



ENGLISH FOR EMPLOYABILITY A Challenge for ELT faculty

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ABSTRACT

Surveys after surveys have brought home the alarming fact that India is facing a huge skills gap; severe job-talent mismatch, the lack of right skills and competencies for the job required and even less than 25 per cent of the fresh graduates are employable. 'Insufficient supply of quality skills' remains one of the major impediments to further economic growth in India.

English being the most dominant, global language of communication, diplomacy, business, science, technology and industry, the ever-increasing importance of English language communication skills as a crucial, vital element in deciding ones employability quotient cannot be overstated. Lack of linguistic proficiency, poor communicative and personality skills often make it difficult for young graduates to organize and express their thoughts effectively and confidently. This affects their prospect of gaining and keeping employment.

The present paper attempts to draw attention to the widening employability crises and the dire need of paradigm shift in the way ELT community at professional colleges perceive their role. It is high time they prepared themselves to play the role of a trainer or facilitator who can build real competencies and skills to bridge the skill gap by focusing on integrated, multi-skill development of the learners, along with enhancement of English Language skills.

Key words: Employability, motivation, proficiency, soft skills

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has thrown open unmatched opportunities, with more focus on the students overall ability apart from the academic competence. English being the global language of communication or the 'lingua franca' of the world has gained the status of a very powerful influential factor causing transformation in Indian society. It is the language of better education, more exciting opportunities and competitive advantage in India. English is associated with the ideology of modernity and progress. It is the language of the educated élite and a marker of social status. English-speaking workforce is the key ingredient in employability today, considering India's formidable place in the global information technology industry, particularly the BPO and KPO sectors. So English language communication skill is no doubt a very crucial, core and the most demanded employability skill; a life skill' or a "survival skill' in the twenty-first century

India which is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual country. We are fast-moving into a world in which not to have English is to be marginalized and disqualified. English is a useful vehicle, a vital element in India's continued progress, but the final goal must lie beyond English.

A number of technically competent students have not been successful in job interviews just because of their lack of communication skills. There have been many cases where lack of proficiency in English or failure to get required score / band on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is evading the dream of studying abroad even in case of academically brilliant students.

Both educationists and employers have been emphasizing the urgent need of improving communication skills of fresh graduates. Narayanan, vice chairman of Cognizant Technology Solutions and chairman of the NASSCOM, in an interview

(Warrior, 2007) stated, "Communication and soft skills and ability to learn on their own and work in teams are very important for those who join the industry". "Most students are not industry ready because they lack communication skills." (Infosys, 2008).

Employability-oriented education; the need of the hour:

Now, with the widening gap between classroom education and skills crucial for employment threatening to intimidate India's growth, the government has recognized the importance of **employability-oriented education**. Many of the good universities now offer co-curricular courses in English communication and soft skills to make sure that their graduates are employable. The established employers from the industries are working closely with the universities and colleges which supply their new recruits. But many colleges do not offer such courses, or do not have the qualified staff to do so. This pushes students into private sector 'finishing schools' or 'courses, that are mushrooming all over the country to bridge the skill gap.

Employability: Employability skills are a relatively new and often talked about term these days being emphasized by every one - be it the academicians, industry or the government.

Definition

"Employability is a multi-faceted characteristic of a person, a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in their chosen occupation(s) to the benefit of themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy." (HEA, 2012, PDF). (Yorke 2006).

Employability skills are those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job (Robinson, 2000). Employability skills are the key skills and personal attributes that one needs to enter, use and thrive in the new world of work. Employment skills basically fall into two categories; Soft skills and soft skills

Job or discipline-specific skills knowledge, related qualifications and competencies and career management skills for a particular job or role (referred to as 'hard skills'). And other more generic skills, capabilities and enabling skills (referred to as

'soft skills', employability Skills, or people's skills) that are equally as important for career success.

Employability Skills or soft skills include communication skills and other generic, attitudinal and transferable, self management skills and personal attributes such as self-confidence, self-control, inter and intra personal skills, honesty, integrity, reliability, adaptability, flexibility, willingness to learn, stress tolerance, managing time, efficiency, Interpersonal skills, and many other skills like team building, Leadership, management, problem solving skills, initiative and enterprise etc.

Communication Skills cover basic communication skills include the verbal and non verbal communication skills like reading, listening, writing, speaking effectively and body language. Higher order communication skills include oral Skills for public presentations, conversations, negotiations, conflict resolutions, knowledge-sharing, discussions, debates etc.

In addition to special training in soft skills and employability skills, integration of these skills within subject modules will certainly offer plenty of opportunities to the professional graduates to improve their skills.

Challenges for teachers of English; a wakeup call

So now, it is a wakeup call and a golden opportunity for us; the teachers of English, to recognize the challenges in rapidly changing scenario and brace up to contribute to enhancing employability of young graduates, the builders of the nation tomorrow.

Challenges: The challenges and bottlenecks are manifold.

The first challenge is ELT faculty need to recognize the wider responsibility, not just of a language teacher; teacher of grammar and structure; but of a trainer or a facilitator who can build real competencies to bridge the gap between corporate needs and institutional offerings. They need to follow a holistic, integrated; skill based, focused, and meticulously planned approach for well-rounded development of the learners.

Next, the primary problem is the great shortage of quality teachers trained in language teaching. The low quality of teachers is due to inadequate exposure and opportunity for these teachers to get trained in the finer nuances of English language and English language teaching. The poor compensation

given to the teachers is the primary reason we do not get enough good youngsters attracted to the profession. The teacher's remuneration needs to be increased by two to three times the current level, if we have to make a difference. Emphasis must be laid on teacher's language skill, overall competency, enthusiasm and professional awareness.

