



ACQUISITION OF EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Article info

Article Received:21/04/2023

Article Accepted:12/05/2023

Published online:17/05/2023

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.11.2.77](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.11.2.77)

Abstract

Thanks to globalization and cut throat competition in the job market, proficiency in English has now become more of a necessity than an option. Communication holds the key to both professional and organizational growth. Mere possession of technical knowledge alone would not enable employee to excel at his/ her workplace. The evolving work place demands linguistically competent and articulate work force. Communication skills make or mar one's career growth because three- fourth of the working time of the professionals is being spent in communicating with others at the workplace. Communication for professionals is vital because nearly 80-90 percent of their working time is spent in reading and writing official letters, reports, and e-mails, participating and convening meetings, listening and making presentations and sharing information over telephone. To carry out the aforesaid activities, one needs to possess sound language skills. This paper seeks to discuss the significance of acquiring effective language skills in today's highly competitive and globalised era.

Keywords: cut throat competition, proficiency in English, professional growth, articulate workforce.

Introduction

Thanks to globalization and cut throat competition in the job market, proficiency in English has now become more of a necessity than an option. Communication holds the key to both professional and organizational growth. Mere possession of technical knowledge alone would not enable employee to excel at his/ her workplace. The evolving work place demands linguistically competent and articulate work force. Communication skills make or mar one's career growth because three- fourth of the working time of the professionals is being spent in communicating with others at the workplace. Communication for professionals is vital because nearly 80-90 percent of their working time is spent in reading and writing

official letters, reports, e-mails, participating and convening meetings, listening and making presentations and sharing information over telephone. To carry out the aforesaid activities, one needs to possess sound language skills.

English- The Global language

With English becoming the language of communication, and many of the world's international organizations using it as their transactional language, the need to possess effective language skills has gained greater traction. Multinational companies and IT firms scout for students who are not only technically sound but also linguistically proficient for their entry-level positions. Hence being linguistic proficiency in

English is considered to be one of the important employability skills. It is an undeniable fact that English is not being taught as a life skill or a survival skill in educational institutions but as a “subject” that needs to be learnt. It is the absence of skills-oriented teaching that results in the ineffective learning of the language. Various media reports, including the survey conducted by *Aspiring Minds*, an employability measurement state that students, especially engineering graduates are not “market ready” and “unemployable” for want of communication skills. The lack of interpersonal skills, and the inability to communicate confidently could become a dampener for students in their career prospects.

There is an ever increasing demand from organizations for competent professionals and the job market is a dynamic one for youngsters graduating from educational institutions. Though the job opportunities are booming, employers lament that the number of candidates possessing employable skills is scarce. Even though Gen Y possesses technical skills in abundance, they are found wanting in communication skills necessary for professionals. The Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report in U.S, for example, is one of the many reports, which emphasizes the need to develop essential employability skills such as communication, listening, team work, willingness to learn among students.

There is a mismatch between the expectations of the industry and the skills acquired by the learners. This can be attributed to the lack of emphasis given to the four language skills- Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in educational institutions and centres of learning. The practical application of a language both in classrooms and elsewhere will result in students becoming articulate and conversing with ease. Participating in class room activities like discussions, debates, mock interviews and the like will give the students the much needed confidence and enable them to become effective communicators. There are three important skill sets requires by the industry. They are 1) Communicative Skills 2) professional Skills and 3) Employability Skills. Communicative Skills include a) Verbal ability b)

Written ability c) Reading ability and d) Comprehension ability.

Communication Skills

Even though the world has become smaller, thanks to technological advancements, the significance of communication is still intact and has not diminished at all. In fact in today’s world, language is a powerful tool used for expressing one’s ideas. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing form the core of communication. Communication skills, including written and oral presentations, as well as an ability to work with others, are the main factor contributing to job success. In spite of the increasing importance placed on communication skills, many students struggle to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively- whether in verbal or written format. This inability makes it nearly impossible for them to compete in the workplace, and stands in the way of career progression.

Earlier employers sought candidates with good communication skills only for high profile jobs. They had the time and resources to train the new recruits and hone their skills. But now, the upgraded academic courses with a focus on communication skills have shifted the focus of companies. One of the Senior Managers of a private concern has this to say: “Communication Skills are now playing a vital role as a basic pre-requisite to consider an employee for the organization. It was not the case a few years ago, where the employees were not exposed to multi- cultural work ambience.”

