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An Analysis of Teachers Perspective of English Language Teaching in Engineering Education: A Study with Special Reference to Engineering Colleges of Odisha, India

Dr. Priya S.

Assistant Professor, Govt. College of Engineering Kalahandi, Odisha, India

Abstract:

For many decades teaching English, whether for beginners or for advanced learner in a non native context, has been a challenging pursuit for the teachers of English. The situation is not different in Odisha, India. This ethnographic study revolves around English language learning methodologies as implemented in different regions of the state under Biju Patnaik University of Technology of Odisha, India. The perspectives of 62 teachers of 20 engineering colleges were taken into consideration. The tools used for data collection (both qualitative and quantitative) comprise questionnaire survey among teachers. The views mentioned by the teachers on the three variables (a) syllabus design (b) students academic needs (c) teachers professional development shows that the existing syllabi, teaching resources, methodology of teaching and assessment mechanism followed in most colleges do not help skills acquisition in mixed-ability classrooms in engineering colleges of Orissa. Quantitative expansion of private engineering colleges in a short span of time raises doubts in certain quarters about the quality of education, particularly in relation to the acquisition of English language competency imparted in these institutes. The viewpoints of the teachers are taken into account to find out the advantages and disadvantages of the English syllabus followed. This study, thus aims at devising effective teaching methodologies for resource building by assessing the needs of English language learners of engineering colleges.

1. Introduction

Engineers use the latest communication techniques for both informal and formal communication and hence engineering students need to be exposed to these kinds of communication channels. It is during the formative years of their graduate program that they have to attain it. Whatever be their level of language skills at the point of entry, it is the duty of the teachers and the administration to devise ways and means to enhance their competency so that they are not handicapped in real life situations in future. Long (2005) focus on the importance of English for Specific Course (ESP):

Instead of a one-size-fits-for-all approach, it is more defensible to view every course as involving specific purpose, the difference in each case being simply the precision with which it is possible to identify current or future uses of the L2. It varies from little or no precision in the case of most young children, to great precision in that of most adult learners.

When it comes to the task of imparting the four skills of language – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing – this challenge becomes more enormous. However, if we browse through the studies made on these four language skills, we find that listening skill acquisition has been the most neglected area, due to the misconception fostered by many of us that this skill is imbibed with mental maturity. We take this language skill for granted under the assumption that without any conscious efforts, listening can be acquired in a natural way just as a child acquires its mother tongue. But are our learners listening to English in a natural environment? If not, practicing this skill is the only alternative.

The acquisition of speaking habit in the classroom situation is far from satisfactory in the existing situation in the engineering colleges of Orissa. In the large theory classes where lecturing method is still followed, there is little scope to impart practice in speaking. In the practical classes this can be attempted. But in the absence of well-equipped laboratories and logistics like movable chairs, individual headphones, relevant software and computer systems, group activities, the acquisition of speaking habit remains elusive. Here the teacher-centric instruction without regular practice, cannot achieve the desired level. Most of the teachers have neither acquired Standard English pronunciation themselves nor are able to acquire it with the help of modern technology. They need to be provided with adequate resources and practice to impart speaking/listening practice demanded of the courses to their students. In this connection; the remarks of Bright & McGregor (1978) seem pertinent:

Skills can be achieved only through practice, which is something we cannot do for our pupils. They have got to do it for themselves, which means that the good teacher of language, even more than the teacher of other subjects, should spend a great deal of his time, listening, reading and *not talking*. Of course, he/she will have to talk quite a lot, but his pupils have got to talk and read and write very much more, under his guidance, if they are to make progress (p.4).

Reading practice can be imparted in the practical classes to some extent, but time constraints to cover the prescribed syllabus stand in its way very often. The students can only be guided to acquire this habit and the students themselves have to try it by reading interesting materials of their choice. Extensive reading of correct specimens of the language is the only way to feel the flavor of natural English as far as non-native learners are concerned.

