

Teaching Speaking Skills: A Few Observations

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Abstract: Any innovation emerging in the field of Technology, Entertainment, and Design, without communication getting work done is next to impossible. Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Robotics, Internet of Things, Block-chain, Sustainable development, Energy & environment, Medical Sciences, Material Research, and Advances in Technologies, it is the communication which supplies life blood to them. Students failed to see English communication as a base of internalizing theoretical concepts and their practical implementation as a way of communication, have often become victim of an unfavorable ambience post tertiary education. Interaction or communication using English language has become an approach to flourish business, attitude of confidence and evidence to credibility. Possessing knowledge of a subject and articulating it with confidence have become two sides of the same coin post-pandemic. Knowledge of various aspects of communication is not enough to measure success of a fresh engineer graduate. After tertiary education, English as a skill of interaction or discussion has become the biggest aspect of students' personality through which his/her success or failure is determined. **Clement, Aloy, and Tamil Murugavel (2015): 116-125.** *“Many engineering graduates in India are found to be unemployable due to their poor communication skills and lack of confidence. There have been a lot of research papers that have reiterated the importance of improving engineering graduates' employability skills; however, the problem of poor communication skills grows unabated in India” 291*

This paper discusses most important observation in teaching Speaking skills at tertiary level. It states an important aspect, which needs to be employed while teaching Speaking skills. Through this paper, I would share my experience of helping engineering students to develop their English Speaking skills. I would explain three major aspects in this paper. First, I would explain the importance of conducting speaking practice classes. Second, current practices followed in developing Speaking skills in schools and colleges. Finally, I will describe the approach I use to assist students in developing Speaking skill. This technique has both advantages and limitations. I will share a few resources I employed in my English language laboratory sessions.

Keywords: Input-based, English, Engineering, Speaking skill, Approach, communication

Introduction

I have been teaching the English Language in an engineering context since 2011. I have noticed many students finding it difficult to converse or discuss in English. Speaking in front of their classmates becomes rather challenging for them. Though they have been learning English for quite a long time. They feel uncomfortable and self-conscious using English language. There are many reasons behind this. First, using the English language to express one's ideas is a skill that is neglected in many Indian government schools. The focus is either on learning grammar or practicing grammatical units. As a result, teachers and students end up having students more proficient in solving grammar exercises. They can hardly develop an attitude toward using English in their day-to-day life. Second, teachers find it difficult to develop English Speaking skill. Lack of appropriate strategies and orientation to teaching communicative/speaking English may be the reason behind this practice. So, when students with such background come to attain an engineering degree, it becomes

essential for tertiary educators to introduce them to their potential of using English for communicative necessities.

Importance of English for Engineering Students

In today's scenario, a confident personality is one that is able to communicate in international language that is English. Global community considers them an essential. Since those who can get their ideas across using English Language as a way of communication, they can interact with anyone across the world. They evidently stand better chances of being hired by globalized companies. Jeyaraj, John Sekar. (2018): 156-161. Spoken English is yet to be considered an essential part of the curriculum at the tertiary level in India. However, International Proficiency Tests and Cooperate world identifies English Communication as a crucial demonstrative skill that is regarded as necessary for both higher education and professional career to shine nationwide and worldwide. Thus, the English language has become a medium of interaction internationally. Patil, Madhumati R. (2014): 35-38. Say: "The world is developing in the field of science and technology. Scientific inventions in Germany, France, and Russia cannot reach India through any language other than English. Therefore, a scientific invention in Germany or Russia will have become outdated and old by the time it reaches Indian scientists through translation. . . Thus, English is a link language. Different people can communicate with one another with the help of English. English is a confidence-builder language. It will get you anywhere. If you are a good speaker of English means good in all. Therefore, engineers have to communicate in English". English makes business accessible around the world and prosperous.

Current practices in speaking skills development

Many teachers realize the importance of developing English Communication skill. They introduce 'Speaking on a Topic' as an idea to develop the Speaking skill. Students are given a list of topics and asked to speak on any topic of their choice. They are given some time to think on the topic and present their views in front of the class. This approach helps students to think about the topic and speak on it. Yet, when it comes to speaking, students find it difficult to express their views on the topic and they end up uttering three to four lines. Students feel discouraged and disheartened as they do not have much information to speak on the topic. They feel less confident to speak in front of the audience. Thus, this approach is of limited scope unless the students have first-class reading habits.