Industry practitioners in recruitment have found new ways to identify and choose candidates who are good at communication skills by conducting group discussions, personal interviews and the like. Madhu Murthy Ronanki, President Talent Sprint opines “We believe there is a set of four skills that are essential for employees- domain skills, technological skills, communication skills and relationship management skills.” The industry concentrates not only on academic part but also on the interpersonal skills, team spirit, analyzing situations and problem solving.

Many recruiting heads are of the opinion that speaking in reasonable good English is a major factor

in interviews because the entire business activity is in English, whether it is writing or speaking. Even if the majority of employees don't have to directly speak with the customers on a daily basis, most of them have to interact through e-mails where their writing skills are tested.

The need to acquire effective LSRW Skills

Mastery over a language is possible only when learners listen actively, speak with ease, read voraciously and write effectively devoid of mistakes. The fact that competitive exams like TOEFL, GRE, and IELTS test the verbal and analytical ability of the candidates indicates the urgent need for developing the learners' language prowess. While listening and Reading are Receptive skills, (learner receives information by listening and absorbing information or by reading and grasping information) on the other hand, Speaking and writing are productive skills. The integration of the four skills is required to gain a good command over a language.

Listening

One of the important soft skills required for attaining professional success and excellence is listening. The fact that listening is twice as hard as speaking is exemplified in the anonymous proverb "We were given two ears but one mouth." The quality and quantity of one's listening determines one's career growth, productivity and output at the workplace. Ernest Hemingway's lines "When people talk, listen completely.....most people never listen nor do they observe," points to the need to listen and observe keenly so as to grasp the full essence of what the speaker is saying.

In any oral communicative situation, listening is of special significance because oral communication cannot be complete without listening. One's response in an oral communicative situation largely depends on one's ability to understand and appreciate the speaker's perspective. The purposes of listening are manifold. It serves individual needs and aids in implementing oral communication goals. Students need to listen keenly and effectively in order to excel in their studies; professionals need to be effective listeners if they want to achieve their goals and their

organization's goals. Hence in every case, listening plays a vital role in helping to analyze a problem, understanding the possible solutions and making a decision. "The wise man has long ears and a short tongue" "Listen a hundred times: ponder a thousand times; speak once" imply that one needs to listen more and talk less while communicating with people.

Listening is an art and to become a better communicator one has to acquire effective listening skills. This is important both for one's personal and professional life. Considering the fact that people cannot listen for very long time, listening is definitely a Herculean task. It is indeed lack of effective listening that result in loss of time, loss of productivity, missing the deadlines and opportunities. In fact, listening improves one's communication and enables one to speak with correct accent and intonation and helps in achieving fluency of speech.

Speaking

"Mend your speech a little, lest it may mar your fortune." (William Shakespeare) This line implies that if one does not work on one's language skills, one will end up losing one's job prospects. It would not be an exaggeration to state that ineffective speaking skills hamper one's career progression and retard one's professional growth. There are several factors that have contributed to the increased importance of speaking skills. The information technology revolution along with globalization and other social and economic factors has ushered in changes in the functioning of many organizations. The growth and development of service oriented sector (IT/ITES) has also significantly contributed to the increased importance of English language competency for professionals. As the economy becomes less dependent on manufacturing and more service oriented, the need for students with good speaking skills has gained greater traction.

Speaking Skills are used as a parameter for assessing one's linguistic competency. When it comes for entry-level positions, new entrants are recruited only based on their performances in group discussions, interviews and so on. Hence it has

become imperative for the students to develop their language prowess. With a plethora of job options available in various sectors, students need to hone their communication skills in order to stay afloat. Surveys invariably point out the urgent need to improve the student's employability prospects by developing their language prowess. *Aspiring Minds'* Survey attributes the lack of employability to the students' lack of confidence in communicating in English. Some of the findings are as follows:

1) Many Indian engineering graduates struggle with English.

2) Only less than 48% of engineers understand moderately sophisticated words of English. (Aspiring Minds survey report) (**The Hindu Education Plus** July 30 2012)

The survey's findings still hold water and are relevant because communication skills make or mar the career prospects of individuals. Many recruiters opine that mere Business English alone is not enough to sustain oneself at the workplace. Students should be facilitated to take part in class activities that will help them get a feel of conversational English which is important for climbing up the ladder of success. More over at one's work place, one needs to possess effective speaking skills to take part in meetings, conferences, workshops and other forms of oral interaction. As oral communication is a tool of professional interaction, one needs to use it confidently, clearly, and with ease.

