous in nature. Learning nature, speeds, styles, attitudes, intelligence levels, communication abilities are different. Different strategies may be effective for different people. English teacher needs to explore various options to address the different needs of the participants to make them interact and communicate rather than just listen to a one-way lecture.

The focus of a good and effective class should be on reducing TTT (Teacher Talking Time) and increasing STT (Student Talking Time) after doing away with the PPP (Present, Practice, and Produce) system of the past.

Students may also be encouraged to organize different events- literary or cultural or fetes or departmental club activities - on their own. The teacher can be the guide. The teacher himself in association with the students can organize individual/pair/group activities like GDs, debates, role plays, case study analysis, situational dialogues, JAM, mock interview process, mock press etc to create a simulated work environment. They can also be encouraged to write and act in skits, plays and act as the MC.

Students should be encouraged to enhance their soft skills by applying the methods like reading books on self-help and personality development which are readily available in the market, attending courses, and joining clubs or societies like debating societies, Toast Masters who are practicing Rhetoric, or scientific societies who offer presentations and discussions, to broaden their horizon,

Clippings from papers and television about acts of courage, achievement, success, pain and endurance, sensitivity to the needs of others, managing events and occasions can be used. Live examples of ordinary people achieving extraordinary success like Premalata Kumari, J. Rajasekhara Reddy, Nick Vujicic, Pratish Datta, Tukaram Omble etc., can be the right tools.

If the English teacher can keep the class informal, interesting and interactive, naturally the students will be engaged and learning will be ensued.

Sport commentaries are a good source to teach them listening skills, vocabulary, pronunciation besides nurturing of team work and sportsmanship. In India where cricket is religion and films are an obsession, the teacher can judiciously use examples from cricket and from good films. The very mention of them enhances the interest and often brings even the most reluctant learners to pay attention. However care should be taken not to overdo it.

Ancient wisdom culled from Jataka Tales, Aesop's Fables, Birbal stories, Tenali Ramalingaiah stories, Panchatantra, Sufi stories, Zen stories, stories from Chicken Soup series etc., which contain situations which lend themselves to many eternal values can be used.

Advertisements can be a good source of teaching - learning materials. Students can be encouraged to even create advertisements on their or create parodies. The spirit of creativity and language skills, sense of observation and team work will be improved.

Continuous Assessment of the student activities - individual or pair or group - needs to be encouraged. Regular monitoring and assessment may be done on the following criteria

1. Interest/attitude
2. Active participation
3. Team spirit
4. Assertiveness
5. Presentation skills
6. Communication skills
7. Problem-solving competencies

The evaluation should be carried out at three levels-SELF, PEER and naturally the Teacher, who is better equipped to judge.

The governments of various states may take up the project of sending English teachers from every school to attend coaching on interactive teaching-learning process which should be conducted by organizations like the British Council or the EFLU. These organizations are to ensure that they regularly provide good and effective Train the Trainer's programmes at economical prices so that the students or the English teachers who just started their journey in the world of teaching English language and skills can afford it.

Institutes of repute in English language education should organize conferences of this nature so that intellectual exchange of ideas takes place and the teachers of English can learn from the masters of the game on various possible techniques being followed to teach various skills in heterogeneous contexts. Skills thus learnt from the senior professionals would guide the amateurs in the right direction and this increase in knowledge would eventually help the students.

The English curriculum should be made interactive and suited to the present needs. It is important to offer interesting content to the language learners and not just dry biographies or grammar lessons about 'The cackling of geese saved Rome' or 'Little Jack Horner sat in a corner'. Instead the examples could be 'Yuvraj Singh fought cancer like a true champion' or 'Abdul Kalam, the son of a boat man, became the first citizen of India'.

Everyone who is into soft skills training will agree that soft skills training is all about enabling and empowering. This will happen when the T-L process becomes student-centered. As with the acquisition of any other skill, the key to acquiring soft skills is by way of practice, practice and more practice. This is the bottom line.

Dr Goeran Nieragden states "We (English teachers) should try to do our best in achieving the twofold targets of enablement and empowerment successfully that are vital in view of ever changing face of English, to enhance our student's linguistic competence and to prepare them to handle the extra linguistic demands-via soft skills." For reaching this target, the English teacher should empower himself with various soft skills. Then only he can contribute to empowering the student community of the 21st century.

The three M's viz., Mindset (of the English teacher) the Material (being used) and the Methodology (being followed) – should go for a transformation. An attempt in this direction by all concerned stakeholders would be graciously welcomed and appreciated by every right thinking person.

## CONCLUSION

Soft skills fulfil an important role in shaping an individual's personality by complementing his/her hard skills. However, we shouldn't over-emphasize the importance of soft skills and undermine the importance of hard skills.

Use of soft skills by people having fundamentally flawed character marked by duplicity may fail to deliver goods in the long run. The golden rule is 'to do unto others as you would have others to do unto you.'

If the student of the 21st century has to move from survival to stability, from stability to success and from success to significance, we need to understand the fact that the new elixir of life is "We are all angels with only one wing. We can all fly, but only while embracing each other and that is what soft skills are meant for." If each English teacher or lecturer or professor can help at least one student of each batch of students understand this simple fact of solidarity, simplicity and good communication, the mission of the teacher is accomplished.

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His forte is ELT, Communicative English and Soft Skills. He underwent training in Soft Skills at Infosys Campus, Hyderabad as part of Campus Connect Programme run by Infosys in collaboration with the JKC, an initiative of Govt. of AP. Presently, he is a Research Scholar in the Department of English at Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur.