



Revisiting Communication Skills in English Courses in HEIs

Dr. Lakshmi Muthukumar

Head, Department of English,
SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce,
Sion West, Mumbai – 22
Email: lakshmim@sies.edu.in

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to defend a stand that the language courses that are designed need to change their investment oriented approach and this should be replaced with a reinforcement approach closer to the last two years of the graduation programme. This will ensure that maximum motivation is generated by a revision of items such as vocabulary building, knowledge of collocations, homonyms, homophones, grammar, editing and awareness of first language or mother tongue interference. This hypothesis will be tested with empirical proof arrived at through a survey taken from a sample size of 143 students, the stakeholders concerned, whose opinion is what really matters

Keywords: communication skills in English, competence, measurable learner outcomes, investment and reinforcement

Introduction:

This paper is the outcome of some pertinent questions that have agitated me as a teacher of English. How can we empower learners with effective English without alienating indigenous languages and cultures, without disempowering those who fail to master mere tools required to use English competently? Is the National Education Policy really a solution to the age-old problems rankling teachers across the nation or is it going to compound the problem further? Should we really adopt a frog-in-the-well approach with regard to English at this juncture and focus on regional languages instead of ensuring measurable learner outcomes with regard to empowering our learners with effective communication skills in English? These are questions that deserve to be asked even if we do not have concrete answers at this juncture.

One is part of the system and as an insider have witnessed several conferences that have had academicians, research scholars and administrators from various parts of the globe debating on multiculturalism, linguism and anti-globalization. The learner of the future, whose fate was going to hang in balance, meanwhile, has to deal with a situation where English had to be mastered by hook or by crook as the language in which all business was to be transacted in the corporate world within India and abroad. Anti-globalization activists can cry themselves hoarse but English is clearly here to stay. Predicting an apocalypse where English is concerned is a non-pragmatic approach that will do more harm than good.

The recommendations in the draft of the National Education Policy (DNEP) for 2019 evidenced a “fixation with “investing” in the child’s future” (Suresh 2019) which does



not augur well for the future of Communication Skills in English courses and the manner in which these courses are going to be taught and tested in the country. There is an urgent need to change the approach towards courses that equip the learners with Communication Skills in English. The National Language Policy that has been adopted for the past seven decades after India's independence has consistently taken an "investment tone" (Rampal 2019). The NEP guidelines approved in July 2020 by the Union Cabinet raises the importance of mother tongue and regional languages. It suggests that the medium of instruction until class 5 and preferably beyond should be in these languages. Sanskrit and foreign languages will also be given emphasis. The policy also states that no language will be imposed on the students. Shortly after the release of the policy, the government clarified that the language policy in NEP is a broad *guideline*; and that it was up to the states, institutions and schools to decide the implementation.

Most of the English courses whose syllabi have been adopted by various states of India, across various boards have been implemented with the ambitious and misplaced expectation that the learner will retain everything that is taught from the primary level to the first year of his undergraduate course, spontaneously take the initiatives necessary to keep in touch with the skill sets taught during these sixteen years of their academic careers and draw on the skills invested after crossing the threshold of graduation. However, this rarely happens. During the last four semesters of the undergraduate course the learner requires reinforcement of the items that have been taught.

Reality checks on English teachers appointed in institutions reveal a bitter truth. Most aided colleges that house Junior Colleges (Eleventh and Twelfth Standards that are not part of a school) and offer undergraduate Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Commerce programmes, employ teachers who seem to have all the necessary paper qualifications but hardly any fluency over the tongue that they are paid to teach. In fact, most Bachelor of Science programmes affiliated to the University of Mumbai, do not even offer a course in Communication Skills in English as if students graduating in the Biological Sciences or Computer Science will not need these skills. The results of a survey conducted in an aided college in the city of Mumbai, bear testimony to this. The survey also reveals that most of the students themselves come from vernacular medium schools and therefore, when they enter Junior College, they are completely clueless and find themselves at sea in the classroom. What worsens this bleak scenario is the State Government policy towards teaching posts in the Open Category which are being denied No Objection Certificates.

While one is all for making the playing field equal, the resulting classroom dynamic is alarming. It is a combination of an inarticulate, diffident learner with a teacher who lacks the necessary proficiency to teach the subject. The outcome is disastrous. Consistent revision and practice are the need of the hour. Instead of empowering the learner with such reinforcement, the way the programme is structured leaves them to their fate during the final four semesters of their undergraduate courses leading to poor confidence levels and mediocrity with specific reference to Communication Skills in English. The last two undergraduate years are crucial because this is when the learner



needs to be in touch with the English language by consistently practising speaking, listening, reading and writing effectively in English. This will facilitate a good performance during the screening and interview process that often includes group discussions or panel interviews before the learner moves on to higher studies or seeks employment.

