



TASK-BASED TEACHING TO DEVELOP ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS OF ENGINEERING STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in English language in today's global world opens doors to worldwide technology and commerce. Effective language skills empower professionals to face challenges in academic as well as professional lives. So, language should be learnt inside the classroom to use it in the outside world. The objective of any language classroom is to get the learners use the language with competency. The role of a language teacher is to expose learners to the target language by giving them continuous practice through various language activities while ensuring learner's interest and motivation. This is possible when learners are truly engaged in the learning process through different activities/tasks

This paper focuses on the role of activities/tasks which are tailor-made to the needs of the learners in order to ensure their active involvement in the learning process instead of just imparting knowledge monotonously. Such a classroom adds variety to regular, passive learning and improves the efficiency of the learners thus creating a positive environment for language learning.

Key words: *language skills, communicative competence, activities/tasks, language learning, tailor-made*

INTRODUCTION

The present study is based on the researcher's observation and experience who is working in one of the engineering colleges in Hyderabad. Students from not only within the city and nearby districts but also from other states join in this institution. The students take



‘Functional Communicative Written English’ and ‘Effective English Communication Skills’ courses in their second year.

Effective English language communication skills have become the key point to reach the ladder of success in any field in this era of globalization. English language, being the Lingua Franca of the world drives people to learn this language. The use of English language as the world’s essential language for global communication has obviously been continuing for years. David Graddol mentions that “despite the extraordinary changes of the last few years, one thing appears to remain the same. More people than ever want to learn English.... English learners are increasing in number and decreasing in age.” (3) (p.10)

Need for enhancing English language skills of engineering students

The ability to communicate well in this language is becoming vital in a student’s career. The field of engineering is also no exception to this scenario, so engineering colleges have been stressing a lot on English language communication skills and thus have introduced communication skills courses in the curriculum to enrich the employability skills of the budding engineers.

“Higher education is becoming globalized alongside the economy, and English is proving to be a key ingredient – partly because universities in the English-speaking world dominate the global league tables, and partly because English is proving popular as a means of internationalizing both the student community and teaching staff.” (David Graddol p.7) (3)

The use of computers and technology has become a basic skill these days. Undoubtedly, English language communication skills empower the technical education received by engineering students in colleges and in turn help them cross national and cultural boundaries.

As said by David Graddol

“English seems to have joined this list of basic skills. Quite simply, its function and place in the curriculum is no longer that of ‘foreign language’ and this is bringing about profound changes in who is learning English, their motives for learning it and their needs as learners.” (p.72) (3)

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 553) (1)



There is a need for proficiency in English language for engineering graduates due to many reasons like:

- admission into higher education in universities abroad
- taking standardized tests to prove language proficiency
- career opportunities worldwide
- Accessibility to digital libraries, e-journals, internet, etc.
- reading and writing technical communication
- making presentations
- dealing with global clients etc.

So, the job of an engineer is not just backstage dealing with technical issues, but he must be able to present the technical knowledge with improved communicative competence in order to make his mark in the global setting. Besides, engineering graduates also require other skills like problem-solving, decision-making, negotiating etc in the corporate world.

But unfortunately, the acquisition of English language skills of most of the engineering students in the existing engineering colleges of Hyderabad is displeasing. A survey conducted by Aspiring minds, an employability evaluation and certification company reports that candidates with English skills above the local average stand out from the crowd and garner 30-50% higher salaries than similarly-qualified candidates without English skills. The survey results also showed that only 7.1% engineers in the country can speak English fluently, around 61% possess grammar skills no better than a Class 7 student and also that engineering students in Hyderabad need maximum improvement.(10)

Indicating a significant skill gap, over 80 per cent of engineers in India remain unemployable, the fifth edition of National Employability Report 2015-16 conducted by job skills matching platform Aspiring Minds has found. Varun Aggarwal, CTO, Aspiring Minds, said,

“Engineering has become the de facto graduate degree for a large chunk of students today. However, along with improving the education standards, it is quintessential that we evolve our undergraduate programmes to make them more job-centric.” (10)

According to the National Employability Report, 2016, an analysis done by Aspiring Minds on a sample of 27,000 engineering students across India with a good mix of engineers from



different tiers of colleges, tiers of cities, metros/non-metros, engineering disciplines observes that

- A total of 19.91% engineers get employed despite of only 19.11 % engineers being employable
- 27% of the engineers did not even get an interview opportunity and this figure increases for the percentage of engineers who could make it to the final round. (p. 41) (5)

There was a significant difference between employability of candidates living in metros versus the rest. This clearly shows that candidates who have spent a significant part of their lives in metros gain better exposure to English and computer education, helping them become more employable.(p 28) (5)

Why task-based language teaching

The reports surely reflect the classroom teaching and learning processes apart from the socio economic and linguistic background of the students.

