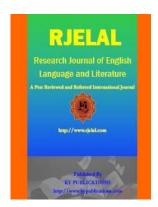




SPOKEN ENGLISH CLASSES – AIDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This research paper highlights the need to acquire spoken English skills in India at a time when India is high on globalization and the positive role played by Spoken English classes in urban India. The process adopted was to meet people attending such classes and seek responses to a questionnaire designed to understand as to why they have joined Spoken English classes. Analysis of the responses to the questionnaire brings to the table, deep insight into reasons for learning to converse in English. It also reveals the urgency for people to learn the language to keep pace with changing times. It very clearly brings out that the new generation looks at proficiency in Spoken English as a much required skill when it comes to employability or better job opportunities. It is a desired skill for personality development.

The paper highlights the importance of Spoken English in professional development and how Spoken English classes are in fact aiding individuals to acquire language skills in a short span of time through use of innovative methods. Understanding the significance of English language in India today, it also brings out the need to impart effective spoken English skills in the early years of education, so that as an adult the individual feels sufficiently empowered to face the competitive professional world in emerging India. As a quick solution for those having crossed the schooling stage, it would greatly help if Engineering/ Medical colleges and Organizations provided crash courses in English language for students and new employees.

Key Words: Multilingual, Mushrooming, Spoken English, Empowered, Professional development, Language skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a medium of communication. Ability to speak different languages always helps people to communicate better. When a communication takes place in a language that both the parties understand; the communication is more effective and the understanding better.

With globalization gaining ground in India, particularly from the last decade, knowledge of English language has become all the more essential

to communicate better with the outside world as it is the language for trade and commerce.

The world of knowledge in terms of books or the internet is available in English, much more than any other language. With technology providing the competitive edge, knowledge of English language has become even more critical as the language of technology and the development of science.

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English is in India today, a symbol of people's aspirations for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life. Its colonial origins now forgotten or irrelevant, its initial role in independent India, tailored to higher education (as a "library language", a "window on the world"), now felt to be insufficiently inclusive socially and linguistically the current status of English stems from its overwhelming presence on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena. (NCERT 2006.1)

India is innovating and more than ever before, the country has taken major leaps in science and technology. Today, when India is poised to be a major global player with the 'Make in India' and 'Digital India' initiatives, it becomes imperative to create systems to impart English language learning and particularly spoken English skills. The stress is on spoken English - verbal communication being used more than written communication in real life to communicate with people.

On an average, students have to study English as a subject in vernacular medium schools for a period ranging from 7 to 9 years, yet the students lack confidence to communicate in the language. The result is that they face difficulties in getting a job in reputed organizations despite having a good academic record.

Various studies have already been conducted in this area and various dimensions of what is lacking in the education system have been brought out.

The Problem

India's linguistic diversity requires a common language for communication within the country. With the colonial past, English emerges as that common language that can connect the country as it also enjoys the status of a language for official work along with Hindi as per the constitution of India.

The methodology of teaching followed in India is still the traditional one focusing on reading and writing skills, whereas communication requires more of spoken skills.

Lack of skilled teachers for teaching English, leads to poor dissemination of knowledge by them to their students, leading to students learning levels being very low. This has further pitfalls like creating disinterest and fear of the language. The focus of students shifts to passing exams rather than learning the language.

The atmosphere at home is not conducive to learning a new language like English as the family members generally do not know the language and are not in a position to support the child in learning the English language.

Similarly, in vernacular medium schools, English is a subject, but there is no development of speaking skills. Overall at the school level there is no incentive to learn the English. However, as the students move towards higher education, they experience the need to know English as the medium of study becomes English particularly in Engineering and Medical colleges. Students find it extremely difficult to cope with the situation which in turn leads to depression and develops an inferiority complex among them. These softer issues lead to loss of confidence and become an obstacle for personality development.

In such a scenario, urban India has seen the emergence of Spoken English classes in the last decade. The mushrooming of these classes during the last 4 to 5 years, highlights the urgency of a growing number of the population to acquire English speaking skills swiftly.

The Process

To understand the reasons for the rapid growth of Spoken English classes in urban India, a study was conducted covering 169 students from 15 Spoken English classes spread over the cities of Mumbai, Chennai, NCR Delhi, Nagpur and Bhubaneswar.

To compare the teaching methods between Spoken English classes and in English medium as well as vernacular medium schools, a study was conducted covering 81 students from 5 English medium schools in Delhi and Chennai as well as 397 students from 12 vernacular medium schools spread over the cities of Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, NCR Delhi and Bhubaneswar.

The people attending the Spoken English classes included students from schools and colleges (66%), BPO Employees (11%), Housewives (4%), Businessmen (4%), Professors (2%) and others who

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were employed but did not specify their profession (13%).

The students' choice of class was largely based on reputation of the class (71.6%) and then by proximity to residence (18.9%) or school/workplace (9.5%). The duration of course chosen by the students was of 3 months (29.6%), 6 months (34.9%) and more than 6 months (35.5%). Of these, 72% of the students had opted for courses of 6 months or of longer duration. It is interesting to note that 67% of the students enrolled in these classes had their schooling from vernacular medium, while what was surprising was that 33% came from English medium schools.

On questioning students from English medium schools, as to why they were here, they said their parents and family members did not speak English; therefore they did not get adequate practice and support to get proficiency in the language. Hence, they had joined the classes to be able to speak fluently in English. The statistics support the argument as 63% of the students, who were under study, came from families in which both parents didn't speak English; in 29% cases one parent could speak in English and only in 8% cases both the parents could speak in English.

