

## English communication competence: Sine qua non for professional and personal development in engineering

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### Abstract

The personal and professional enrichment of an engineering student largely depend on their English communication competency. It is usually acquired during the process of learning and interaction among cross-sections of the academic world and beyond. A significant aspect that determines the academic life and prospective career of an aspiring technical student today, communicative competence largely hinges on some innate factors as well as on training. The students who want to rise to the top in their professions require outstanding communication skill which can augment their technical and professional skills that define their core competencies which must be showcased and marketed. Employers look for diverse sets of competencies suitable for specific working environment, but the requirement for communicative competence outweighs all others. Besides analytical and problem solving skills, domain expertise, research and decision making ability, managerial skills, cultural competency, assertiveness and ability to work in challenging international environment are some of the most essential qualities expected from aspiring engineers. However, students primarily focus on clearing their branch-specific papers and maintaining pass percentage in English communication skill. If students fail to visualise the broader scenario of the corporate culture and overlook the practical applications of the English communication skill, it can not only endanger their career but also stunt their growth. It is because English language is not only used as the medium of instruction in academia but it is perhaps *the* language of industry, which thrives on science and technology. Besides, passing papers in English Communication skill does not necessarily reflect the same level of competency when it comes to actual communication. Thus pragmatics governs the true essence of one's communication needs. In this context, the present paper deals with the significance of English communication competence and its successful inculcation in the minds of the budding engineers from a practical point of view. It demonstrates that the productive implementation of this skill will not only brighten their future but will also make them fit and fine to utilize their skills in campus interviews, prove their leadership skills in GDs and perform in country-wide companies and MNCs. Without a high degree of communicative competence, this paper avers, knowledge of highly sophisticated technical and/or professional skills will be useless.

**Keywords:** Communication, Core Competence, Show Cased, Marketed, Academic Life, Prospective Career

### 1. Introduction

The 21st century is arguably both an age of communication and miscommunication. The IT revolution, necessitated by globalization, liberalization and privatization (LPG) and perpetrated by them in turn, has brought technical communication to the forefront of academia and industry. In essence, it has created two worlds insofar as businesses are concerned --- the mundane world where as Wordsworth says people are busy in earning and spending and the other one --- the virtual world. Of course, these two worlds do not always remain in watertight compartments, --- they often intersect, nay overlap, each other. As such, communication has become a challenge, and hence an obsession, with the business world (read business organizations). As it links people with people, B2B, and people to organizations in all forms possible (e.g., employees, customers, vendors, governing authorities), communication has emerged to be superior to the most important factor in business, i.e., capital. That is to say, in today's post-globalized world, communication *is* the very oxygen for the birth, survival and development of any business. Against this backdrop, it can be safely adduced that business organizations do expect from all, and especially from their employees who run their show in whatsoever capacities, that

they be highly communicative. With this need, they seek to recruit persons with communicative competence that is people who have facility with the language (i.e., English) and can use it in diverse situations with ease and as per the need of the moment. As a result, it is desired that technocrats or technical professionals, who are usually good at technical skills, prove their communicative competence to bag the job that the industry offers. The academia that produces these technocrats is also supposed to have furnished them with soft skills and communicative competence. In advanced countries of the world, as much as in the developing countries, it is *a priori* that proficiency in communicative English is vital for success in getting a job, on the job and for climbing the ladder of success in the industry. In a nutshell, communicative competence is the *sine qua non* for both the academia and the industry vis-à-vis the technical profession. To be more specific, an engineering student must imbibe communicative competence to enhance his or her employability. And the challenge thrown at him or her is not how, but NOW.

