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Soft Skills: A medium to enrich Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The ever revolving dynamic world of today, demands soft skills to handle human resource at workplace in varying situations. In academic growth process, the stress is laid on acquiring technical/theoretical knowledge. Very little or no efforts are made to enhance soft skills/life skills/people skills. In order to gain competitive advantage, the workforce needs to be updated with soft skills along with technical skills. Communication being a crucial aspect of soft skills is left ignored. The technical professionals are required to display strong communication skills when interacting with domestic or overseas clients and peers. On their business network, each employee is expected to be thorough with the nuances of communication. Adequate language skills are a prerequisite to communication. Unless the language is impressive, the communication cannot be fruitful. The communicators, globally, feel comfortable in interacting with people in English in different contexts and situations. The widespread use of English has over years, prompted nations to train their people for business transactions, cultural exchange, technological advancements etc. The present paper draws attention towards the significance of soft skills for technical professionals and how English can be developed and enriched by using soft skills. The focal point of the study is a discussion on Activities and Exercises used in the communication under soft skills. In institutions, students are nowadays trained to become effective communicators with specialized language skills. While developing and designing courses on language skills, subject experts introduce different pedagogical methodologies and curriculum for easy and better understanding of prospective learners.

Keywords: communication, network, nuances, soft skills, language, significance, learners

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Necessity of Soft Skills

The millennial workforce has undergone tremendous transformation both latitudinal and longitudinal. The rampant technological advancements have been instrumental in shaping the present business arena. The old style of working may be found effective but not efficient (Redmann & Kotrlik, 2004)¹. In the globalized economy and 24 X 7 burgeoning business worlds, the job roles at

every level have evolved and expanded in such a way as making it essential for the executives to undertake various roles and responsibilities at the same time. Right from back office operations, managing a sales team, research and development, consultancy to offshore and onshore clients and customers the executives have to perform at myriad levels. Acquiring a job and sustaining in the same has now become tougher. Despite technical insight

and wisdom, an employee is expected to have skills and attitude fit for the changing workplace situations. Mere technical knowledge is not adequate enough to assure his/ her success or even growth in the organization. Modern companies are always look out for candidates who can add value to their organization through their soft skills (Serby Richard, 2003)². At certain places, soft skills are given preference over technical or hard skills as the employers are of the opinion that they can through training cultivate technical skills but for soft skills, the employee needs to have an innate desire and a positive attitude to develop new skills i.e. people skills. Hard skills were in earlier times, needed to retain the employment (James and James, 2004)³. However, in a dynamic business environment, hard skills may not be adequate enough to combat with "altered economy, advances in technology, or more efficient production." Soft skills are required for individual and personal growth as well. Without these skills, the organization may work but may not flourish. "Soft" skills are defined as personal qualities, attributes, or the level of commitment of a person that set him or her apart from other individuals who may have similar skills and experience (Perreault, 2004)⁴.

Concept of Soft Skills

The Wikipedia defines the "Soft Skills as a sociological term relating to a person's (Emotional Intelligence Quotient - EQ), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities."⁵ The hard skills may not be complete as soft skills comprise the humane part of a human being (hard skills). Hard skills contribute to only 15% of one's success while remaining 85% is made by soft skill (Watts M & Watts RK, 2008)⁶. The interpersonal skills encompass listening, team building, leadership, conflict and negotiation, assertiveness, problem-solving and decision-making, change management, self, and image management, etc. that form a major part of soft skills. Soft skills are categorised as Intra and Interpersonal skills (socio-emotional) essential for personal

development, social participation and workplace success (Kechagias, 2011)⁷.

The soft skills are action-oriented and hence required to be practiced more outside the four walls of classrooms. Diverse tools and techniques like simulation games, role-plays, outbound games, brain-storming sessions, ice-breakers and warm-ups, discussions, case study, handouts, presentations are used to train students/trainees on soft skills.

Soft Skills and Language Training

Gone are the days when the degree itself was the symbol of worthiness and usefulness of the employee/job aspirant. In present times, English is used extensively in news and information, business, diplomacy, professions, travel and also entertainment (Kenji, 2006).⁸ Now more stress is laid on the person's ability to utilize the acquired knowledge and skills towards the growth of the organization. The same is true with the language teaching. It is now required to use the acquired grammatical and lexicon rules in various situations than to merely know them. "English language teaching more than pertaining to teach the high-flown rich and bountiful literature has to shift track and digress towards teaching a more utility oriented language (Padamja, 2012).⁹ The learners of the language are not just to be academically strong but also equally versed in using the knowledge in communicating with others. Both these aspects of language teaching have to go hand in hand. As is rightly stated, we (English teachers) should try to do our best in achieving two results simultaneously that are vital in view of the ever-changing 'face' of English: to enhance our students' linguistic competence, and to prepare them for handling the extra-linguistic demands via soft skills. (Menon & Alamelu, 2009).¹⁰