Writing skills can be imparted properly in the practical classes provided the teacher is prepared to take extra effort to identify common mistakes in the assignments and get it corrected without de-motivating the learners. Instead of the teacher correcting the mistakes, the student himself or his peer can be prompted to correct it. Helping the students to avoid mistakes is much better than correcting it. Engineering students can be motivated to write better English, if scientific and technical topics are assigned to them. Creating interest in students to write good English will see them through in future work environments.

How far the acquisition of the four basic skills has been successful by undergraduates in engineering colleges of Odisha who undergo the course prescribed in the prevailing system of teaching and learning English, remains the objective of the study.

2. Literature Review

English is the link language between two people from different cultures whose mother tongue is not English. Therefore, English communication skills give an added advantage to engineers. An ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course for engineers will enhance their ability to work in cross-cultural locations.

Dudley Evans and St. John (1998) describe English Language Teaching as a continuum that ranges from General English courses to English for Specific purposes. One of the first and most widely accepted definitions of ESP (Strevens, 1988), states that it refers to the teaching of English which meets the needs of learners, and is related to the content of particular disciplines, occupations and activities. The triangulation method of needs assessment advocated by Michael H. Long (2005) appears to be quite appropriate to assess the needs of the students. He remarks that “learners are far more active and cognitively independent participants in the acquisition process than is assumed by the erroneous belief that what you teach is what they learn, and when you teach, it is that they learn it” (Long, 2005, p.29). According to Nunan (1995) it is a fact that many learners are not interested in what the teachers teach and hence the gap between teaching and learning can be reduced if the teaching is reoriented according to the choice and interests of the learners. He argues that the teachers should find out what their students think and feel about what and how they want to learn. In the present context of examination-oriented scheme of the engineering education, there is little link between actual learning practices and its outcome.

Though needs analysis have been carried out for course design in academic as well as professional contexts on various occasions, the methodology of needs analysis has been theorized by Michael Long (2005) in an authentic way in his article ‘*Methodological issues in learners’ needs analysis*’. He argues that:

There is an urgent need for courses of all kinds to be relevant to the specific group of learners and to the society at large. In most of the needs analysis surveys in the teaching of English as a second language semi-structured interviews or questionnaires with little or no inside knowledge of the course concerned were used as tools to base the findings. The views of the respondents alone may not be authentic as it forms only one aspect of the study. Just as initial questions asked by a physician to a patient does not help him to diagnose the disease and offer treatment, the need analyst can draw conclusive proof about language needs simply by obtaining the response of the learners (p.19)

The problem with many teachers is that they think learners learn only what they teach, and take for granted that the students really learn what they teach. But very often the interest of the learners lie elsewhere and the teachers fail to fathom it.

“When students create their own sets of meaningful language rules and concepts and then test them out, they are clearly learning through a discovery /exploratory method that is very different from rote learning”. (Larsen - Freeman, 2000)

The position of English as a global language is being strengthened day by day with the advent of modern communication systems and the concept of globalization gaining ground in the recent past. Existing learning theories such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism, have been in vogue before computer and internet were in its initial phase. These theories related to the learning taking place within an individual. “Technology reorganized our lifestyles, ways of communication and ways of learning” (Topolovec, Marinovic & Pavlic, 2008, p.301). They, further, cite certain learning principles suited for the neo-millennial learners. Thus application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in language learning can motivate learners to be prepared for the digital age.

Development of Information and Communication Technologies opened up numerous possibilities and access to these technologies in the teaching and learning process has revolutionized the academic scenario especially of professional education. Traditional concepts of learning and teaching of the English language have undergone drastic changes due to the fast changing trends in Information and Communication Technologies in modern times. Neo-millennial learners need technology integrated methods of language learning in view of their interests, tastes, and learning habits to keep pace with the demands of present times. In such a scenario any advocacy of the traditional learning teaching methods may not result in fulfilling the targeted goals of the curriculum. Since language learning is a life-long learning process, it is not possible to limit it to a set of theories in practice. One may not be able to predict all future work situations and study a language to suit those requirements. But if certain life-long language skills are acquired early in life, it can well be utilized in any future situation effortlessly. Hence, it is the long-term goals, not the immediate ones, that should be aimed at when students device the learning strategy of a language.