Reading

"Reading makes a man complete." - Francis Bacon

Bacon's famous line holds water even today because like Listening and Speaking, reading is crucial to effective communication. While students need to have effective reading skills to read text books, journals, research papers, scientific articles, lecture notes as part of their academic activities, professionals need to read business documents, reports, brochures and the like as part of their professional activities. In order to excel both in educational; institutions and at work place, one needs to have effective reading skills. The changes in business and industrial fields along with the

development in technology have drastically changed the way one interprets information. Reading is not a physical act of looking at the letters; it is an act of receiving, understanding and interpreting information.

"Knowledge is power" goes a famous saying. To become knowledgeable one needs to enhance one's reading skills. The recent advancements in technology, including the advent of mobiles and the penetration of internet have resulted in students not taking to reading. The reading habit among the youngsters is on the wane, thanks to these new modern gadgets and attractions. A survey conducted by *Aspiring Minds* to analyze the English skills of engineering graduates says that "around 36 per cent of engineering graduates would be unable to read official reports and transcripts and derive information out of them, even when the information is explicitly stated." "More than 25 per cent engineers do not possess English comprehension skills required to understand engineering school curriculum." "Not more than 30 per cent of engineering students, who undergo stress and exhaustion while preparing for entrance exams, were acquainted with the word 'exhaust.' This shows the lack of intensive reading and comprehension skills of the learners and the need to develop the same for attaining academic and professional success.

Writing

"Writing makes a man perfect"- Francis Bacon

The significance of writing skills cannot be overstated because writing is so important both for students and professionals alike. As a student, one needs to have effective writing skills because one has to write examinations, project reports, lecture notes, abstracts, and so on. As a professional one needs to write job application letters, proposals, resumes, e-mail messages, reports, minutes, agendas and so on. It is needless to say that one's professional survival and success largely depends one's writing skills. Even though writing is an important skill, it is least used by students. Thanks to blogs, Twitter, mobiles and the like, the habit of writing full and complete sentences has a severe beating. The fact that students' writing skills are

abysmally poor can be gauged from their inability to write grammatically correct sentences.

“Around 50 per cent of engineers possess grammar skills that are not better than that of a class VII student.” “Only 57 per cent of engineers can write grammatically correct sentences.” (Aspiring Minds survey report) (**The Hindu Education Plus** July 30 2012)

“The worse of the students’ writing comes out in mails- the most important medium of communication in corporate offices” says a HR of an IT major. He explains, “They write incomplete sentences; their punctuation is non-existent and grammar very poor. This is why most companies have readymade templates with sentences, and employees just have to choose what they have to say.” A senior HR official points out the need for developing the students’ linguistic skills by saying “Companies take communication very seriously and there are frequent training sessions for them..... There is little done to improve their vocabulary or grammar.” (Aspiring Minds survey report) (**The Hindu Education Plus** July 30 2012)

Remedial Measures for enhancing the LSRW Skills

The lack of exposure to diverse environments and the poor emphasis on LSRW Skills in schools and colleges have resulted in students finding it hard to express complex ideas, thoughts with ease. Employability being the catchword of the day, it is imperative to equip the students with the skills required for professional survival. Mere technical prowess alone would not a world of good because possessing knowledge on a particular subject is certainly different from possessing the skills/ability to express that knowledge. Even though English is the medium of instruction in schools and colleges this lack of English skills among the students is due to the limited use of the language both in classrooms and elsewhere. Teachers as facilitators should inculcate an interest in the language among the students and help them to shed their inhibitions and interact with ease.

Students should be made to take part in group activities that foster their critical thinking and group skills and develop their language prowess in a

meaningful manner. There should be learner autonomy through language laboratories and web-based learning. There should be a paradigm shift from basic language skills to a wide range of skills required at work. The Aspiring Minds’ survey is a wake-up call to all stake holders to initiate the necessary measures on a war-footing and make the students “employable.”

Conclusion

Students need to be on their toes even after entering into companies. There is no scope for complacency because the new entrants are expected to constantly brush up their communication abilities. They need to network, deliver presentations, send emails, for which proficiency in English is a must. With the world becoming a global village and work ambience becoming diversified, students need to be articulate, expressive and communicative. To tide over the manpower crisis that is looming large and make the students “job-ready” and “employable”, there should be participatory and inclusive learning in the language classrooms. Language acquisition will be complete and productive only when all the four skills are mastered. It is the acquisition of LSRW Skills that will pave the way for the empowerment of the learners.

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