



COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR PROFESSIONAL STUDENTS: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract: *As a globally recognised language, English undoubtedly enjoys a supreme position in the course curriculum of our educational institutions. At present times, English language has almost become synonymous to life giving oxygen gas because it helps us to survive in this cut throat competitive world by equipping us with the necessary platform (job) Be it an interview or dealing with the project leader or working out a solution with a team or writing a report, today what matters the most is a sound knowledge of communication skills. In the existing globalization scenario, most of the hiring companies look for a right and suitable incumbent for executive posts. Whatever be the recruiting criteria these industry giants might have in their agenda, one thing is very clear: simply a first class degree would not serve their purpose; the candidates must have effective communication skills too apart from technical skills. In other words, communication skills are as important as technical qualifications for youngsters aiming at a bright career. Poor communication skills, low confidence level and improper body language radically affect the selection process of students who turn up for job interviews. In spite of its status as a widely used medium of communication; English language tends to petrify its students. The case is more pertinent in the context of rural students who find it highly problematic to communicate in English even with their peers. This paper discusses some issues and challenges that are related to communication skills and suggests some strategies that can be followed by young professionals to tackle the problem of effective communication.*

Keywords: *Listening skills, Speaking skills, Reading skills, Writing skills, Grammar, Vocabulary.*

Intoducation:

Every language has a set of skills known as language skills that help its users to communicate with other members clearly and confidently within the same language community. These skills comprise listening skills, speaking skills, reading skills, writing skills along with a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Language learning becomes easy and much more viable when it is learnt in terms of its constituent skills in an integrated way rather than as a classroom subject. We must remember that communication, be it spoken or written, is an active process that makes use of the above six language skills. Let us look at the various language skills that make up our target language:

A. Listening Skills:

Listening is a receptive language skill that requires the listeners to understand, interpret and evaluate what they hear. The ability to listen actively can improve personal relationships through reducing

conflicts, strengthening cooperation and fostering understanding among participants. By becoming a better listener, we can improve our productivity as well as our ability to influence, persuade and negotiate (with) others. We can also avoid conflicts and misunderstandings if we do focussed listening. Our acknowledgement can be something as simple as a nod of the head or a simple "uh huh."

B. Speaking Skills:

Speaking is a productive skill in the oral mode. It is more complicated than just pronouncing words. It involves various micro-skills in the sense that the speaker has to (i) pronounce the distinctive sounds of a language (called phonemes) clearly enough so that people can distinguish them, (ii) use stress and rhythmic patterns and intonation patterns of the language clearly enough so that people can understand what is said, (iii) use the correct forms of words, (iv) put words together in correct word order, (v) use vocabulary appropriately, (vi) use the register

or language variety that is appropriate to the situation and the relationship to the conversation partner, etc. A monotone speaker can put an audience to sleep regardless of how exciting the message is and even makes it difficult for listeners to pick out the important points.

C. Reading Skills:

Reading is also a receptive language skill. It is a complex cognitive (mental) process of decoding symbols in order to construct or derive meaning (reading comprehension). It is a means of language acquisition, of communication and of sharing information and ideas. Like all language, it is a complex interaction between the text and the reader which is shaped by the reader's prior knowledge, experiences, attitude, and language community which is culturally and socially situated. The reading process requires continuous practice, development, and refinement.

D. Writing Skills:

Writing skills just like speaking skills are productive by nature. These are specific abilities which help writers put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form and to mentally interact with the message. Writing skills help the learners gain independence, comprehensibility, fluency and creativity in writing. Writing skills can be of various types, such as, *comprehensibility skills for writing* that include writing for communicating messages or information, *fluency skills for writing* that include recognizing the linear sequence of sounds, mastering writing motions and letter shapes, recognizing the chunking of words, recognizing the need for space between words, writing quickly and *creativity skills for writing* that include the ability to write freely anything the learner wants to write.

E. Grammar:

Grammar is the set of structural rules that govern the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any language. The term also refers to the study of such rules, and this field includes morphology (how phrases and sentences are formed from words), syntax (study of grammar and its rules in sentence formation) and often complemented by

phonetics (how speech sounds are produced and form syllables), semantics (how meaning is inferred from words and concepts) and pragmatics (how meaning is inferred from context). Grammars may also refer to spelling and punctuation.

F. Vocabulary:

A person's vocabulary is the set of words within a language that are familiar to that person. A vocabulary usually develops with age, and serves as a useful and fundamental tool for communication and acquiring knowledge. Acquiring an extensive vocabulary is one of the largest challenges in learning a second language (here English language). An extensive vocabulary aids expressions and communication. Vocabulary size has been directly linked to reading comprehension. Linguistic vocabulary is synonymous with thinking vocabulary.

I. Importance of Communication Skills

In the present job scenario, the significance of communication skills has increased manifold for professional students. The importance of these skills cannot be undermined if we look at the following relevant points:

- Communication skills help the learners in expressing themselves clearly and confidently.
- Good communication skills are essential for proper planning and coordination among learners.
- Effective communication has a special role to play, particularly in a country like India where English is considered to be the second language. Students very often come under the influence of their mother tongues while communicating their opinions or ideas. This robs them of their vocal skills.
- Better communication skills can help students in better performance during class presentations, debates, group discussions, etc.