As the profession of engineering has crossed national barriers due to globalization, multinational companies want engineers to move around the world and hence a good communication competence in both oral and written is expected of them. Moreover, as the language of international business, diplomacy, science and of professions, English has become the most widely spoken language in the world.

A study in Australia (Riemer, 2002) shows that engineers need excellent skill in communication, decision making and teamwork. Competencies in business acumen, marketing and public relations are also desired. However the academic educations provided by most universities fail to inculcate these skills in their professionals (Reimer, 2002). He further points out that 'Knowledge and technical knowhow are clearly important, but these must be presented with an excellent standard of communication skills particularly oral' (p.94). Therefore, promotion of oral skills should get due consideration in language learning process. It also sustains the interests of students and motivates them to be active participants. Moreover, it helps them immensely to cope with the future work place needs. Slimani (1992) correctly identifies that mismatch between teacher and learner occurs when the teacher teaches one thing and the learner focuses on something else. Sometimes what the learners choose and learn by themselves in a group is learned more quickly by all than what is taught by the teacher.

According to Nunan the first step towards learner-centeredness is to make the learners aware of the goals, content, learning program and the pedagogical materials. He states that there is evidence, in fact, that interest and motivation are enhanced when the purpose and rationale of instruction is made explicit to learners (Nunan, 1995, p.136)

Block (1994) remarks about the gap in the perception of the teacher and learner. Very often the learners are in the dark about the rationale for the task given to them. Though the rationale exists, it has not been spelt out to the learners. On adapting and modifying the curriculum to suit their needs, learners are capable of creating their own goals and content.

The final level is to transcend the classroom and link content to the world beyond the classroom. This has been reported not only by Nunan(1995) but also by Schmidt and Frota (1986). Then only the learners will be able to apply what they learn for practical purposes, later in life.

Students come to the class with different mindsets, not to learn what the teacher teaches. Mismatch at the learning process level is evident in such situations. Nunan (1988a) argues that the teachers should find out what their students think and feel about what and how they want to learn Nunan (1988b).

3. Methodology

This study focuses on teachers views through a questionnaire on the implementation of the syllabus and seeks suggestive measures from them. The responses were sought on a three point likert scale of leading from negative to positive i.e., never to always. The questionnaire included two sections which collected quantitative (8 items) and qualitative data (five open ended questions). The quantitative data analysis in the teachers' questionnaire is followed by qualitative data analysis. They are analysed based upon the three variables – (a).syllabus design (Items 1 and 2) (b) Students' academic needs (Item 3-6) and (c).teachers professional needs (Item 7 and 8) and how far are they are met in the language learning context. Irrelevant responses were discarded. The final results of quantitative data are interpreted in table format.The questionnaire is appended (APPENDIX-1)

The questionnaire was based on BPUT syllabus where teachers teach theory of Communicative English in the First semester, Business English in the second semester followed by Language lab activities of two/three credit course. In the second year students are to complete three credits course on Corporate Readiness lab for one semester. Some details of the theory and lab classes are mentioned for better understanding the English language patterns in engineering colleges of Odisha.

3.1. Theory Classes

- The total strength of theory classes varied from minimum of 60 to maximum of 90.
- Students mostly attended theory classes as the attendance percentage affected their grades
- Students who were serious about examinations preferred to attend theory classes' to score grades.
- Teachers preferred the lecture method in theory classes as it was difficult to conduct learner-centered activities.
- Students mentioned that at times the teachers' voice remained inaudible.
- Teachers gave attention to those students who interacted with them or posed questions.

