



Testing oral communication of engineering students for better employability

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ABSTRACT

Of the four skills of language, speaking skill in English is the one that gets least attention in the curriculum at Schools and Universities. Teaching and learning a second language is a great challenge to both the facilitator and the learner. This paper investigates the reasons for ineffective oral communication of engineering students. Two tasks (Personal Interview and Group Discussion) are introduced in this experimental study to know their proficiency level in oral communication. And a short description of the objectives of testing speaking skill, author's responsibility, research design, findings, pedagogical implications and conclusion are discussed. Hoping, it will also help the teachers' community to incorporate it in teaching and learning process.

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Introduction

This is true that our engineering students who start their professional careers in many companies in India and in the other parts of the world after receiving their degrees. Therefore, the development and enhancement of oral communication competency plays a crucial role in the future development of professionals, no matter what field they choose. A survey carried out by the National Association of Colleges and Employers analyzed 294 employers of different fields and secluded eleven fundamental skills that recruiters seek in job seekers. The first and most significant of these skills is oral communication (Jacob and Huui 2006). Similarly, another study from the Centre for Public Resources, which surveyed a total of 250 companies, found that listening and speaking are the most critical areas in need for improvement among the people entering the work force (Bailysok 1991). Other studies specifically link second language proficiency to cognitive and academic ability. On the other hand, individuals who are also proficient in a second language will most likely to be creative and have better problem solving skills (Bialysok, 1990). Other studies reinforce the benefits of second language proficiency with high scores on standardized tests and verbal and non verbal intelligence tests.

As placement recruitment results showed that the ability to use English is regarded as one of the most important criteria that employers look for when hiring graduates. The researcher strongly believes that the graduates' failure to communicate effectively in English Language during job interviews and in the work place is due to their failure to grab the opportunities and the resultant lack of practice in the language when they were in their Schools, Colleges, or Universities. In other words, ability to participate in classroom discussions has also caused them to waste the golden opportunities to get better and master their English oral communication skills.

In this aspect, the researcher hopes that there is an acute need for the language teachers to explore what actually happened during the teaching and learning process. It is hoped that this experimental study will come up with useful working plans and strategies so as to ensure the successful teaching and learning process.

Researcher's interest

In spite of observing positive perception towards target language, it is being begun to sense the learners' frustrations and disappointments. It is noticed keenly that learners get through the written examination with ease. However, few can have good oral communication. They face tough time when they appear for a job interview. There are always complaints from the principal, the management, corporate executives and academia that they are not trained properly to enhance their oral communication. There is a record that many have lost their job opportunity because of their poor oral proficiency in communication skills. Their frustration and lack of motivation inspired the researcher to pursue a phenomenological case study to diagnose their proficiency. Moreover, it helped her understand what learning means and entails. As a result of overwhelming complaints from parents, students, university administrators, some universities felt pressured to improve the communication skills of non native language learners by establishing oral English proficiency requirements. Numerous complains from employers, for example that many Indian ESL users are poor communicators. Lack of communication skills especially in the English language has been cited as one of the reasons why there are so many unemployed graduates.

Therefore the department of English has been given the responsibility of developing the students' communication skills. The question that we constantly ask is whether we should teach English as a subject and prepare students for examinations or we should teach it as a interpersonal skill and prepare them as industry ready. Teachers of English have a responsibility to help their students in overcoming their fears about communicating and to assist students in developing more positive perceptions of communication activities. Miller (1984) says that our classes should produce students who are more confident about reaching out symbolically to others, rather than withdrawing from them.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are described below to focus on the assessment of engineering students' oral communication skills

- To plan, implement, and administer sample oral tests with rating scales that can be used to assess students' L2 oral proficiency levels
- To diagnose the problems that hamper students' fluency

Hypothesis

It is assumed that the genders have impact over grasping power and learning ability. Female gender is assumed to have better performance than that of male gender. To prove this presumption, it is decided to assess and analyze their proficiency with the help of SPSS.

Research Design

It discusses the research methodology used in this study. It gives brief descriptions of research design, sampling, instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis. This study aims to investigate students' oral participation in classroom discussions used two main methods; observation and questionnaire. The selected group of participants is B.E final year Electrical Electronics Engineering. This group received an orientation about the purpose and methodology of the study. They asked for clarification and which are explained on the same day. A sign up sheet with instructions is given which asks for personal information in order to contact them for further administration of the testing. The questionnaire is completed and returned to the researcher. The selected group of 60 participants is of 32 female and 28 male. The selected participants are given unique identification number which refers roll number, medium of instruction, area of schools and gender, for example EMR40, TFU26. They are given convenient time.

Rating Scale and diagnostic tool for testing

A rating scale is a series of short descriptions of different levels of language ability. Its purpose is to describe briefly what the typical learner at each level can do, so that it is easier for the assessor to decide what level to give each learner in a test. The rating scale therefore offers the assessor a series of prepared descriptions, and he or she picks the one which best fits each learner. The rating scale descriptions should be built on the basis of the typical learner (Underhill, 1987). However, few learners are typical. Especially as far as oral language testing is concerned, the problem is extremely complicated because oral language ability is very complex, combining a number of different skills and factors, including personality. The only solution is to adapt and improve scales by trial and error keeping only the parts that are genuinely useful.

Finally in this experiment the marking scores could be awarded on the basis of speaking grading criteria as per American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL 1999). The range could be from 1,2,3,4, where Grade 4 is advanced- the speaker has exceptional communication skills, Grade 3 is intermediate- the evidence of very good language proficiency, Grade 2 is elementary- the speaker makes a number of lexical or grammatical errors and the speaker may depend too much on rehearsed phrase, Grade 1 is novice- the speaker has difficulty in expressing himself in anything other than short sentences. The selected components for the activities personal interview and group discussion are participation, vocabulary, fluency, ideas, coordination and non-verbal communication.

The Sample Oral Tests (SOT)

Personal Interview

It is designed intentionally to achieve positive objectives. For this matter, all organizations spend both time and money on the job interviews to make sure the correct selection process. Thus, there is personal interview to test the personality and

attitude of the candidates, technical interviews are also conducted to generate information in response to particular questions for testing academic and subject awareness, situational interviews reveal the candidates' problem-solving skills and out of box thinking ability and also assess how the candidates will behave in an unexpected situations, and criterion based interviews judge knowledge and abilities in tightly focused way to evaluate how well a candidate fits a particular position. It tests the confidence level of the candidates, and to access the most up-to-date career information, identifies the professional strengths and weaknesses, obtains critical feedback of the interviewee. Whatever may be the style of conducting a job interviews, but the purpose is predefined so that the predictive capabilities of interviews are enhanced.

Results of the Personal Interview - Table 1

Levels	Participation	Body language	Vocabulary	Fluency
Advanced	1(1.7%)	2(3.3%)	0	0
Intermediate	18(30%)	11(18.3%)	15 (25%)	12 (20%)
Elementary	31(51.7%)	34(56.7%)	30(50%)	32(53.3%)
Novice	10(16.7%)	13(21.7%)	15 (25%)	16(26.7%)

Table 1 contains the result for the specially assessed components such as participation, body language, vocabulary, and fluency. The scores show what specific level the participants scored. For the first skill, participation, the oral competency is observed to be at the advanced level for the given 1(1.7%) target participant, 18(30%) target participants exhibit their participation skill at the intermediate level during the pretest of the observation. There are 31(51.7%) participants whose participation is at the elementary level. And (16.7%) are able to get only to the novice level.

The second column describes the results for body language. There are 2(3.3%) whose non-verbal cues are at the advanced level, 11(18.3%) of them are able to exhibit their non-verbal proficiency to the intermediate level, 34(56.7%) of them are at the elementary level during the pre testing period, the non-verbal communication is observed to be at the novice level for the given 13(21.7%) participants.

For the vocabulary, there is none with more word power to get an advanced level. There are 15(25%) participants whose vocabulary is at the intermediate level, 30 (50%) of them are at the elementary level, 15(25%) of them exhibit their word building proficiency to the novice level. As far as the result for fluency is concerned, again none of them is able to get to an advanced level, 12(20%) of them are capable to get to intermediate level, 32(53.3%) of their word stock is at the elementary level, and 16(26.7%) of them are at the novice level.