### 2. Why Communication Matters

Communication is fundamental to all relationships. Poor communication is the most frequently cited cause of discontent

within organizations and it would be reasonable to expect that most employers are seeking to appoint people with good communication skills. It is no surprise, then, that people often cite “excellent communication skills” as one of their key qualities on their CV/résumé. As to why communication skills do matter for technical professionals, Thomas N. Huckin and Leslie A. Olsen, opine: “Scientists and engineers may be technically brilliant and creative, but unless they can convince co-workers, clients, and supervisors of their worth, their technical skills will be unnoticed, unappreciated, and unused. In a word, if technical people cannot communicate to others what they are doing and why it is important, it is they and their excellent technical skills that will be superfluous. From this perspective, communication skills are not just handy; they are critical tools for success, even survival, in “real world” environments” (p. 3). The success of professionals greatly depends on their ability to communicate effectively in today’s fast paced work place, and also to effect work-life balance. In the existing globalization scenario, most of the ITES (IT-enabled Services), MNCs and public and private sector jobs demand for technical professionals with reassuring communication skills is not difficult to understand.

The major challenges in today’s work place are the constant introduction or updating of technologies, team-based work, cross-cultural communication, and customer satisfaction, leave alone profit making. As a researcher asserts, people in organizations usually spend 75 percent of their daily time on communication through language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Both verbal and nonverbal communication skills are essential, not to mention the soft skills. Effective communication is an essential component for organization success, whether it is in the interpersonal intra group organization or external levels. A survey report says that out of every hundred interviews, only five qualify for recruitment. It is not that they lacked in technical skills, but they lacked in communication skills. An estimate shows that roughly 70% of Engineering graduates are unemployable and, what’s more, further 70% of the employed personnel do not complete one year on the job. The main reason undoubtedly is the lack of required level of communication skills. In general, many causes can be ascribed to such a crisis. At a gathering of vice-chancellors during the 82nd annual meeting of the Association of Indian Universities, former President of India, Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, asserted that only 25 per cent of graduating students were employable, and that students were lacking in areas such as technical knowledge, English proficiency and critical thinking. Communication skills are as important as technical qualifications for engineering students for employability. Technical competence, inter-cultural competence, effective presentational skills, persuasiveness, and negotiation skills hold the key to getting, retaining, and going up in a job. All these are, in essence, communication skills. Needless to say, industry needs professionals who are proficient in TEA (thought, expression, and action). However, the question remains: ‘Is Academics able to fulfil the demand of the Industry?’

### **3. Bridging the Gap between Industry Needs and Curriculum**

Conventional Engineering curriculum is strongly focused on the development in students of technical knowledge and skills. However, in recent years, employers have increasingly acknowledged that this traditional preparation of Engineering

students is inadequate, as graduates lack the wide range of written and spoken communication skills required to engage with members of other professional groups and with the broader community. Recognition of the important role that communicative competence plays in professional success within the engineering industry has, as a result, led to a number of institutions developing curriculum to address these needs. English is a compulsory subject for all the first-year students of Engineering and Technology in almost all colleges across India. The English curriculum in engineering includes theory subject titles like English Communication Skills, Technical English, Professional Communication, Business communication in English and practical subjects like “Communication Practice Lab”. Some technical universities in India also have introduced Communication and Interpersonal Skills for Corporate Readiness Lab to enhance the employability skills for the higher semester students. Despite this fact, ironically enough, Engineering students do not seem to be bent on improving their communication skills in English the way they are expected, notwithstanding the fact that the colleges try their level best to rise up to the expectations of the corporate sector in general and their industry partners in particular. Lack of focus on English communication skills by students broadly indicate two bottlenecks: the huge gap that exists between their communication adaptability post-school situation, and the priority they give to core engineering subjects over English for understandable reasons -- English Communication Skills suffers due to focus (?) on engineering subjects.

The present day engineering students are not giving enough importance to English language and they give prior preference to their specialized subjects. So they lack basic language skills, in particular, vocabulary, spoken skills and usage of grammar. As a result, they are unable to satisfy the interviewers in job interviews. So, there is a need to develop their language through the most scientific methods of teaching especially through the newly advanced methods of using the multimedia and the Web. The English teachers of technical institutions face different and difficult problems either academically or non-academically. The reasons are:

- (1) Lack of sufficient instructional hours,
- (2) Lack of infrastructure for Lab activities,
- (3) the mixed class, where the abilities of students vary greatly.