3.2. Lab Classes

- Maximum students got a first time opportunity to attend language labs. They feel excited to do activities in pairs and groups.
- Many students are serious about the grades they score.
- Many a times the lab marks are not told to the students.
- Teachers feel time paucity to conduct ten assignments.
- Teachers seek for proper guidance to design and conduct lab activities but many a time cannot avail it due to lack of appropriate resources.
- Teachers feel the challenges of a mixed ability class

Items	Never	Sometimes	Always
1. Conducting grammar practice sessions, technical writing activities and error analysis	29 (46.7%)	20 (32.2%)	8(12.9%)
2. Conducting activities based on Intra and Interpersonal skills	20(32.2%)	25(40.3%)	13(20.9%)
3. Developing listening skills with relevant learning software	27(43.5%)	19(30.6%)	2 (3.2%)
4. Mock speaking sessions for oral practice	24(38.7%)	31(50%)	6 (9.6%)
5. Reading activities	28(45.1%)	25(40.3%)	6(11.3 %)
6. Writing skills practice	21 (33.8%)	19(30.6 %)	4(6.4%)
7. Provision for of online/offline resources for classroom practices	26 (41.9%)	26 (41.9%)	10 (16.2%)
8. Professional development programs facilitated	22 (35.4 %)	15(24.1 %)	12 (19.3 %)

Table 1: Interpretation of Syllabus Design, Teaching Methodologies and Professional Development Programs as Reported by Teachers

4. Results and discussion of Quantitative Data Analysis

4.1. Syllabus Design and Other Related Issues

Out of eight items the first two were based on enquiring how far could the teachers conduct the activities as needed in a learner centered syllabus in their classes. The variables measured in the first section were, to find out, to what extent activities like: Grammar and vocabulary building, group discussions, reading practices, business communication, conducting paper presentations, and technology assisted language learning were being conducted by the teachers in the classrooms.

An analysis of the objective data collected from this section indicates that teachers lack proper training in conducting technology related activities in language classrooms. Many teachers need training in using relevant software for language learning and to facilitate interactive activities that would develop students' personality, leadership skills, team activities, and interpersonal skills.

4.2. Students Academic needs

The results from item 3-6 focused on how activities related to the four basic skills of listening, speaking reading and writing had been implemented in the classroom context. It shows that technology related teaching activities along with personality development sessions are very much necessary and those should be implemented by giving proper training to the faculty and language instructors of the colleges.

This indicates that there is nothing wrong with the syllabus design, but the problem probably lies with lack of proper implementation.

4.3. Teachers professional needs

The need for effective teacher training shows that the objectives and goals of the syllabus cannot be achieved without properly training the teachers in new and innovative concepts. Teachers highlight the need for effective teachers-training programmes and professional development workshops. Thus, it is seen that due to the various administrative and teaching related constraints the teachers are unable to bring much constructive changes to the learning process.

The qualitative data collected from the teachers' questionnaire summarizes the comments of teachers on the three variables as discussed above. Item A and B on syllabus design, Item C on academic needs of students and Item D and E on professional needs of teachers. The teachers had to comment on these five open ended questions.

5. Discussion of open ended questions based on Qualitative data

The results of the-five part, open ended questions are summarized as stated below.

Qualitative data on implementation of syllabus (Item A and B)

5.1. Item A: Kindly Suggest Some Innovative Ideas to Improve the Quality of English Language Teaching in Engineering Context.

The teachers had been requested to suggest certain innovative methods of English language teaching to meet international standards. Most teachers favor an activity-based teaching than passive lecturing method usually followed by many teachers. They advocate interaction with students and taking their points of view also into consideration.

Teaching phonetics is neglected in the engineering colleges of Orissa since most teachers themselves are not trained in phonetics. A sound knowledge of phonetic speech is essential to converse successfully in the international context.

Improving oral communication is also imperative. Proper study material and training to teachers are required to improve the standard of teaching since most teachers are not accustomed to communicative English. Conducting oral examination is another suggestion made by the teachers.