Strangely, instead of focusing on the reinforcement of these skill sets closer to the year/s when these learners actually become employable, what we have in place is a pattern that does nothing to ensure that learners, on the brink of their graduation year, get opportunities to reinforce these extremely relevant skill sets that they will need in order to either pursue higher studies or become employable. The usual run of the mill Communication Skills in English courses are thus often skewed. This results in thousands of graduates floating around who are unemployable. They fail to make the grade at the very first level of the screening process on account of poor grades which are steadily declining, as the medium of instruction, teaching and testing, in most programmes, is English. Graduates with good grades are also unable to perform confidently at interviews and group discussions for the simple reason that their listening and speaking skills have rarely been tested during their academic career.

Reality checks for teachers of Communication Skills in English (for BA programmes) and Business Communication or BC (For BCom Programmes) reveal that more than 80 percent of the class is unable to use English with confidence. Learners are not in a position to produce error free work when it comes to English vocabulary, grammar, spelling and pronunciation. Thus, even after sixteen years of having been taught the language formally, learners in their first year of the Bachelor of Arts Programme for example, are not equipped to tackle an interview or group discussion with confidence. Their performance is abysmally poor in tests which focus on their speaking, listening, reading and writing abilities.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To urge syllabus designing committees to facilitate a dialogue with language teachers across schools, colleges and higher education institutes.
2. To ensure that the English curricula that is revised will not remain an effort at tokenism that gambles with the destiny of an entire generation.
3. To exercise self-reflexivity with specific reference to communication skills in English courses.
4. To infer from the feedback given by the learners of such courses.

Research Objective and Methodology:

The objective of this paper is to defend a stand that the language courses that are designed need to change their investment oriented approach and this should be replaced with a reinforcement approach closer to the last two years of the graduation programme. This will ensure that maximum motivation is generated by a revision of items such as vocabulary building, knowledge of collocations, homonyms, homophones, grammar, editing and awareness of first language or mother tongue interference. This hypothesis will be tested with empirical proof arrived at through a



survey taken from a sample size of 143 students, the stakeholders concerned, whose opinion is what really matters.

The hypothesis that this paper proposes to defend is that the Communication Skills in English course has to be reinforced, taught and tested during the all six semesters of every undergraduate programme (BA/BCom/BSc/BMM/BMS/BAF etc.) in a graded fashion ensuring that the skills relevant to English pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading and writing are revised, reinforced and tested by giving them enough opportunities to practice these within the language classroom.

The success of such an approach is automatically assured by the urgency felt by the motivated learners to polish these skills that they are going to require for higher studies and employment. The learner outcomes will definitely be better than they were in school and in junior college because the motivation levels are naturally, and logically high. They will be more attentive and focused in class. The language classroom will become far more dynamic, powered by the determination in the learners who will make every attempt to succeed by involving themselves in the learning process actively because they are aware that whatever the professional career they may choose; English will be the medium of communication. The primary problem that is faced because of the investment tone being adopted in the language courses that are designed with specific reference to English, is that, there is a major time lag between when the learners are taught Communication Skills in English passively and when they end up actually using them in a productive manner. In order to find out what the stakeholders, the learners themselves think regarding their confidence levels with reference to Communication Skills in English, a survey was carried out using a Google form. The questionnaire that was administered to undergraduate students and alumni of a city college along with the findings after applying normal approximation are given below:

Table 1

Question	\hat{p} , (proportion of students who said yes)	se(\hat{p})	95% confidence interval for P	
			Lower confidence limit	Upper confidence limit
1. Have you studied English in the classroom?	0.918	0.023	0.874	0.963
2. Do you think being fluent in English is important in today's world?	0.925	0.022	0.883	0.968
3. If yes, do you think it should be made compulsory for all six semesters of an undergraduate course? (BA/BCom/BSc/BMM/BMS)	0.714	0.037	0.641	0.787



4. Do you/did you attend the Communication Skills in English/Business Communication/Effective Communication in English lectures during your graduation?	0.857	0.029	0.801	0.914
5. Have you been able to use what you have learnt in these lectures, in the real world?	0.789	0.034	0.723	0.855
6. Do you get sufficient opportunities to speak English in the classroom?	0.701	0.038	0.627	0.775
7. Given a choice, would you prefer to speak in English over another regional language?	0.68	0.038	0.605	0.756
8. As an ex-student, do you think a three year course in spoken English would have helped you more after graduation?	0.432	0.053	0.328	0.535
9. Do some people in your class speak better English than you?	0.878	0.027	0.825	0.931
10. If yes, does this reduce your willingness to participate or ask doubts?	0.327	0.039	0.251	0.402
11. Are you really keen to speak better English?	0.878	0.027	0.825	0.931
12. Do you think the Compulsory English course can be improved?	0.878	0.027	0.825	0.931
13. If a spoken English course is made compulsory for six semesters, would you actively try to participate in the classroom?	0.857	0.029	0.801	0.914

The null hypothesis taken into consideration was as follows:

H₀: The two attributes A and B **are** independent variables;

versus the alternate hypothesis:

H₁: The two attributes are **not** independent variables.