The tools, techniques, and methods of Soft Skills training could be of immense use to make a shift from the traditional method of teaching language skills to the communicative method of language teaching. Instead of focusing on grammatical rules, syntactic structures, rote memorization of vocabulary and using literary texts as teaching material, the present-day English teachers need to concentrate on improving language efficiency by making use of real life

situations as teaching material. For this, a more creative, analytical, logic-oriented and interactive method of teaching should be adopted. Briefly, English teachers should become more of a facilitator, and less of an instructor.

Instead of teaching if the learners/trainees are trained on how to work upon their language then they would pick up the concepts of language with much ease. The learners are able to grasp language related fundamentals by actively participating and performing as per the requirement. A lot of activities as mentioned further assist trainees to work in groups/teams and refine their language skills. While interacting and communicating with other group members the trainees unhesitatingly, express their thoughts and ideas. By understanding the group dynamics, they also learn how to behave in a group and work in a team. Teamwork is required at every stage of professional career and life. Moreover, the trainees learn from one another's output. This generates a very congenial environment where all the learners/trainees work together upon a given task and deliver maximum in the limited time. The performance or output is measured at both teams as well as individual levels. In the words of Perreault (2005)¹¹, learners who take a keen interest in acquiring new skills-set and continue apply them for better output are always given preference over others.

Role-Play

Activity - Through role-plays, learners emulate real/imaginary life situations in the classroom environment. This activity provides a platform to use acquired language skills in real life situations e.g. college, hostel, bus stand, movie theater, market place etc. When the trainees use the language in real-life situations, their confidence is increased manifold. The activity, further, includes an opportunity to practice writing skills, as the trainees are to write their own scripts/dialogues on a given real or imaginary situation. The emotive and expressive aspect of language learning is also covered in the activity wherein the trainees express and project the character's emotions using impactful words and appropriate body language.

Process - The activity starts with a video related to acting and/or dialogue delivery. This creates a suitable environment for role-plays. A brief discussion related to vocabulary and tenses used in day-to-day conversations helps in the preparation of the scripts. For the activity, groups of 4 to 5 trainees are formed. Every group is briefed about the situation. Following are some sample situations:

A. Child labour: You are an NRI student, visiting India for the first time with your uncle, who is a senior government officer. You halt at a roadside eating joint and see many young children working there. You talk to the joint owner. Incidentally, parents of some children are also there to collect their ward's wages.

B. Concern for the environment: Every month you visit the temple situated in a village nearby your town with your grandmother. Lately, a fast food joint is opened there. The used plastic plates and cups are scattered in the temple and the gardens adjoining. You try to reason with the vendor. The head of the village, the security guard of the temple and some other villagers also join the discussion. Around 5 to 7 minutes time is given to the groups to prepare their script. The group unanimously decides upon individual roles and practises their situation. Once the preparation is over all groups, one by one act out their situations.

Discussion & Feedback - In the discussion listening skills, conflict management, paralinguistic, body language and emotive aspect of the language are included. The feedback covers the suggestions to improve the writing and conversational skills. Proper use of words and grammatical rules while preparing the scripts is highlighted. The technique to develop effective conversational skills is explored through the first-hand experience of the role-plays.

Outcome - The trainees learn to write dialogues in the English language. As the dialogues are generally in witty repartee form, the skill to ask questions and give answers is inculcated in the trainees. Identifying and resolving conflict in various situations is learned through this activity.

Newspaper Analysis

Activity - The activity is designed to integrate newspaper into developing and using communication for an effective outcome. As the

activity is built around the newspaper so the trainees get an ample opportunity to improve their reading and comprehending skills along with vocabulary enhancement and analytical and writing skills. Since the newspaper is easily accessible and is also inexpensive so the facilitator does not have to struggle for a resource.

Process – The entire class of students is divided into groups of 4-5 members. Each group is handed over a copy of the newspaper. The trainer/facilitator flashes few words or phrases from the headlines of a news story on the projector screen. The group members together recall the meaning of those words and phrases by going through the news story and looking at the pictures associated with it.

Thereafter, each group is guided to choose either one news article or an event report. The group is required to skim and scan the article among its members and identify uncommon words. The members may discuss their article with the facilitator for a better understanding and then prepare a write-up or a presentation for the same. Towards the end, each group makes a presentation of the write-up and other groups pose questions to the presenters.