As we see, proficiency in English has never been a criterion for admission to engineering programs in India though it happens to be one of the most requisite qualifications for recruitment. Quite naturally, engineering graduates in India face the prospect of substantial unemployment despite high corporate demand for their services. Despite the growth in the demand of engineers, India is facing a significant level of unemployment among its engineers. We can conclude that a poor communication skill in English or absence of English language proficiency has marred the employability prospect of engineering students in India.

### **4. Diagnosing the Ailment and Effecting the Remedy**

It is, not without merit, argued that a student’s English is already shaped in the school. Most of our students come from the rural school background, where the teachers of English are not competent enough to take care of the “English needs” of their pupils, for their own “proficiency in English” is questionable. As Gokak points out that “The foundational years for the teaching of English in schools are in the hands of teachers who neither know enough English nor are familiar with the latest and far-reaching developments in the pedagogy of

English” (p.65). The students pass the secondary examination with English as a second language without getting real exposure to sound English teaching practices. As a result, even if they are able to cope with the engineering curriculum, their speaking and writing skills in English continue to remain inadequate. As pointed out by Tickoo (2004), the whole teaching-learning system could be stated to be at fault for this lack of English proficiency in our students, as they are taught by teachers who may not always be highly proficient in its use. The minimum qualification prescribed for English teachers by CBSE and ICSE and the Higher Secondary Boards of different states is a Post Graduate degree in the subject concerned, in addition to a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree. However, in many public schools in Orissa, Postgraduates without B.Ed. are teaching English in Higher Secondary classes, resulting in certain negative teaching outcomes, particularly in the language teaching process. No doubt when these students enter into the engineering colleges, they do possess intelligence and necessary qualification for higher education and bright future. But, lack competency in English skills which is going to play a pivotal role. These students lack the exposure to the English communication in the family, society as well as in the colleges. As a result even the meritorious students fail to achieve success during personal interviews due to lack of communication skills, soft skills, interpersonal skills and a presentable personality. During their education lack of confidence in speaking English leads to an inferiority complex, as a result students keep themselves lonely and isolated. This is what compels the students to maintain a low profile, substantially affecting their career growth. There is much in common between the classroom performance and for-the-job performance.

Classroom contains students from different strata of the society who possess different grasping power and English communication competence. It is found that the English communication competence of the students whose parents are literate belongs to higher middle class is better than that of the students whose parents are illiterate and belong to lower middle class. The fact for this situation is the literate parents can provide more exposure to their child to English as they are aware of the importance of English competence. They consult the teacher about their progress and guide them at home to perform better. In fact it never happens with the second group as they lack parental supervision and guidance. The other important factor that affects English learning is lack of skilful teachers. Most of the teachers at all the learning levels are untrained and are not exposed to the current trends and advanced techniques of English Language teaching. The condition is same with the regional medium as well as the English medium schools in rural or semi urban areas. Again English teaching and learning process is much exam result oriented which tests the memory power alone. Even the parents are craving for the marks than skills or knowledge. So, teachers stress on students to remember by heart, as a result, they find it very tiresome. This fright remains in the mind till higher education because of lack of proper guidance. Again these exam oriented students give prior importance to their technical subjects than to the communication competence.

### 5. Global Needs and Local Kids

The importance of technical communication for an individual of an organization cannot be overemphasized. The whole world has become a global market and the transfer of technical information is playing a key role in economic growth and

transformation. Revolution in information technology has a profound impact on technical communication acquiring these skills are a challenge in the changed technological environment. These skills include ability to understand and explain complex technical information in a simple and familiar style, ability to understand and explain quantitative data, cultural awareness, capability, and ability to analyze and priorities information. Whether you are an executive working in a MNC, an engineer working at the shop floor level, a scientist working in a premier scientific lab, or a technical student of a professional institution, you need effective technical communication skills in order to be successful. As the professional world becomes more diverse, competitive, and result-oriented, the importance of technical communication skills continues to increase. The changes that have taken place in the field of science and technology reflect several developments in the way technical communication skills are viewed. In fact, there has been a shift in perspective, so that communication skills take priority over technical and professional skills. There is no doubt that good writing and speaking skills are essential to job success. It is also true that some technical skills are as important as communication skills but knowledge of technical or professional skills will be useless if one does not know how to communicate the information and elicit that result from the use and application of these technical and professional skills.

