Developing Communicative Competence of Engineering Students

Sunthara Valli.K

Research Associate in English (Ph.D)

School of Social Science And Languages, Vit University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu-632014, India

Dr.N.S Vishnu Priya

Assistant Professor(Sr.)

School of Social Science And Languages, Vit University, Vellore, Tamil Nadu-632014, India

Abstract

This paper titled "Developing Communicative Competence in English of Engineering Students – Some Strategies" begins with an introduction on the importance of communicative competence for students of engineering courses to have a rosy future in the world of competitions and challenges. The paper, besides defining the terms 'Communication' and 'Competence' in an appropriate manner, moves with a detailed discussion on the text materials in English prescribed in technical institutes, and pinpoints the inclusion of essential components in the curriculum for the benefit of the students. The wrong notions about the process of communication are listed out and discussed in detail. The irregular approach in the system and the teaching-learning process is discussed with appropriate illustrations. It further underscores the importance of communication skills in terms of prosperity in both academic and professional life of students of engineering courses. The objectives of teaching and learning English both as a subject and as a language are highlighted in this paper. The paper stresses the role of teachers in enhancing the communicative competence of students and also shows some surveys recently taken in favour of engineers with communicative competence. The efforts on the part of the learners in the process of developing their communicative competence are also highlighted. The paper ends with some innovative and down-to-earth strategies for developing the communicative competence of students in the best possible ways.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Engineering students, Teaching and Learning

Introduction

"Communication competence is the degree to which a communicator's goals are achieved through effective and appropriate interaction."

Our country is entering into an era of internalization and globalization. The trend of globalization is leading to closer relationships between countries. Of all the different languages, English, as a global/international or a Lingua Franca, is widely used in communication between people and countries. The English language has spread and developed globally. The prosperity of a nation lies in the scientific and technological developments. Our students are going to step into the world full of academic and professional challenges and competitions. The world of technology is marked with amazing innovations. To keep abreast of the latest developments in science and technology, a sound knowledge of English is indispensable. To have a wide exposure to the world of technology and to face the academic and professional challenges and competitions, engineers need communicative competence in English.

Language as communication:

A central concept of the communicative approach to language teaching is communicative competence: the learner's ability to understand and use language appropriately to communicate in social and school environments. One of the earliest concepts of communicative competence was introduced by Dell Hymes (1966). He believed that the ability to communicate properly should be cultivated in language teaching. Students should learn how to use a language in their daily communication in order to demonstrate their mastery over a language.

Communicative Competence

The word 'communication' is derived from the Latin words 'communis' or 'communicare', which means 'common', 'communality' or 'sharing'. 'Communicare' means 'to share'. The word is also related to 'community' as there cannot be any community without communication. 'Competence' is the ability and the capability to compete with anyone with a great spirit. 'Communicative competence' means a lot more than mere proficiency in the language learning skills namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW). 'Communicative competence' is 'the competence to effectively; appropriately and powerfully communicate at any circumstance and in professional set up'.

The scientific and technical advancements of a nation in the womb of time lie in the hands of the engineers who besides a sound knowledge of their respective disciplines of engineering have exemplary and

excellent communication skills,. It is not a mere exaggeration to state that the world of tomorrow belongs to engineers. The importance given to the study of English, the establishments of language labs with the updated software on communication skills and even the demand for faculty in English in engineering colleges indicate the realization of the fact that communicative competence is essential for the budding engineers to come off with flying colours in their future.

Language is a tool for communication. A language is not to be taught or learnt, but to be practiced constantly for acquiring mastery over it. Unlike other subjects, English is skill-oriented. A skill can neither be taught nor learnt, but be acquired. When English is taught as a subject, learners secure some marks in the exam, but when it is practiced as a language, the development of the skills becomes possible. Constant practice of the same with a great zeal and zest results in communicative competence. Though grammar is the backbone of a language, communicative competence cannot be achieved just by mastering the rules of grammar. Rules of grammar are the guidelines for the use of language. Mere remembrance of guidelines without practice is of no use. Too much insistence on the definitions of grammatical terms and rules of grammar might curb the interest of the learners. The intention of such an insistence may be good, but the result may be pernicious.
"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that has taken place"- George Bernard Shaw.

Communicative Competence through Prescribed Text Material.
The text material in English for engineering courses must be need based and learner centered. The components of TOEFL, GRE and the competitive exams conducted by both state and central government can be very well incorporated in the syllabus so as to enable the learners to face challenges at all levels. In classrooms, the focus of the teachers must be more on teaching definitions, descriptions of grammatical terms and rules of grammar. The components such as tenses, concord, conditionals, passivity, mechanics of effective writing, letter writing and E-Mail writing, report writing, paragraph writing, statement of purpose, case study reports can be included in the syllabus, as they form the major part of the competitive exams and syllabi followed in most of the academic institutes.