Discussion & Feedback – The newspaper activity enables trainees to work upon their linguistic competency. While synchronizing news headlines with the news photographs, the trainees are exposed to a variety of new words and phrases. Reading and comprehension along with written expressions are primarily shared by the trainees. The discussion is followed by the facilitator's feedback on write-ups and presentations as well. The grammatical errors, sentence formation, organization of thoughts with clarity, coherence, and completeness also take a due share in the feedback.

Outcome – The trainees take a keen interest in analyzing the news articles as each group has a different story to talk about. The trainees learn to use the newspaper to improve vocabulary, reading comprehension and writing skills.

Video Analysis

Activity – It is not only “seeing is believing” but otherwise also, visual imagery has a strong impact on the minds of the trainees. When used as a

teaching-learning medium, the videos hold the attention of the trainees comparatively more than listening to things. While watching a video the trainees get involved with it and are able to retain the content.

Process – Similar to newspaper analysis, groups of 4-5 members each are formed and they are instructed to sit in their groups. Before viewing the video, an array of words and phrases picked up from the video is prepared and shared with the trainees. This is followed by a short introduction of the video along with the speaker is given to the trainees. Once the video is shared, they are asked to prepare a write-up/presentation on the video. Besides, they are asked to observe the non-verbal cues and paralinguistic of the speaker. For this activity generally, the TED videos are picked up.

Discussion & Feedback – The discussion revolves around the learners performance during the presentation which reflects their observation strength, active listening along with analyzing and comprehending skills. Does the background information of sharing vocabulary and about the speaker help the trainees, is also exchanged with them. While sharing the feedback, the groups are informed about the gap in their presentation and that of the speaker both from the verbal and non-verbal perspective.

Outcome – Upon the completion of their task the trainees get insight about new words and phrases along with a theme which they may or may not have studied earlier. Their language skills get a boost as during the activity they tend to analyze and comprehend the subject content of the video. They also happen to learn how to emulate the language usage and pronunciation of words through the speech delivery of the speaker. Along with their spoken delivery, their writing skills get strengthen as develop a write-up for the video.

Presentation Skills

Activity - The activity introduces the trainees to the conversational/presentation aspect of language including tone, intonation, pitch, pronunciation, and proper body language to express the ideas more emphatically. The trainees also get an opportunity to use language in close coordination with other

team members. The trainees become familiar with the formal version of the language.

Process - The session starts with a discussion on the use of language at the workplace. The selection of words, sentence formation, and body language is to be in accordance with the environment. Then the trainees are gathered into groups of 3 students. Handouts of power point presentations are given to each group. 10 to 15 minutes are given to each group to prepare the presentation. After this, each group delivers its presentation.

Discussion & Feedback - Presentations are followed by a discussion on the use of precise and to the point language in presentations. The vitality of the coordination among the team members is also a point to be reckoned in the discussion. The feedback part throws light on the assessment of each group's presentation. Paralinguistic aspects like tone, volume, pitch, pace, pronunciation and clarity and body language and its various nuances like eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture are the bearers of the verbal message. These aspects are evaluated in the feedback part.

Outcome - The trainees become aware of the formal version of the language and how it is differentiated from the day-to-day conversational language. The activity trains the presenters to control and mould their paralinguistic and body language according to the workplace environment.

Case Study

Activity - Case study activity is found to be very effective in developing reading-comprehending-analyzing abilities of the learners. The activity demands a strong command over the skill to ascertain and understand the hidden meanings of the text. As the trainees discuss the case study or give answers to the questions from the case study in written form, they also get an opportunity to use language to resolve conflicts.

Process - The trainees are divided into groups of 5. Each group is given a printed copy of the case study. The group reads the case study and tries to understand the problem/situation given in it. As every group reads it for 3 to 4 times, they grasp the conflict and the several perspectives of the conflict presented in the case study. Then, not going out of the context of the case study, every group prepares

a write-up on the case study. The write-up primarily includes what the group has understood in the case study i.e. what is the problem and what are the probable solutions to resolve the conflict. Now every group reads out its analysis one by one. The trainer writes the solutions as given by every group on the white board. Once the groups have given their views, a group discussion is conducted to evaluate various solutions on a common platform.

Discussion & Feedback - The trainer discusses the activity from the perspective of understanding the text and its layered meaning. The reading and comprehending skills are also discussed through this activity. The feedback dissects the process with which every group tried to understand and resolve the conflict of the case study. To what extent the approach to the case study and the solutions provided by every group are different from one another are the contents of the feedback.