Considering these reviews and criticism, a close examination and introspection at the teaching and learning procedures of the English classroom is of paramount importance. Students should be involved in meaningful, communicative language activities rather than focusing on examination-based teaching and learning. The teacher has to play the role of a facilitator and a co-participant who can motivate the students to involve in the tasks which facilitate language learning.

Language should be learnt inside the classroom to use it in the outside world. So, it is the responsibility of the teacher to create an environment where meaningful, real-life tasks are performed by the students while sustaining the interest of the student in the learning process.

Content of the course

The content of the course for second year students is:

- Listening skills
- Reading skills
- Writing skills
- Oral presentation skills & speaking



- The art of communication
- Group Discussion
- Interview skills
- Nature of technical communication
- Soft skills & Modern Etiquette

The content demands that students have to be involved in activities which enhance their language for their career, academics and everyday life.

Task-based Approach

A task can be defined as the many things that people do in day-to-day life. A task is a work plan to be undertaken. A pedagogical task is an activity that students perform in a classroom. It uses language situations beyond the classroom.

Long (1985: 89) frames his approach to task-based language teaching in terms of target tasks, arguing that a target task is:

a piece of work undertaken for oneself or for others, freely or for some reward. Thus examples of tasks include painting a fence, dressing a child, filling out a form, buying a pair of shoes, making an airline reservation, borrowing a library book, taking a driving test, typing a letter, weighing a patient, sorting letters, making a hotel reservation, writing a cheque, finding a street destination and helping someone across a road. In other words, by 'task' is meant the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play and in between.

David Nunan defines a pedagogical task as:

[...] a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning, and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end.



When it comes to language tasks, these should include the effective use of language in order to enable learners use the language outside the classroom that is, in the real world. Learners are required to process language pragmatically in order to achieve the desired outcome. The use of authentic materials for carrying out the tasks makes the activities close to the real world learning. (2)

According to (Nunan, p.4) pedagogical tasks involve communicative language use in which the user's attention is focused on meaning rather than grammatical form. (6)

Task-based learning enables learners to do meaningful tasks using the target language and focus on

- comprehending
- manipulating
- producing
- interacting

Language learning is no longer viewed as memorizing rules and structures. There is, now, evidently a lot of emphasis on learners and the processes they are involved in. This point obviously leads to the fact that communicative language teaching is of paramount importance in second language acquisition. Tasks have been employed to make language teaching more communicative. Tasks, therefore, are important features of communicative language teaching. (Rod Ellis p.27) (2)

So, as an effort to inculcate an interest in the students in honing their communicative competence, the researcher attempted to conduct the following activities in the lab sessions.

Each class is divided into two batches of 30 students each. The duration of each lab session is 100 minutes. The activities are:

Activity 1- Build the Word Wall

This activity was done regularly throughout the academic year to enrich students' vocabulary.

Pre-task

In the first class, the researcher discussed the importance of vocabulary. Then, at the beginning of every class students were given three new words and they write down those



words in their notebooks along with the meanings, pronunciation and usage. This creates interest in the students.

Task

After two weeks, the students were asked to prepare word walls on which they write at least three new words (which they collected) along with meanings and pronunciation. Students were advised to read newspapers regularly to find new words. Students took turns in collecting new words.

Post-task

Students collected new words every day and learn how they are used. A test was conducted at the end of the semester to test their vocabulary.

Outcome

Students developed great interest in learning new words as they represent the class in preparing the word wall in turns. Regular reading helped them in encountering new words. This task focuses on producing and comprehending as students have to understand and come with new words.

Activity 2 - Present your product

The students were divided into groups of four. Each group is asked to choose a product of their own choice. The product chosen should have some new specifications compared to the existing ones in the market so that it would withstand the competition. They prepared the specifications of their product - its design, uses, features etc. Then they were instructed to make group presentations assuming the launch of the product.