The other serious issue is the wrong approach or methods and lack of awareness about the latest developments and trends in the profession. ELT faculty should use the right blend of latest trends in both teaching and training techniques in different proportions depending on the need.

Verbal diarrhea: A further tough challenge is verbal diarrhea; inability to control teacher talk. We have grown up passively listening to teachers who love listening to themselves and keep going on and on. The most important crucial criterion for language learning is minimizing teacher talk and creating opportunities for learners to participate, perform and use the language.

Role of Motivation: One more key factor is motivation, which is such an integral, crucial part, that it is called the backbone; the "neglected heart" of the learning. Without motivation there is no pulse; there is no life in the class. The teachers are the key figures in the learning process. Being role models, teachers can use themselves as a model of enthusiasm, dynamism and inspiration for learning. A cheerful, smiling, confident and interactive trainer with positive attitude, good sense of humor and positive approval and appreciation for student's efforts can work wonders. Even other factors such as classroom environment, classroom management, tolerance, patience are also important. We need to create a warm, friendly, learner-centered, low-anxiety, personalized atmosphere and make the classroom a cheerful place where learning is enjoyed, recognized and valued.

Finally there are limiting problems at the institutional level like lack of facilities, open atmosphere, and failure to prioritize and allot time for training needs.

Enhancing employability

Learner-centered innovative teaching or training

The key lies in using truly learner-centered innovative mix of various relevant, interesting techniques, activities, games, puzzles, cues,

pictures, visual aids, videos, movies, role-plays, and presentations etc. Even English songs, poems, newspapers, special articles, success stories can be explored as food for thought. Learners should be encouraged to regularly present and face the class through various interesting activities like power point presentations, skits, news broadcasts with audio-visual clips, television shows, panel interviews, pep talks, debates, discussions, organizing quizzes, games, presenting cricket commentaries, food recipes, singing English songs (solo or group), tongue twisters, puzzles etc. They should be motivated and guided to take responsibilities as anchors, quiz masters, team leaders, time keepers, organizers, supporters etc. Team building, problem solving, and other activities to enhance inter-personal and other soft skills also should be included for integrated skill enhancement.

We should involve learners, invite suggestions, and keep taking feed-back from them to understand their needs and interests better and make changes so to ensure that they enjoy learning. We should strive to improve each learner's language proficiency, vocabulary, confidence and other life skills to the point that they are ready to face the recruitment process and the challenges of the real world of work in future. It is important to plan class activities for best use of the learner's time through a good mix of pair work, group work and individual presentations. It is absolutely important to see that every learner actively participates and is not forced to just passively listen to others. A trainer should go around closely monitoring the activities and maintaining classroom dynamics and a sense excitement, and fun.

First things First' The basic rule of 'First things First' should not be forgotten. The areas crucial for recruitment process like oral communication, and presentation skills, just a minute round, group discussions and interview preparation should be given enough time and priority. Intensive practice sessions, mock sessions, seminars and workshops should be planned for each activity.

Other Campus Initiatives:

Creating English-speaking Environment (ESE) on the campus: ELT faculty need to take responsibility to

nurture a rich English language environment on the campus with the support from the institution's management, teaching, non teaching faculty and the students. Keen language learners can act as English-speaking volunteers in every class and start speaking in English causally on the campus.

Libraries and activity clubs or movie clubs volunteered by students should provide a diversified choice of English reading materials, videos and English movies with English subtitles.

Subscribing to English newspaper

Another measure is to encourage students to subscribe to English newspaper. (A bulk order can be placed by the institution) It makes them regularly read a newspaper which enhances their vocabulary, language skills, knowledge and general awareness.

Curricular, co-curricular activities

In addition to these regular activities, planning innovative extra-curricular, co-curricular activities, events and competitions every semester is part of campus life. Activity clubs like Debate club, elocution club, movie club encouraging regular, active participation and initiative in campus events, contests, and students' activity clubs is crucial for developing language skills, self-esteem and leadership skills. Starting an E-Plus club, a concept started by 'The Hindu' publication to help students from rural background better their communication skills and English language is also a good idea. A club comprises 30-like-minded students who are good in academics but lack proper communication skills.

The need for Indian test of language proficiency / employability

Here as an ending note I would say, if there were an Indian test of skill in English, or a comprehensive 'employability' test it would be immensely useful for both students and employers. Recently a unique 'employability' test to gauge the preparedness of young graduates for industry is adopted for the first time by Delhi University's placement cell that started in December. It has already seen as many as 1,045 students appearing for it. Earlier the All-India English Language Testing Authority (AIELTA) of the English and Foreign Languages University (EFL-U), Hyderabad, had announced its first National-level English Proficiency Test to assess ability to use English in real-life, academic or workplace situations.

Adopting from the existing fluency tests, ELT faculty can develop their own fluency tests that are set in the Indian context of spoken English to test their students' ability to use English in real-life or workplace situations. Grading language learners at different stages will be beneficial for all learners, trainers and employers.

CONCLUSION

The universities and the institutions should develop a holistic integrated approach, facilitating the linking together of different aspects and competencies of employability along with improving English language skills and incorporate employability enhancement in curricula.

As teachers of English language, we should strive to contribute to transforming young graduates into English language proficient, confident, skilled, and competent professionals. We should be always alert and focused about the final goal of integrated, multi-skill development of the learners, along with enhancement of English Language skills in the wake of threatening employability crisis

ELT community need to constantly update and upgrade their skills, professional awareness competency, knowledge, content and effective training and teaching techniques. One should recognize the constant change that the field is ever going through and embrace it, realizing that learning is ongoing life-long process.

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