Well-equipped laboratory with relevant software will help the students, provided the teachers are trained in this method. Learners are to be provided with language learning skills even after their semester-end examinations. Language labs can be used for this purpose. Self-access learning centers are suitable for implementing this suggestion.

Some teachers argue in favour of reform in the methods of present evaluation system which does not reflect the true potential of the students. An objective and transparent evaluation system for both theory and practical classes have been advocated. Exposure to the corporate culture is another suggestion made by the teachers. So exposure to popular literature, even informally, will help the learners acquire finer aspects of English language. Team teaching has been suggested by a few teachers. Exposure to real life situations in future is another practical suggestion made by teachers.

According to Brookes (1964) a defect of our education of scientists and engineers is that they are not normally made acquainted with models of the best scientific writing nor are its essential qualities made known to them. Therefore, if popular science books are introduced into their reading syllabus technical students can be initiated into reading habits in an easy way. This will enhance their language proficiency and technical vocabulary as well.

5.2. Item B- Monitoring the Teaching Process

On being asked whether the teachers' performance in the classrooms is being monitored and effective feedback provided by the senior members of the faculty or experts in the field, majority of them (53.7%) replied in the affirmative, 39% in the negative and the rest remained silent. This means that almost 46% of the teachers fail to get feedback regarding the efficacy of their teaching and are deprived of the opportunity of correction and improvement. Therefore, proper monitoring of the performance of the teachers is essential. The teachers are also free to obtain feedback from the students, if they are interested. If so, they may be able to adjust their teaching to suit students' aptitudes.

It is necessary for teachers to pursue a particular teaching strategy, which in his/her personal conviction must be appropriate and effective in the given situation. It is not only desirable to have a strategy but also necessary to explain to the learner how this strategy can lead him to the targeted goals. It is probable that the learners often fail to fathom why they learn the content assigned to them. If the purpose is explained to them, they may be motivated to learn it with interest. Research shows that strategy training which fully informs the learner (by indicating why the strategy is useful, how it can be transferred to different tasks, and how learners can evaluate the success of this strategy) is more successful than training that does not. (Oxford, 1997).

Garrido and Fortneto suggest that it teachers are to be supported and trained to implement the strategy. Their needs are to be assessed by means of interviews, questionnaires, language audits or class-observation and bridge the lack in them. (Garrido and Fortneto, 2010).

5.3. Item -C: Needs of Students in the Perception of Teachers

The teachers have been asked to specify three most important needs of the students in their perception to study English effectively for communicative purposes. The collated data indicates that almost 30% of the teachers stressed the need for providing well-equipped language laboratories with relevant software and modern communication systems as the top priority to impart effective training to students in basic language skills.

McKay (2007) argues that engineering students can be trained in acquiring humanities aspects like soft skills, social and cultural awareness, verbal reasoning, written and communication aptitude through elements of core subjects. For instance, teaching through written as well as audio-visual methods relating to core subjects of engineering students such as ozone facts, environmental issues, and social impact of engineering projects enhances the social and ethical awareness of engineers. At the same time tasks to suit future needs to practice grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing need to be designed to help the learners.

5.4. Item- D: Challenges Encountered by the Teachers

Lack of motivation among students to attend English language classes has been mentioned as the most difficult problem faced by the teachers as reported by about 40% of the participating teachers. Many students of private engineering colleges are not interested to attend English classes as they feel that they can manage without attending it and yet score good marks. Some of the reasons mentioned are core subjects' pressure, absence of well-equipped language labs and class rooms, lack of training to teachers in imparting activity-based teaching using latest technology, odd timings of English classes in the college timetable and constraints in completing the syllabus in time etc. The evaluation process of both theory and practice also de-motivate the students. Oft repeated questions at semester-end examinations and liberal evaluation process, both in theory and practical assignments discourage the students from acquiring language skills. The awareness about the importance of communicating in English dawns on them only when they reach the final year class to face tests for job interviews. Then it is too late to compensate the loss of vital time early in the course.