II. Issues and Challenges in Communication

Myriad problems may plague a learner's communicative competence. These problems can be found at the level of the individual learner or in a group. Let us look at some of the problems:

- Some students write well, but they are not able to express themselves clearly when it comes to spoken aspect. Fluency is missing in their speech.
- Conversely speaking, some students can communicate fluently, but they cannot write without making grammatical errors.
- Some students seem to be comfortable speaking among themselves in a small group, but are not comfortable facing the audience.
- Some have problems with their body language while others find it difficult to maintain eye contact.
- Some students do not have a large stock of vocabulary which tend to impact their speaking and writing skills.
- A great majority of students suffer from imperfect pronunciation. Most of the times mother tongue influence (MTI) plays a spoilsport in the way of communication.
- Many students do not pay any attention to active listening. Hearing seems to be a good substitute for them.
- Lack of good communication skills also hampers confidence levels of the learners.
- Students tend to be afraid of making mistakes
- There is also lack of exposure to English language and practice of the same inside the classroom.
- Learners should not be pre-occupied with grammatical accuracy. Fluency is more important than accuracy when it comes to language learning. Once the students become fluent in the target language, they should try to work on their skills of grammar.
- Students must make it a point to read national newspapers (rather than local ones), stories or articles, watch news on T.V. and listen to radio to develop their listening skills.
- They can also pretend themselves to be a newscaster and read out the newspaper to mirror.
- Practice is very important in learning a language. Whenever students get an opportunity to speak in front of others, they should make use of it. Facing the audience without any inhibition can definitely improve their confidence level.
- To obtain a better command of the English language, learners should expand their vocabulary by reading and writing more. They should look up words in a dictionary that they are not familiar with. The better they are able to express themselves, the better their ability to communicate.
- Learners should also try to mingle with others freely; it will help them to develop interpersonal and group skills.

III. Strategies for Developing Communication Skills

Good communication skills are keys to success in life, work and relationships. Without effective communication, a message can turn into an error, misunderstanding, frustration, or even disaster by being misinterpreted or poorly delivered.

We cannot deny the fact that the onus of teaching communication skills lies solely on the language teachers. They should make an effort to help their students gradually pick up the language skills through their innovative teaching methods. Students, on the other hand, should develop their own learning strategies in learning the language. We have come up with some strategies that can help a language learner achieve a reasonable degree of communicative competence:

- While reading a book, they should underline all the words that they do not know and look them up in the dictionary for meanings.
- They can also make a list of these words and use at least five of them in a conversation during the day.
- Most importantly, learners should make an effort to speak in English to their friends and family.
- Books are temples of knowledge. Therefore, students should visit the college or institute library regularly at fixed hour.
- Cultivating the habit of reading books on a daily basis can also help the professional students developing a cutting edge over others. Reading fosters our writing ability. Therefore, by reading books, learners can improve and develop their

'Creativity'. There are a plethora of good authors who are popular today. Some good writers whose language is easy to follow include Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Paulo Coelho, Robin Sharma, Chetan Bhagat, etc.

- The best way for teachers to encourage communication from all students is through classroom discussion or small group work. There has always been the notion that you learn best when you actually have to teach or explain a concept to someone else. This means being able to verbalize what you know. So teachers need to encourage their students to verbalize their own knowledge so that they can learn more efficiently.
- Students on the listening end also benefit from hearing their classmates explanations. When students listen to each other, they often benefit from hearing concepts being explained from different points and in ways that might be closer the students' way of thinking. When students listen effectively they generate questions to further everybody's thinking and learning.
- In order to have good discussions with their students, teachers need to provide problems that have multiple solutions or methods of solution. These types of problems are best in simulating discussion, creativity and risk taking. When teachers are trying to encourage a meaningful discussion it is crucial that they give their students plenty of time to respond and think about what they want to say. Teachers should avoid yes/no questions and short-answer questions if they want to have a quality discussion. Open-ended higher level thinking questions are the best choice to get students thinking and communicating their ideas. The teacher should stay involved in the discussion to correct wrong information but at the same time they should

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be careful enough when pointing out mistakes. It is very important to create and maintain an environment that students feel comfortable while participating.

- Debate is another strategy that teachers can adopt to provide their students with the opportunity to practice their communication skills. Research suggests that debate encourages different types of responses, helps students to develop convincing arguments, and allows teachers and students to learn from one another. This also encourages students to back up what they believe and it allows teachers to really get a good idea of what kind of conceptual knowledge students have about certain topics.

The aforementioned strategies are not exhaustive in nature. Students can innovate their own style of learning English. The idea should be to feel at home in using the target language in various real life situations.

IV. Conclusion

It is an irony that in spite of pursuing a professional course, many of our engineers and software professionals fail to make an impact on the global market mainly because they lack the required communicative competence. Our engineering curriculum can hardly afford to ignore the importance of good communication skills in academic and professional fields if the students need to aim at both professional excellence and acumen.

Communication skills are one of the important eligibility criteria for getting good placements in well reputed companies. Unless a student is proficient in language, he/she cannot get a desirable job.

Every professional student must be made aware of the significance of language skills which are so essential for an effective communication.