Another frequently used approach is Role Play. Students are assigned certain character roles along with specific situations. Students have to prepare their dialogues as the role assigned and have to perform the acts. This activity is performed in groups. They are given familiar or unfamiliar situations. This approach is helpful. Students develop their Speaking skill to a certain extent from a new perspective. They get an opportunity to practice their Speaking skill with fun in the class. However, in India, we have learners with mixed abilities, for example, Slow Learners, Average Learners, and Fast Learners. Fast learners are often seen overtaking the slow and average learners. They try to consume more time as compared to their counterparts. Consequently, slow or weak learners turn out to have lesser opportunities of presenting themselves. What else that affects language acquisition in this context is learner's inhibition. Students with introverted personalities resist participating in the performance. They suffer with low confidence of dramatically presenting themselves. A third way of developing Speaking skills is equal to not teaching at all. Teachers dictate a few topics and ask learners to write a paragraph on the topic of their choice. This helps students to take their time to express their views in writing. Later they express their write ups in front of the class. However, learners coming from a rural area or non-English medium background face the problem of lack of subject matter. They write two or three lines and later feel they do not have much to say on the topic. Even the fast learners face the problem of lack of subject matter sometimes. Question arises, if writing is a justified integrating skill with Speaking skill in a context where the learner is supposed to develop Speaking skill or what kind of exposure does the learner receive by writing.

My approach is an experiment on class of 61 students. They were the students who studied the course 'English Theory and Practical' in their 2nd semester, B. Tech, computer science, 1st Year Program. This was under the course type Humanities and Social Sciences. The class was further divided into two sections. There were 30 students in each section. They had two hours of English Laboratory class weekly. In other words, I was

meeting my students for two hours once in a week. The syllabus of English Laboratory includes Listening Comprehension, Self- Introduction, Role Play, and Communication at Workplace, Interviews, Formal Presentations, and Conversations and Dialogues. The sections comprised students from various states such as Bihar, Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, New Delhi, Uttrakhand, Jharkhand, Chandigarh (U.T.), and Rajasthan. Many of them had schooling where the medium of instruction is regional or mother tongue. Many come from schooling where English is used to understand subjects, but almost no opportunities to use the language as a medium of interaction. Few had good opportunities to use the target language outside of the classroom. For, they had studies from English Medium schools. Thus, language competence level contrasts due to diverse backgrounds. However, the challenge of developing a confident English Speaking skill was the common goal to achieve for all.

Norton and Toohey (2001) say students know language since they have been studying it since their school days but mastery of the target language lies in the ability to use that language to get ideas and opinions across. Thus, language knowledge is not the only indicator of language mastery. A learner needs to understand various grammatical units, such as Sentence Structures; Tense, Active and passive voice, and Word Formation using different parts of Speech. However, the objective of my approach was to inculcate the habit of gaining input to improve language competence levels. Learners must understand that huge amount of input of the target language is essential to develop a confident Speaking skill. This approach is a part of fluency-based approach leaving the accuracy part later when the participating teams record their experiences and learning in their practical files. I injected the input in the form of listening to interesting and comprehensive videos thereby providing the exposure via Ted Talks. Using Ted talks was such a functional activity for the two sections. It encouraged students to produce language to a good extent without worrying about their mistakes. Even the introvert students showed growth and were willing to grab their turns to speak.

I find an Input based approach of developing English Communication skills effective in assisting many students to develop Speaking skills. It to a good extent helped them in gaining the confidence of expressing their views. I divided this approach in five steps.

Stage One: Students are oriented to what they would be doing in the English laboratory class as a part of their Speaking Practice. The section is divided into teams of three participants in each team. They have to listen to a presentation that is Ted Talks (Technology, Entertainment, and Design). As they listen to the speaker, they have to evaluate the performance of the speaker. Each team is given three questions to evaluate the performance of the speaker. Following are the sample questions on which the Ted Talk speaker will be evaluated.

- Mention name of the topic_____ and the speaker_____ (to all teams)
- Is the topic of the presentation well explained and elaborated with examples? Explain.
- Do you find the conclusion memorable? Explain by giving example.
- Do you find his speech Interactive enough, Explain by giving example.
- What audio-visual tools does the speaker use? Do you find the tools appropriate? Explain by giving example.
- Do you find the beginning of the presentation interesting? Yes, or No, explain.
- Do you see any sequence or structure in his/her presentation?
- What are the central ideas and sub-central ideas in the presentation? Explain by giving example.
- Do you agree or feel convinced about his/her idea/topic he/she communicated? Explain by giving example.
- Have you noted any motivating declarations or striking ideas? Share with your classmates.
- Have you noted any humorous and witty expressions in his/her presentation? Explain by giving example.
- Student leader of each team will given opinion on the following two questions. 1. what we understood and liked in the presentation, and 2. where the speaker could have improved.

As a part of previewing exercise, the above-mentioned questions are discussed with the learners before they begin to listen to the talk. Meaning of words such as audio-visual aids, central ideas, sub-central ideas, motivating declaration or striking ideas, humorous and witty expressions, were discussed.