The students had joined the Spoken English classes as they felt it would help them in many ways, such as:

Reason	% of Respondents
It will make me feel more confident while interacting with people	85
It helps in personality development	95
It improves my position in society	90
It is necessary in today's world	96
It helps to get a better job	92
It helps me in my profession	91
It will help me to go abroad	82
It will help me to teach my child/children	83

The students felt it easier to learn English in these classes as they got individual attention. The argument seemed right as 41% of the classes had batches of 10 to 20 students, which made learning easier with individual attention.

Further, 91.7% found learning interesting as innovative methods of teaching have been adopted in these classes. The methods included use of group discussion (81%), Video recording and replay (22.5%), story-telling (35%), role-play, music & drama (38%), quiz /games (32.5%). Overall, 93% of students attending Spoken English classes found English language learning easy in these classes.

This was contrary to the methods used in English as well as Vernacular medium schools where the majority of the activities in the English class is restricted to reading, writing or listening (85.8%), while speaking is the least of all activities. Further, teacher teaching words and students memorizing them was another major activity. 77% students

responded that teachers rarely or never used innovative methods like audio-visuals or visuals to teach English in their class though scientific research has proved that the human mind process images quickly and also retains the image.

90% of the students responded that in school, grammar was taught by the teacher explaining rules; students copied from the blackboard and memorized what was taught. 67% students responded that the teachers never used games/quiz/pictures/role play/actions to explain a dry subject like grammar.

While 97.9% of the students in the English medium as well as Vernacular medium schools combined liked learning English, only 17.5% stated they could speak English fluently. 98.1% responded that they want to learn to speak fluently. 97.3% felt it was important to learn to read, write and speak English for the following reasons:

Answer	% of Respondents
It will help me in higher studies	98

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It will enable me to use the internet easily	95
I will feel more confident when I am in college	96
It will improve my position in the society	94
It is necessary in today's world	97
It helps to get a better job	95

The findings in both cases i.e. Spoken English class students and schools students on the significance of English is very similar.

99% of the students from Spoken English classes felt that the knowledge of English language to an Indian is very significant at a time when India is high on globalization. 82% felt that it would help if schools /colleges/office organized crash Spoken English classes for students/employees so that they did not have to attend classes outside as they were doing presently.

To the question, as to at what age it is easier to learn a language like English, 41% students felt 2-5 years, 25% felt 6-10, 28% felt 10-15 years and 6% felt above 16 years of age.

On the questions seeking factors influencing learning English, the responses show 76% students stated their parents /family influence them to learn English, 67% responded that their friends / neighbours also influenced them to learn English. While 59% felt that the place of residence (urban/rural) impacts and influences learning English, 33% felt their place of residence didn't matter to them. This is perhaps because of their experience in their present status in life.

One of the most interesting finding was the growing number of housewives joining the classes. In fact, in Mumbai, a particular Spoken English class conducted a special batch for housewives. On talking to the housewives in the class, it came to light that their need to learn English arose from the fact that their children were getting an inferiority complex that their mothers didn't speak English. The need arose due to social pressures - reasons like being able to converse with their child's teacher during parent-teacher meets, converse with their husband's friends, etc. These housewives felt that their position in society was improving with their ability to converse in English; it was also helping them to teach their children. They felt much more confident and empowered as an individual and their family members appreciated their effort.

The employed, who attended the classes, included those working in BPOs, where English speaking skills fetched higher salaries. There were businessmen who had joined the classes as they found English was the language of trade and commerce and it became a necessity for them as they expanded their business to other states of the country and overseas. While those employed but did not disclose their profession while answering the questionnaire said they worked in malls as sales persons or were self employed and had English speaking clients. The Professors, who joined the Spoken English classes, felt fluency in English had become a necessary skill for better employability options. Each of them felt ability to speak in English language empowered them to take on the world.

Conclusion

The mushrooming number of institutions offering spoken English classes indicates what is missing in our education system. While a student has to study English as a subject from 7 to 9 years in vernacular medium schools, the students still lack confidence to communicate in the language. Therefore, even the poor aspire to send their children to English medium schools.

On the other hand, India is innovating; today when the country is looking at becoming a global player by making India a manufacturing hub or even opening up the tourism industry in a very big way, it becomes imperative to create systems to impart spoken English skills. While the government is working on tweaking with the education system, it is a long drawn process. The citizens of today cannot wait for the system to change and are finding their own solutions.

To conclude, English language plays a significant role in the development of peoples' personality and equips them for growth at professional level. This in turn helps in the progress of the country as English is the language of business and trade. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of the family, teachers, government and the society http://www.rjelal.com

to contribute towards improving spoken English skills throughout the country.

It would be a great help to students pursuing higher study particularly Engineering and Medical, if their institutions arranged for such Spoken English classes in the college premises as part of the curriculum. Similarly, organizations could, as part of their training programme arrange for Spoken English classes in their own premises to help the new recruits particularly from vernacular schools.

Till the system matures to deliver the results and make available a robust system of helping each child to acquire, English speaking skills, Spoken English classes seem to be a quick fix solution to acquire Spoken English skills to different segments of the population in India. These classes are in a way truly aiding professional development by helping the seekers of English language skills.

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