In order to facilitate this, the data on A: “Do you/did you attend the Communication Skills in English/Business Communication/Effective Communication in English lectures during your graduation?” was considered and the data on B: “If a spoken English course is made compulsory for six semesters, would you actively try to participate in the classroom?” was also considered. Table 2 given below shows the result after applying a Chi-Square test in order to determine the independence of attributes:

**Table 2**

	B		
A	Yes	No	Total
Yes	115	10	125
No	11	6	17
Total	126	16	142

Result of Statistically Analysed Data:

A Chi-square test was applied to test the null hypothesis: H₀: The two attributes A and B are independent variables versus the alternative: H₁: The two attributes are **not** independent variables, and that yielded $\chi^2 = 11.1505$, with a p-value of 0.0008. Since the p-value < 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis and conclude at 5% level of significance that A and B are not independent. This suggests that students who attended the Communication Skills in English lectures during the first year of the course want to learn it over 3 years. A point worth noting is that 11 out of 17 i.e. 64.7% of the learners who never attended lectures want it to be taught over six semesters.

Another point that is worthy of consideration is the learners' attitude toward the Communication Skills in English course in the initial two semesters of the undergraduate programme. In India, generally, students take their first year of under graduation lightly after the grind that the Standard XII public exam makes them undergo. Such a phenomenon casts a cloud over two academic years that occupy a strange in-the-cusp zone viz. the eleventh grade that follows the rigorous Standard X public exam and the first year of the undergraduate course. Learners usually take these years very lightly and decide to take things easy before the going gets tough for them again, little realizing that in the process, several foundational skill sets have been missed out by them during these years. Such students will profit if the lessons are spread over six semesters.

Another interesting revelation comes from the question:

On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the highest, how fluent would you say you are in English?

Table 3

\bar{X}	SE(\bar{X})	95% Lower confidence limit	95% Upper Confidence limit
3.497	0.066	3.366	3.627

On a 5- point scale the average rank = 3.497 with 95% confidence limits as indicated in table 3, suggests an urgent need to strengthen Communication Skills in English.

The figures provided with regard to question 10 in Table 1, show that almost 32.7% of the learners are reluctant to ask questions to clear doubts in class as they feel that others in the class are better than them. This clearly calls for having smaller batches of homogenous groups in the form of tutorials to create an environment for students to pose doubts without fear of being ridiculed or compared.

Conclusions:

The statistical analysis of the data from the survey proves the hypothesis that the learners are interested in learning English with a better teacher-student ratio, that they



want to become more fluent in their Communication Skills in English and that they are looking for improvements in the way Communication Skills in English courses are taught.

What if status quo continues? Is there nothing higher education institutions can do? Even if central and state governments do not allow aided institutions to recruit more teachers of English or make the student teacher ratio ideal in the English classroom, nothing can stop institutions from introducing value added courses that start at the entry level (the eleventh grade or the first year of the undergraduate programme) and end at the exit level (the sixth semester in the third year of the undergraduate programme). As the student is still in the college pursuing graduation in some stream or the other, this will not only ensure that the learner is motivated to register for such a focused value added course and be accountable for it, but will also ensure that the teacher-student ratio is maintained. Institutions that do design such value added courses should statistically document how many such batches they run in a year (batch size should ideally be 15) in order to determine the demand for such courses in future. If the institution already has a language laboratory with the requisite software, these courses can be run there systematically. College managements will only have to ensure that such labs are manned by administrative staff with a graduation in the Humanities and the requisite technical knowledge.

Heads of institutions and course designers need to understand that there is a real need to introduce items in small parcels spread across six semesters, under units such as vocabulary building, grammar, emailing, summarizing, effective listening, effective pronunciation and speaking, common errors and how to correct them as well as writing academic essays and reports. That way, every item and skill could be taught and tested, thus empowering the learners with the necessary practice and confidence in using the language. While each unit need not become a Holy Cow to be revered and paid obeisance to, each unit would be mastered objectively as relevant tools that become the deciding factor for one's employability within the country and outside it.

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