Stage Two: How not to take things personally? YouTube Video| Frederik Imbo | TEDxMechelen I 17:36 is played. The teams are asked to listen to it carefully. Prepare their answers on the questions dictated to them. Students have the liberty to bring questions or insights of their own to present in their answer. When students listened to the speaker for 5 minutes, in the beginning, the teacher asked around if they had wanted to enable the subtitles or if the sound needs to be adjusted.

Stage Three: The player is stopped now. The teams are asked to take a few minutes to organize their answers and discuss among themselves.

Stage Four: Each team comes in front of the class to present their answers and thoughts.

Stage Five: Teacher raises questions to the participating team. It would bring further clarity to their thoughts. Teams would get a chance to look at the talk from the teacher perspective as well. At the end, teams are applauded for their performances.

Finally, students are asked to record their experiences and learning of around 100+ words in their practical files. These pieces of writing would be marked for the accuracy part.

Why listening to encourage speaking

All humans have capacity to acquire second language, even if they come from different backgrounds. However, how they should approach the language acquisition is the question that should be facilitated by the teacher. Patrick, Robert. 20.39 (2019): 37-44., says that even the teachers of Latin and Ancient Greek struggled with teaching Speaking skills. The foremost reason, students are expected to interact with the grammar and syntax structure of the target language from day one. However, we want different outcome in the form of producing language as a way of interaction.

According to Input Principle, (Krashen, Reference Krashen1982, pp. 20-29), language input has two forms: Listening and Reading. Both the forms are pivotal for the target language acquisition. According to this principle, learners of second language may perform better in the form of speaking and writing if they are exposed to 'Understandable Input'. This input should be given in the form of listening and reading. Here, 'Understandable Input' suggests the content that students are able to understand and be able to analyze it critically. The Input must be injected in a huge amount for better outcome. However, reading is considered more effective input when compared with listening. Further, in his sixth hypothesis, Krashen (2013), learner is more successful in language acquisition if they find the input (listening and Reading) compelling. The principle of compelling material acknowledges learner's selection or choice, what channelizes his or her motivation and creative abilities, dreams, aspirations, fears and anxieties, educational backgrounds everything that presents inter and intra-personality of the learner. Teacher should try to understand physical and emotional inclination of the learners towards the input material. This is how she can create conducive environment for the learners to receive input. Input which is Compelling and Comprehensible will provide more opportunities and challenges to grow.

According to Liu, Dayan, 4.4 (2015): 139-146: "We progress along the natural order (hypothesis 2) by understanding input that contains structures at our next 'stage' $\frac{3}{4}$ structures that are a bit beyond our current level of competence. (We move from i , our current level, to $i+1$, the next level along the natural order, by understanding input containing $i+1$; ...) (Krashen, 1985, p.2) According to Krashen (1985, p.2), the unknown structures are acquired with the help of contextual information. The hypothesis has two convictions: first, speech would emerge, rather than being taught, as a result of acquisition through comprehensible input with competence successfully built; second, grammar is automatically acquired if comprehensible input is received and there is enough of it."

About Stephen Krashen who is pioneer in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) contributed substantially to the understanding of teaching and learning process. His ideas have been appreciated in the context of research. His Input Hypothesis as a central part of an overall theory of Second Language acquisition has generated a heated debate. However, at the same time, this hypothesis has been of concern in many ESL classrooms.

Advantages of the approach outlined in this paper

According to Tavail, Zekiye Müge., *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 9 (2010): 765-770., learners while listening to the target language interact with the speaker psychologically. They react to the idea presented by the speaker. They may ask questions and seek clarification. They may agree or disagree in the light of their background knowledge. The crucial question arises if they are able to understand the spoken content or not and this is where the hypothesis by Krashen (2013) intervenes as earlier stated in this paper that “understanding and compelling Input’ fetches better results in the context of Input based language acquisition. Thus, if the skill is taught in integration or Input based it will generate more communicative responses by the learners. Teachers should understand this and bring more integrated activities to teach Speaking skills. Such an environment should be created which compels students to take part and practice. Self-confidence and self-esteem of the learners should not be challenged. If students fail to speak in a group, it leads to self-consciousness, fear, anxiety and even panic. According to Jones, 2004, p. 34, the language educator should act as a facilitator in the classroom. If classroom environment becomes a threatening ground for the learners, educator must intervene. Those who are confident and have had a good amount of exposure of the target language previously, they will be able to participate. However, those who have been deprived of such exposures may refuse to enter in the class or will protest or hesitate to participate.