Outcome - The trainees learn to dissect a statement and get the meaning hidden under the surface. The skill to dissect a written discourse and point out the subtle statements and arguments are inculcated in the trainees. As the groups discuss various interpretations of the case study, they learn the use of language to reach a conclusion.

Public Speaking: Public speaking is the process of speaking to a group of people in a structured, deliberate manner intended to inform, influence, or entertain the listeners. It is closely allied to "presenting", although the latter has more of a commercial connotation. In public speaking, as in any form of communication, there are five basic elements, often expressed as "*who is saying what to whom using what medium with what effects?*" The purpose of public speaking can range from simply transmitting information to motivating people to act, to simply telling a story. The dexterity in this skill is very crucial in today's world of fast communication and connectivity. For nurturing public speaking skills activities like Just a Minute (JAM) and Volte-Face are very enlightening and engrossing.

Activity - JAM is an activity, which demands the participants to think and speak at the same time. Although the speeches are not made extempore, there occur such situations in life where one has to

speak without giving much thought. For such occasions, this activity provides a base for practice. The activity requires the participants to talk for sixty seconds on a given subject, "without repetition, hesitation, or deviation."

Process - The trainees are to speak for one minute on a given topic "without repetition, hesitation, or deviation." The rule of repetition does not allow repetition of words and phrases. Using same sentence structure repetitively can also be challenged. Hesitation rule does not allow pauses and gaps in between the speech can cause negative marks under this rule. Again, deviating from the topic is not allowed. The trainer explains these rules to the trainees. The trainees are divided into five groups. Each group selects a candidate for the activity. All the five participants sit in front of the class. A topic is given to each participant. The participant has to speak on the topic for 60 seconds while taking care of the rules given below. While one participant is speaking, other groups can raise objections according to the rules stated above.

Sample Topics for JAM

- If you could be a superhero, which superhero would you be?
- If you could change one thing in the world, what would it be?
- If you had 25-hour days (while everyone else continued to have 24-hour days), what would you do with the extra time?
- If you woke up suddenly because your house was on fire, which three things would you save as you run outside?

Discussion & Feedback - The discussion of the activity is centered on the techniques to develop the ability to think and speak sensibly at the same time. The habit of reading and writing is also discussed to generate ideas and give them a structure. The feedback on the performances of the participants and the objections raised trace the process with which every participant developed ideas and presented them on their topics.

Outcome - The trainees realize the importance to think and communicate quickly. They also understand the vitality of reading and writing to discipline their faculties to perform in such

situations where they are thinking and speaking simultaneously.

Activity - Volte-Face is another activity related to public speaking in which the trainees get an opportunity to break their hitch of speaking in English. In this activity, on a given topic, the trainees are to express their ideas in favour of it and then they have to counter their own views on the topic. In this activity, the trainees are to think laterally and explore their thoughts in every aspect. Along with this, the spontaneity of the trainees in expressing their thoughts is also evaluated.

Process - This is an individual activity. One by one, every trainee is asked to pick a topic for a topic. Preparation time of 1 minute is given to every trainee. Then the trainee speaks in favour of the topic for 1 minute until the buzzer sounds. After this immediately, they speak against the topic for another 1 minute until buzzer sounds.

Sample Topics for Volte Face:

- Nature
- Music
- Travel
- Cricket
- Tata Nano
- Health

Discussion & Feedback - The discussion relates the activity to an effective tool to build communication skills with confidence and spontaneity. The ability of quickly moving from one idea to another is also discussed with the trainees. Reading and writing habits that build the thinking process is also a part of the discussion of the activity. The feedback is given on the individual performances of the trainees.

Outcome - The focus is on the thinking process and the use of language to communicate arguments about the topic.

Conclusion

The above activities under soft skills could prove a milestone in learning of English language if designed, planned, executed, and evaluated thoroughly. Based on outcomes certain modifications may be taken up to improve the effectiveness of the training further.

Surely, through the above-said activities, the learners would unknowingly be able to contribute and perform individually within the group.

Gradually, they will be at ease and shall become confident in their communication and linguistic skills. English, being the global language, is in great demand when it comes to the business world. The professionals, across sectors and segments, are required to be high on soft skills along with technical/hard skills. The communication is the least that is expected from any professional. (Jaderstrom & Schoenrock, 2008)¹² asserted that clear and crisp communication is vital for success in the global business environment. While imparting skills to the learners, the institutions face a tremendous challenge but with soft skills as a medium, it becomes easy to train learners on the nuances of language for communication purpose

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