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Challenges Encountered by Lateral Entry Engineering Students in English Language Learning

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Abstract

The Indian government's policy to liberalise education has resulted in the opening of thousands of schools and colleges. Especially, there has been a great surge in the field of technical education and to fulfill the demand great number of engineering colleges have come up offering various branches of study. In addition to the regular students who join engineering colleges after the completion of Higher Secondary Course (10+2 Course), a good number of students with a diploma degree in engineering enter the engineering college, directly in the second year to earn a Bachelor's Degree in Engineering. Majority of these lateral entry engineering students are of rural background and they have had their school education in their mother tongue. Due to their poor exposure

to English, they find it an arduous task to communicate in English in the engineering colleges, where the medium of instruction is only English. The present paper analyses the ways and means to confront their challenges.

Keywords

Challenges; Lateral Entry Engineering Students; English Language Learning.



The world has witnessed great changes in all walks of life in the past three decades. Globalization, international cooperation in trade, commerce, and education has brought in changes in the Indian scenario. The Indian government's policy to liberalise education has resulted in the opening of thousands of schools and colleges. Especially, there has been a great surge in the field of technical education and to fulfill the demand great number of engineering colleges have come up offering various branches of study. In addition to the regular students who join engineering colleges after the completion of Higher Secondary Course (10+2 Course), a good number of students with a diploma degree in engineering enter the engineering college, directly in the second year to earn a Bachelor's Degree in Engineering. A considerable number of these students have some work experience. Almost all of them possess better technical knowledge than the regular students. Majority of these lateral entry engineering students are of rural background and they have had their school education in their mother tongue. The scenario is not better in the polytechnic colleges where they study their diploma, as most of these colleges are inclined towards bilingual teaching and learning.

Due to their poor exposure to English, they find it an arduous task to communicate in English in the engineering colleges, where the medium of instruction is only English. Moreover, they have to study all their technical subjects only in English. Unable to comprehend the lessons in English they develop inferiority complex and become poor performers.

Though English is introduced to them at the primary level in the schools, it is merely treated as a subject and the students have very little exposure to the communicative aspects of the language. They are attuned to think only in their mother tongue as the school environment is not English friendly. Even at class X and at the higher secondary level, English is not given due importance as a language. The students are trained and coached to score maximum marks in the examinations but no practical exposure is given to improve their spoken and written skills in English.

Another glaring fact is that majority of the schools, even many of the English medium schools do not create an ambience to use English as the language of communication even inside the school campus. It is ironical that even those who teach English lack proficiency in the language.

Often English is taught through the mother tongue. It does not allow students to think in English which is essential for speaking and writing. They have little chance of listening to good English nor are they encouraged to watch English television channels which might help them to listen good English.

As mother tongue is the predominant language for oral communication, English is seldom used to speak even at informal situations. Reading is restricted to their lessons. They read the notes and specific areas that would help them answer the questions in the examination. Here rote memory takes an upper hand and original answers are not to be expected. There is little opportunity for creative writing or writing on their own. In short the LSRW skills are not given their due importance in the formative years which makes the students develop an aversion towards English. Fear, shyness and inferiority complex take strong roots in their minds.

With this background they enter engineering colleges. As they do not think in English, they try to translate their thoughts from their mother tongue to English. This attitude results in confusion. Moreover their pronunciation of English words is also far from the acceptable standard. This translation method hampers their communication.

In the engineering college they have to learn all their technical subjects in English, prepare notes on their own referring to books from the library which they find it a daunting task. As they cannot follow the lectures in English, they keep quiet during interactive sessions. With poor understanding of verb patterns, sentence structures and grammar of the English language, they write with innumerable mistakes, ranging from spelling errors to errors in vocabulary. Compounding of all these drawbacks go on to affect not only their academic career but also their professional career at large.

English language being the only common link language among all the states of India and the global language of business, commerce, trade and technical higher education, it is indispensable that every engineer/professional gains a good command over the English without which their professional career would be restricted to their local state.

And so it is imperative that proper methodologies are chalked out to support the lateral entry engineering students to become confident users of the English language for informal and professional communication. A comprehensive plan of action to make the lateral entry engineering students practice LSRW skills is to be incorporated in the engineering curricula.

Initially there should be some special sessions to boost their confidence in using the English they know. They have to be oriented in such a way that they realize the importance of learning English and start taking necessary steps regularly to improve their English. In order to create such an atmosphere they should be given a lot of sessions on listening to short speeches, news reading, conversations, interviews and group discussions which would improve their comprehension. This would help them think and respond in English. These listening sessions should be followed by participation sessions where the students are encouraged to be proactive and perform. The students should be strictly instructed to communicate in English among themselves and with the teachers. Once they start using English for casual communication they would become confident of using it at the professional level too.

The habit of reading has to be inculcated and the use of library during class hours should be encouraged. A compulsory library hour every week should be included in the time table. Varied reading materials with simple objective type questions to assess their comprehension of the materials read, summarizing what they have read through writing and/or speaking should be made mandatory.

Task based reading and writing activities have to be made compulsory and should be carried out on a regular basis. Reading a short passage and making notes, reading a story and summarizing it combined with dictionary reference to improve their vocabulary and usage would benefit them a lot. Writing short descriptions and passages on simple topics help them think in English and communicate. Taking up dictation and copy writing would help them improve their spelling and speed in writing.

Participating in conversations and role play, spelling and vocabulary quiz would be interesting and rewarding. Watching and listening to recorded video and audio lessons periodically would improve their comprehension and their pronunciation which in turn would make them confidently communicate in English.

Making them participate in one minute prepared speeches, extempore speeches, talking on real life situations /experiences, and group discussions would help them improve their language skills in a short span of time. Installation of language laboratories in colleges would create an ideal atmosphere for conducting the activities and learning the nuances of the language in a focused manner without distraction. In carrying out all these activities the entire team of teachers in the college should work in unison. All the engineering subject teachers should also interact in English with the students both inside and outside the classroom without giving any room for dilution so that all the lateral entry engineering students can become confident in using English which plays a greater role in making them employable.

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