After using input based teaching, I noticed my students becoming more expressive. They were open to take part and grab the speaking opportunities. It was seen that students had subject matter. they had idea or topic or context to express their opinion on and required vocabulary or word or expressions. They were challenged to speak with a natural flow in the target language. After participating in the activity two to three times, students realized the need of gaining input as an essential need. It helped them to gain new words, ideas, sentence structures, ways of expressing thoughts, and ways to communicate naturally. Most importantly, it helped them to think in the target language. They felt confident while expressing their thoughts in front of the class. Now they had enough subject matter to use and this encouraged peer interaction among them. Now the focus was on the subject matter that they heard and watched and they were able to relate themselves with it. They were not lost in thinking of any random topic.

They were less hesitant to express themselves. A real life environment had been created in the laboratory. They all were aware of the context and performances. It created their interest in knowing real content. They were willing to produce it in their performances. This approach had a positive effect on their communicative competence and confidence stimulating.

Limitation of the approach and recommendation for future implications:

Any approach or methodologies when used with students, who have different backgrounds, attitudes toward language learning, and pace of learning then the outcomes also vary in a given situation.

First, this approach gave positive results to those students who attended the laboratory classes with zeal and enthusiasm. They performed well during their final assessment as an end-semester viva performance. For those who were introvert or hesitant of expressing themselves in public, good progress can be seen in their performances in English speaking by the end of the semester. For those who were already confident in speaking, no major changes were seen in their performance but the ideas which were discussed in laboratory were thought-provoking for them. They shared how the ideas shared in the videos transformed their way of thinking. The ideas challenged their behavior also.

Second, following the mentioned approach in a classroom requires commitment on the part of the teacher. Before sharing any Ted Talk videos with students, the teacher must analyze the accent, language, background, speed of the speaker, topic or idea, duration of the talk, content discussed in the talk, preparing previewing and post-viewing activities. Teacher must have clarity of aim behind running a specific video in the class. For example, fluency-based or accuracy-based lesson plans should be based as per requirement. This analysis will equip the teacher to have a better control over the classroom environment. Teacher will be able handle naughty elements in the class wisely. Another requirement, the proposed approach requires a multi-media laboratory setup or essential tools such as a reliable internet connection, laptop, projector, and speakers. In my context, I had availability of all the required tools.

Third, those students who think they are already proficient in the target language may show less inclination toward the approach. For future implications, similar experiment can be carried out by introducing documentaries, short movie clips or using the classroom as a stage for Ted Speaker in the class or sharing interesting videos to ignite debates or group discussions. Students may be directed to present their reports on a specific series other than Ted Talks. They are the platforms such as Big Think, IdeaCity, The Moth, RSA, Creative Mornings, Pecha Kucha, 99U, Ignite, The Gel Conference, The Veritas Forum, and Talks at Google.

Conclusion

To produce exposure as an input based approach of the target language plays a paramount role in the development of language skills especially Speaking skill. The students who received the exposure of the proposed approach, a significant progress can be seen in their Speaking skills and confidence level. Teaching Speaking skills individually will influence the communication negatively thereby generating less communication in the classroom. Hence, teacher should act like a facilitator in the classroom thereby integration listening with speaking and also inject his/her own creativity to enhance real life communication among the learners.

To conclude, listening and reading are the receptive skills which help to boost productive skills that are speaking and writing. In the context of my approach, Students became more successful and less hesitant when listening and speaking skills were integrated through teacher's creativity of encouraging students to participate thereby injecting understandable and compelling input.

Resources

I am sharing A few resources of Ted Talks that I employed in the English Laboratory Classroom that assisted my students to a greater extent. They may be a wonderful assistance to your students as well.

1. How great leaders inspire action | Simon Sinek, May 4, 2010 YouTube Video
Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp0HIF3SfI4> [Accessed march 2022]
2. A dialogue to kill the fear of public speaking | Animesh Gupta, Jul 21, 2015 | YouTube Video
Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cjs7dyzLVco> [Accessed march 2022]
3. How not to take things personally? (Mar 5, 2020) YouTube Video, added by TEDxMechelen. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnJwH_PZXnM [Accessed march 2022]
4. Don't Believe Everything You Think | Lauren Weinstein | Jun 6, 2018, YouTube Video, added by TEDxPaloAlto. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xdhmgp4IUL0>
5. How to change your limiting beliefs for more success (Dec 8, 2015) | Dr. Irum Tahir | added by TEDxNormal. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fom14XGMFHA>

Note: Following resources can be employed by the fresh teachers of English to develop the Speaking skills of their students, for Android and IOS users respectively.

1. https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.cengage.ngl.nventive.learnenglishwithtedtalks&hl=en_IN
2. <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/learn-english-nglearning/id1301395785>

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