The features of inaccuracy of words, phrases, inhibitions, lack of vocabulary, and fear of grammatical mistakes, superficial listening and incorrect decoding makes them silent most of the time, and inability to understand the questions and other problems during the interview is also observed. In general they are unable to respond to simple questions on the most common features of day- to-day life. The very basic word repertoire produces inadequate speech that allows them to express only elementary needs and ideas. Therefore, the minimum word stock make them to respond with mono word responses to simple questions such as telling date and time, description of leisure time activities, family and friends, and expressing greetings. The use of non-verbal communication of the target participants is not to the expected level. They are bound by nervousness, lack of eye contact, improper jerking, and rigid facial expression etc. Fluency was mostly constrained to simple direct questions even

which are generally predictable topics. It is also characterized by hesitations and prolonging with one or two word responses. Many have frequent hesitation filled with silence.

Group Discussion

The capacity to take an active part in group discussions is one of the most essential skills that fetch professional success. Laurels come to a person who has effective group discussion skills. It also ensures academic success, interpersonal skills, logical thinking, and ideas generating proficiency. Therefore, the components chosen for this task are ideas, co-ordination, body language, and fluency.

Results of the Group Discussion - Table 2

Levels	Ideas	Co-ordination	Body language	Fluency
Advanced	0	0	1(1.7%)	0
Intermediate	15(25%)	6(10%)	15 (25%)	11 (18.3%)
Elementary	33(55%)	31(51.7%)	33(55%)	32(53.3%)
Novice	12(20%)	23(38.3%)	11 (18.3%)	17(28.3%)

A brief description of the results in number is given in table 2. The components designed for this task are ideas, co-ordination, body language and fluency. It is necessary to mention the reasons for selecting components related to interpersonal rather than linguistic factors. They should be efficient to co-ordinate with others' ideas, and perspectives because each participant's performance reflect team spirit by maintaining co-ordination to accomplish a task. As it is a hallmark to be a leader, selection experts always look for a candidate with a strong but realistic level of confidence without exhibiting disgusted, disgruntled body language with the confidence of persuading the team members. So it is important to remind to talk with confidence and self-assurance.

The first column is designed for the ideas; there is none who get an advanced level grade. There are 15(25%) participants who exhibit intermediate level of ideas, 33(55%) participants' proficiency is discerned to be at the elementary level. And a number of 12(20%) participants' ideas are only to the level of novice. The ideas and content of the topics are the most requirement but they have poor amount of knowledge on the given topic. They have poor ability to analyze the facts or information in a systematic way to correlate them with the personal experiences and exposure. The reason for the poor ideas is unaware of national and international burning issues. And an idea alone does not guarantee for an effective articulation, but other prerequisites are good listening, error free expressions, clarity of expression, and clear articulation.

Co-ordination results are as follows; nobody's performance is at an advanced level. 6(10%) participants' coordination is discerned to be at the intermediate level, 31(51.7%) of them prove their coordination skill to the elementary level, and 23(38.3%) participants showcase their coordination proficiency to the novice level. There is 1(1.7%) target participant whose non-verbal communication is at an advanced level, 15(25%) target participants' proficiency is discerned to be at the intermediate level, 33(55%) of their performance is identified to be at the elementary level, and 11(18.3%) target participants' competency is observed to be at the novice level.

It is generally evaluated that body language determines personality factors such as nervousness, frustration, insecurity and self confidence which take place due to their poor content and language. They are unable to maintain appropriate non-verbal cues. Co-ordination and confidence level are less. Poor confidence level leads to a lack of co-ordination and

productivity. It is clear that they have the problems in analyzing the existing knowledge and assimilating new ideas that can give birth to bright and brilliant ideas and schemes. They are evidenced to be unaware of matters of every day's observation and experience. Their language is inappropriate with imprecise, unclear words, phrases and poor ideas. The body language of the participants reflects their co-ordination, confidence, openness of mind and sincerity, ability to grasp language and appropriate words to construct the sentences. Evaluating listening of what is being discussed will help them deliberately to follow others views and opinions for the successful discussion. Many feel that they are pressured for participation and clarification. They face obstacles such as inability to analyze a situation, problems, or condition that result in unsuccessful discussion. Unnecessary pauses and hesitation robbed the clarity of expression, and clear articulation, i.e. their voice is slow and weak with indistinct articulation. Poor listening resulted in misunderstanding of the words or phrases. They appear to be weak, submissive and passive persons. Lack of analytical bent of mind and rationale thinking block their participation. Incomplete thinking disturbs the good flow of language and content.