One of the best methods for relaxed language learning, especially for engineering students, according to Carter (1999) is the access to a well-equipped language learning centre (LLC). This centre is equipped with Internet, multimedia, DVD Library, Lending Library (fiction), reference library, journals, magazines etc. This is different from the usual language laboratories in that formal language practice is not imparted in LLCs, but the learners are allowed self-access at their leisure hours in a connected atmosphere.

5.5. Item E: Professional Development

This question probes the achievements of the teachers in their professional field. Many teachers claim that they are supportive to students, interactive, open to new ideas, ready to take initiatives and love professionalism. They love activity-oriented teaching and take part in team activities. Discussion with students on the problems of language learning is also claimed by a few teachers. The need for soft skill training, personality development, phonetics practice, exposure to the corporate world, business communication, training in public relations, handling well-equipped language labs and conducting internet based activities has been highlighted.

Professional growth can be achieved collaboratively as pooling of multiple intelligences results in a better output. Another requirement of professional growth is enquiry-oriented teaching activities that help them de-routinize their practice in class which is the essence of reflective teaching (El-Okda, 2005).

6. Conclusion

Some of the suggestions are worth trying in the context of English in engineering education. Lack of motivation among students and apathy towards acquiring different language skills due to pressure of the core subjects, lack of trained faculty, liberal evaluation of the semester-end examinations where a pass percentage is easy to come by, and, hence passing the examination is being taken for granted. Lack of training to handle the specialized course and attain the objectives of the course prescribed by BPUT hampers effective teaching. Teaching should be student-oriented and lectures should be interactive and intelligible. Individual attention in communicating in classroom situations to discuss answers/solutions properly has been stressed. English classes must include the technical aspects of language learning (vocabulary, documentation, technical vocabulary) along with guidance in developing one's personality, for better job prospects. English course should concentrate on imparting business English training to handle any future situation. Group discussions on current affairs enhance leadership qualities. More oral tests are to be conducted. Thus the ultimate aim of language learning must be the practical application of language skills is needed. Activities to improve English fluency should be imparted to develop confidence in communicating effectively in real life situations

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Questionnaire (Appendix-1)

QUESTIONNAIRE TO ASSESS THE NEEDS OF ENGLISH LECTURERS TEACHING IN ENGINEERING COLLEGES

This questionnaire is a relevant tool of data collection on the broad area of research, “English language teaching in technical education”. The information shared through this questionnaire helps to understand the practical problems that are faced by teachers in Orissa, in dealing with students from different English learning background. It tries to find out the relevance and needs of variety of resource materials and training in technology based classroom teaching, at regular intervals to impart quality teaching.

NAME.DR/MR/MS/MRS//.....
 POSITION.....
 NAME OF YOUR COLLEGE.....
 LOCATION.....
 EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION.....
 EXPERIENCE IN TEACHING ENGLISH (IN YEARS).....
 E.MAIL ID.....CONTACT NO.....

I request you to kindly contribute your views, ideas, and share your rich experiences in this area. Your valuable and informative suggestions may be noted below:

Section -1

How often do you do the following activities in your regular teaching?1=never, 2=sometimes,3.=always

Items	Never	Sometimes	Always
1. Conducting grammar practice sessions, technical writing activities and error analysis			
2. Conducting activities based on Intra and Interpersonal skills			
3. Developing listening skills with relevant learning software			
4. Mock speaking sessions for oral practice			
5. Reading activities			
6. Writing skills practice			
7. Provision for of online/offline resources for classroom practices			
8. Professional development programs facilitated			

Section -II

Item A: Kindly suggest some innovative ideas to improve the quality of English language teaching in engineering context.?

Item B Could you share your experience of being monitored or received feedback?

Item -C: Mention some academic needs of students in the perception of teachers?

Item- D: In your opinion what are the major challenges encountered by the teachers?

Item E: What is the scope of professional development in your professional career?