The text material in English must be prepared, keeping in mind the academic professional needs and requirements of the budding engineers. They must be trained to use the English language effectively and grammatically in order to suit the needs of the present competition world of today and tomorrow. The focus of the teachers must be on developing all the four language learning skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Learner must be made to learn English, not learn about English. Ignorance of even one language learning skill results in lack of communicative competence. When English is taught as a subject, students learn something and secure some marks. When English is taught as a language, learners develop their communicative skills which are constantly practiced and develop their communicative competence. Ample opportunity must be provided for real life situations. So that learners practice the language skills.

Communicative Competence for Employability
That communicative competence has become the most essential employability skill for engineering graduates with ambitions and aspirations in life is an acerbic and undeniable truth. The uncontrollable acceleration in the systems and processes has not left the recruiters too. The concept of conducting formal interviews with focus on testing the subject and general knowledge of every individual, spending some considerable amount of time has been replaced with informal interviews, with more focus on the communicative competence of the interviewees rather than on their subject or general knowledge. In software companies, the new recruiters are expected to undergo a few month training on soft skills that mainly includes good communication.

In engineering colleges, English is taught only in the first year, that too for a short period of five or six months. As only grammar forms the major part of the syllabus, students are just taught the rules of grammar and there is no exposure to wide use of the language. In conventional class room, teacher is the active speaker and the students are the passive listeners. Opportunities are not provided to learners to develop their communicative competence. Class room lectures make learners passive listeners, who store information in memory and reproduce them in the examination.

Thompson and Wyatt in their book "Teaching of English in India" say, "The power of expression in a language is a matter of skills rather than of knowledge. It is a power that grows by exercise, not by knowing merely meanings or rules"(15). Communicative competence cannot be attained over night, as it is like the growth of a plant, not the construction of a wall. Several playful, psychological and innovative methods need to be identified and experimented for developing the communicative competence of students of engineering disciplines.

Communicative competence in English can be best attained in a natural setting. Under no circumstances, learners should be under any stress or pressure, as it has adverse effects. The entire process of developing the communicative competence requires academic and professional relevance, clear objectives, suitable methodology and evaluation procedures. The focus of the teachers must be more on teaching English than on

teaching about English.

Palmer observes that language learning is essentially a habit-forming process, during which we acquire new habits. A lot of motivation is needed during the process of developing the communicative competence of students, as motivation moves even mountains. By introducing variety in language teaching, the interest of pupils can be awakened. Creating real life situations is an important aspect of language teaching. Learning takes place in an atmosphere of freedom and joy. Learners must be made to realize the fact that mastery of a language does not mean 'knowing about the language', but 'knowing the language' and using it correctly, appropriately and effectively in academic, professional and even personal situations.

These days, parents prefer engineering colleges where the Placement and Training Centres are functioning effectively. Software companies, industries and all project-oriented concerns prefer engineers with excellent communicative competence to those just with knowledge of their respective engineering subjects. So a mandatory course on communication skills is essential in engineering colleges and the components of the text-material must be out and out need-based, learner-centered and fluency-focused. Activities such as group discussions, debates, story-telling, narration of incidents, descriptions, meetings, negotiations and presentations on various topics both technical and non-technical must be incorporated in the syllabus specially designed with the intention of developing the communicative competence of engineering students.

Some strategies in communicative competence:

1. The students of engineering colleges can be introduced to the study of literature for two days in a week in order to improve their expressions in speaking and also to improve their vocabulary in writing.
2. Creating a real life situations in classroom and making the students involve in language activities will also help the same.
3. Each student can be made to write five or ten words daily for their vocabulary acquisition.
4. Competitive exam question papers and English newspapers or magazines can be discussed like a classroom activity.
5. The ultimate purpose of English teachers should not be covering of syllabus before examination but enhancing the communicative competence of engineering students.
6. Mock interviews can be conducted as it will enable them to face the interviews with courage and confidence.
7. Syllabus must be updated, it must be need based and learner centered. Syllabus in English must fulfill the academic and professional requirements of engineering students.
8. Statement of purpose, resume designing, report writing, technical writing etc., all must be incorporated in the syllabus.
9. Each item in the syllabus must have a descriptive theoretical note followed by plenty of language tasks based on several notes of testing which provide ample opportunities to engineering students in their future carrier.
10. The traditional approach to grammar must be dispensed with in favour of communicative properties of language and technical relevance. In short, grammar is to be made student friendly, purposeful and useful from the examination and technical point of view.

Engineering students need academic as well as communicative competence to survive in this global market. Today, communicative competence is the central aim of foreign and second language teaching, providing a number of suggestions as to how teachers can give pupils optimum frameworks for acquiring a good communicative competence.

References

1. Agarwal, Shalini. *Essential communication skills*. Anne books.pvt.ltd, 2009.Print.
2. HG, Wells. (1998). *Teaching Language As Communication*. OUP.
3. Nuran, David. *Designing Task for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge University, Press.2005.
4. Richards, C.Jack. *Communicative Language Research Today*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.
5. Wyatt, M.S.H. Thompson and H.G. *Teaching of English in India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, India, 1937.
6. http://scholar.google.co.in
7. www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag
8. http://wingedword.wordpress.com/2010/08/02