Brief Review of Opinions of the Target Participants on Activities

The target participants describe their informal conversation and interaction with the researcher during the study. As they describe their experiences, the obstacles identified are feeling nervous around others, poor exposure to others due to limited practice. One of the participants confessed that he fears and speaks English poorly when he speaks to the superiors because he is very conscious that the listener judges his English, especially worries about pronunciation and appropriateness of words. In contrast, he feels less nervous when talking with someone who has same school background, because he is clear that in these interactions they can practice their language skills and negotiate meaning in a non-threatening forum.

The activity based teaching promote learners' autonomy; build the team spirit and leadership skills automatically. The target participants said that classroom activities such as debates, discussion, word games make it possible to acquire many language skills and enhances their oral efficiency, particularly this approach has more impact to put an end to shyness, to enrich linguistic competence, and to acquire it practically but not theoretically. They do not deny that classroom activities generate interest in language based activities.

Analysis of Hypothesis

Chi-Square and Mean Value Result analysis for genders - Table 3

Gender	Novice	Elementary	Intermediate	Advanced	Total
Male	10(62.5%)	14(43.75%)	04(33.33%)	0	28
Female	6(37.5%)	18(56.25%)	8(66.6%)	0	32
Total	16	32	12	0	60

Table 3 explains that 10(62.5%) male participants' performance is discerned to be at the novice level, 14(43.75%) participants exhibit their performance to the elementary level, 4(33.33%) participants are able to get the grade of intermediate level and none gets an advanced level

Among 32 female target participants, 6(37.5%) participants' proficiency level is observed to be at the novice level, 18(56.25%) are at the elementary level, 8(66.6%) participants are able to get intermediate level

Mean Value for the Genders Table 4

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Mean-diff	t-value	Df	Significant
Male	28	51.3214	13.8592	2.6191	-7.6161	-2.0646	58	0.0434
Female	32	58.9375	14.5911	2.5794				

Chi-Square Value for the Performance of Genders Pre& Post Tests Analysis Table 5

Chi-Square Value	DOF	Table value	Sig. Value
2.5781	2	5.991	0.276

The result is again examined keenly with SPSS package to explore whether there are any significant findings in concerned variations in the oral efficiency between male and female participants. It is assumed that usually females perform better than male, but the results of this research reveal that the assumption is wrong. For example, activity which is planned or prepared, they might attempt for good performance, whereas for the unprepared task, they find it difficult and more stressed to take part in activity and kept mum. This shows that anything which is memorized, they can do. They are not confident enough to face the audience. It is to be believed that females have more assumption and sometimes are scared about the negative criticism of peers than that of male. The Chi-Square results present in the above table 5 shows that there is no difference in gender's performance. On the basis of findings, alternative hypothesis could be rejected that there is difference between genders, null hypothesis is accepted. The chi-square tests give the researcher confidence that the result is real on these data. In terms of all the results obtained, the significant difference in oral proficiency and performance between males and females are equal in all the tasks.

Findings & Pedagogical Implications

- It is discerned that students are confined and bound by shyness, nervousness, intimidation of peers, worried about peers' remarks etc. Most of the target participants have lack of assurance in expressing their ideas and views, then it automatically results in poor performance
- It also reveals that male and female participants from rural based schools try their level best to perform better, though some of them have poor linguistic competency, they show inquisitiveness and quest to learn new words and improve their proficiency
- The findings of the study suggested that many target participants are still having problems with the language; therefore a few are able to acquire proficiency only at the novice level. Thus, it is recommended that the low level proficient

learners may be identified and isolated and helped for basic language learning. And for others, activities to improve all the skills are to be planned

Conclusion

This study explored the oral efficiency of selected target non-probability engineering students. There are no specific tests for English in engineering college to enhance oral communication hence new tests are selected and experimented to find out the disparity in the oral proficiency. The objectives that lead to this experiment are planning, implementing sample oral tests with rating scales, diagnosing the problems that avert fluency, comparing and describing the significant findings between genders. It is found that when language is taught as life skill rather than as a subject of knowledge they will take part in the classroom interaction actively. The teachers are expected to motivate the learners and expected to patient enough to bear with their errors.

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