The need of acquisition of good communication skills is international in nature. Therefore, the present English course in engineering syllabus needs to develop a set of generic skills along with technical skills forming the part of graduating engineers’ academic and professional development (Bottino, p. 553). Engineering students need not only linguistic competence in English, but also certain life skills and technical skills related to language learning that need to be included into the syllabus to handle real-life situations on completion of their engineering course. One of the important goals of the English syllabus in engineering is to equip the students with proper communication skills for effective usage in everyday situations and also to manage future workplace situations. The students are expected to be exposed to workplace situations, at least through simulations if not in real terms and get initiated into the corporate culture. Assessment of the students with regard to their schooling background, previous language competency, language learning capability etc. should be taken up before the beginning of the course to facilitate extra attention to the students who are poor in English. Students cannot dispense with English language skills even though they acquire subject expertise. The basic language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing should be practiced in classrooms and teachers have to provide personal attention in developing these skills in a systematic way. This can be attempted in the lab classes where time constraints do not stand in the way. Therefore, appropriate measures should be taken to conduct soft-skills training for personality development, training in interview-skills, intra and interpersonal communication in lab classes. This would help them to develop their self-esteem and attend job interviews and communication tasks related to project training. English teachers can take the lead to provide these training. “The teachers should learn to be facilitators, not instructors and help learners take responsibility for their own learning.” (Larsen and Freeman, p.53). English classes should include interesting tasks that involve technology related activities like emails, chats, online discussions, power point presentations, video conferencing, and use of internet.

## 6. Communicate or Die

English proficiency is recognized as the important element in the academic life and career of the engineering students. It requires use of integrated methods to facilitate advanced communication skills, which is the demand of industry as well as society. English syllabus includes tasks that reinforce the achievement of generic skills/life skills like leadership skills, teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities along with effective communication skills. To develop professional competence the awareness of social and cultural aspects related to the engineers' workplace can be exercised in the classroom by selecting authentic materials. The teachers of English can take the lead in organizing such interactive sessions and work on it successfully in follow-up sessions. Such exercises are useful to strengthen the communicative competence of students. When they face real life situations in future, they would be able to handle it with ease. If the students are provided facilities and guidance in developing technical English skills with proper orientation and practice they can develop a broad perspective to face future workplace needs. Exposure to corporate culture, interaction with experts from business and industry, management experts, academicians specializing in various fields, scientists and technologists can empower engineering students to be better communicators in their workplaces. The teachers of English can take the lead in organizing such interactive sessions and work on it successfully and conduct follow-up sessions if necessary.

## 7. Conclusion

To conclude, engineering students have no option left but to develop their communicative competence, proficiency in English language skills, and they should do so from the very start of their career. Engineering colleges should provide English language training to the students in a versatile manner, not in one size fits all manner. In other words, the threshold level of students vis-à-vis their English standard should be assessed just after their admission to the first year programme. Parameters should be set and each student needs to be assessed in English communication skill. Remedial classes should be provided to the students on the basis of their needs. The English Communication Skills Lab should be equipped with all the required logistics support to carry out GD and PI, English pronunciation drills, Soft skills games, etc. Software relating to corporate etiquettes, communication, documentation, presentations, and interview sessions should be made available in the language laboratories and students should be able to access it in their own time. Group discussions on different facets of corporate culture, current affairs, technical topics, debates, elocutions, extempore talks relating to corporate/business topics, slogan/poster writing competitions, write ups for commercial advertisements, simulated Board Meetings etc. can be organized by students so that they will be in touch with corporate environment. Of course, care should be taken for need-based training as the mixed-ability classes create problems in fast learning. The stakeholders – the college management, the T&P cell, teachers of English, and most importantly the students – must work in tandem to fulfil the industry need through academics, facilitated by industry-academia interface. Obviously, it has to begin with the goal to develop the communicative competence of the engineering students for a lucrative job anywhere in the world.

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