Pre-task

Each group was given a user manual to read.

Task

Students are given 30 minutes time to discuss and make notes about their product. After the discussion, each group presents their product- the first participant gives the overview of the product, the second talks about its specifications compared to the existing products, the third talks about its uses and the fourth concludes presenting its design.

Post-task



Teacher gives feedback to all the participants telling them where they need to improve in their presentation based on the parameters of: content, fluency, organization, presentation. Students present the written report of their presentation to the teacher.

Outcome

This task proved to be very interesting and the class turned out to be very lively. It focuses on all the four elements mentioned by Nunan i.e. comprehending, manipulating, interacting and producing.

Students actively involved and participated choosing products like, smart phones, car, laptop, electronic watch, a monster truck (that can be used in army), smart refrigerator etc.

Students' enthusiasm was quite evident while preparing for the presentation to launch their new product. Though some students were not forthcoming initially, working in the group made them participate and come forward to present. Earlier, the teacher had to coax them a lot to make presentations and there were instances when the students were unprepared.

Activity 3 - Brain storm ideas

Pre-task

The teacher/researcher suggested some themes for discussion in class. As a part of the discussion, students were asked to think of some key words on the given themes. For each theme, a student wrote the words on a piece of paper. After twenty words were collected, the next theme begins. After all the themes were done, the students were divided into groups of four. The number of themes is the same as the number of groups in the class.

Task

Each group was given a theme. The teacher instructed them that they should write a paragraph using all the words they were given with a suitable title. The duration is 30 minutes. Once all groups complete their task, they were asked to read out their paragraphs to the class.

Post-task

The teacher listened to the paragraphs and gave feedback. Students were evaluated on the parameters of structure, organization of ideas, clarity and mechanics. This activity focused on learning coherence in writing.



Outcome

Discussing key words in the pre-task stage developed enthusiasm in students and prepared them for the task. It has been observed that rather than giving topics in isolation and asking them to write paragraphs individually, this group activity involved the students completely in the task as they would want their paragraph to be the best in the class.

As said by Rod Ellis one of the most obvious ways of manipulating learner output in the performance of a task is by creating conditions that favor one or more of these types of planning. This task focused on producing.

Activity- 4 Share your thoughts

Pre-task

The teacher conducted a discussion in the class on the importance of soft skills for engineering students. Then, students were asked to make a list of soft skills which help them in their academics and career.

Task

The batch was divided into groups of four. Each group was asked to choose any two soft skills which are useful to them. Then they discussed among themselves the benefits of possessing these skills and the disadvantages of lacking them. Each pair in the group presented the advantages and disadvantages of possessing and lacking each skill citing examples of situations from their own experience or observation.

For instance, in case of team building skills- students had to present the benefits of possessing good team building skills and on the other side of the coin, the disadvantages of bad team skills.

As a variation to this activity students were asked to choose real-life situations or problems (after approved by the teacher). They then suggested solutions or make decisions as a group after discussion. This activity attempted to test their decision-making and problem-solving skills.

Post-task

Teacher gave them feedback on their presentations and reinforced the importance of soft skills. Students were asked to submit written reports on their presentations.



Outcome

It is very important for engineering students to be equipped with soft skills required for a successful career. This activity does enable the students to understand the importance of these skills.

This task also focuses on all the four elements - comprehending, manipulating, interacting and producing.

Advantages of task-based teaching

There are many advantages of this approach, like:

- The name-activity/task itself gives a kick start and motivates the students in the learning process who sit continuously in theory classes for hours together.
- Besides creating interest in the students in the learning process, task-based learning fosters a positive learning environment in the class.
- It provides a platform for students to learn from peers and also from the teacher who plays the role of a co-participant sometimes.
- Learning is more natural and enjoyable.
- Learning becomes student-centric rather than teacher-centric.
- Students are truly motivated as they are involved in hands-on learning.
- Helps students to get acquainted with real-life experience.

CONCLUSION

Continuous evaluation, being an important assessment factor of language lab sessions, task-based activities help the teacher in assessing the students continuously and also facilitate language learning through interesting tasks which keep them engaged. It can be suggested that if executed properly and on a broader manner in the curriculum, this approach enhances learners' efficiency and communicative competence.



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