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TEACHING SOFT SKILLS TO ENHANCE EMPLOYABILITY QUOTIENT: REDEFINING THE ROLE OF AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER

Dr. GITASRI MUKHERJEE

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Muffakham Jah College of Engineering & Technology, Hyderabad, India
gitasrimukherjee@gmail.com



**Dr. GITASRI
MUKHERJEE**

ABSTRACT

A large pool of professionals, churned out every year from the technical and professional institutions in India face the paradox of possessing substantial grip over core technical subjects but lack of necessary employability skills and sense of application of the acquired technical knowledge. Employability and not unemployment has become a major concern today. Such candidates fail in exhibiting the necessary soft skills which could pave their way to the industry or help them sustain the fierce corporate competition.

Soft skills refer to those skills that place emphasis on personal behaviour and managing relationships between people as well as interpersonal, human, people or behavioural skills. It is primarily affective or behavioural in nature and associated to EQ (Kemper, 1999; Mc Murchie, 1998). In such a scenario an English teacher appears to be the custodian of this budding generation who could possibly mould these techies for the larger good, for the society. He/she holds immense responsibility to help the students to nurture an employability oriented approach from the very beginning, buttressing the need to acquire the essential soft skills.

Key Words: Soft Skills, Employability Skills, Effective Communication, English Teacher

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INTRODUCTION

Time and again several studies have been made to show that in spite of passing the professional course with high percentage a large pool of the young graduates are not ready to be deployed in the industry. Newspaper headlines such as, "Hone your soft skills to succeed." (Deccan Chronicle, pg 22, 20-01-2008) "Soft Skills courses for students (Deccan Chronicle, pg 17, 20-01-2008) and "Right Communication is the Key" (Deccan Chronicle, 22-1-2008) forced intellectuals to look into the seriousness of the matter and its far-

reaching consequences. Stephen Covey in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* wrote, "Begin with the end in mind" (98). The harsh reality of today shows that these young students embark on their professional journey with less or zero focus on the 'end' or the goal. Unfortunately many of them while pursuing their professional course are not aware of the factors that could play a vital role in getting placed in reputed organizations. Degree without practical knowledge of application proves to be fatal when it comes to procuring jobs. Unless a candidate is not capable and confident to apply

theoretical knowledge to solve practical challenges s/he cannot sustain in the industry. The hard skills that they learn in technical institutions can be complemented only by effective training on soft skills and once acquired is proved to give endless benefits. A candidate then proves to be an asset in the workplace. However, the existing curriculum is often blamed for the glaring gap between academia and industry where students do not exhibit strong communication skills be it apt use of language befitting the situation, vocabulary, pronunciation, intonation, neutral accent, appropriate body language etc. or showcasing effective team work, time management, positive attitude, self-awareness and so on. Since, these areas are mainly language centered English language teachers automatically are assigned the role of imparting soft skills to bridge the gap. This paper discusses how an English language teacher's job has become much more challenging today as s/he is expected to perform multidimensional roles i.e. other than teaching English language s/he is expected to impart necessary soft skills, develop learners' personality and interpersonal skills and take various measures to equip learners to face industrial challenges and thus shape the career of the future professionals.

Analyzing the Problem: The famous Pulitzer Prize-winning author and New York Times Journalist, Thomas L. Friedman has visualized this 21st century world differently. He writes in his best seller *The World is Flat : A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* , "It is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world." (first ed., New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005: Chapter 2). To him globalization today is characterized by the potential of "individuals to collaborate and compete globally". So keeping these facts in mind, unless learners are ready to keep the pace, they will be trampled. Hence, to be a global citizen and face its challenges, soft skills must be ingrained into learners' personality carefully, consciously and from the very beginning.

Presently a majority of students joining the professional courses are products of English medium schools. All these years they have been studying in English, though the question of quality looms large. The issue is in fact a matter of worry and appears in front of the English teachers in a magnified form when these students after spending years of education in English acquire average or very low proficiency, be it speaking or writing. Many of them cannot even read an English text properly. The marks they obtain and the knowledge they possess often do not match. These students in the long run during interviews exhibit very poor performance due to the improper training in developing interpersonal and communication skills and thus fail to convey their ideas in a persuasive manner. In this context English teachers play a very crucial role to integrate soft skills in the academic curriculum. Exam-oriented classroom teaching would not be sufficient to meet this goal. Keeping in mind the larger good, a healthy society and responsible, empowered citizens, the teaching framework must be designed.

Relevance of Soft Skills: With a conventional teaching learning set up students may drill grammatical rules, memorize a few vocabulary items or learn answers for the questions from a given lesson. However, with this mechanical learning they grow up with no ability to use it in real life situations. Interestingly a learner who corrects errors present in a sentence during examination might be committing the same mistakes while speaking or writing. It means, they acquire knowledge that is factual but when it comes to application they fail. Soft skills facilitate one's use of language, helps learners to realize what to say or not to say, when to say, how to say, how not to say or how much to say. These skills make learners aware of these parameters and thus help them to use language as a weapon.

Our learners are not aware of what the soft skills are. Language teachers need to make them aware of the array of skills that come under the label of soft skills viz. communication skills and ethics, interpersonal skills, team work, problem solving skills, creative thinking, time management, stress management, change management and the

list goes on. These skills have to be inculcated and imbibed. Our ancestors transferred those values and skills to us. However, today in nuclear families with working parents there is dearth of time and patience to pass on those age old values to the young generation. On the top of it, today's youth live in the virtual world where real communication has taken a back seat. What are we heading towards? This grave situation has reinforced the relevance of soft skills all the more and teaching of these skills has become mandatory. Formal training would definitely give a fresh perspective and language teachers can guide learners to grow a right attitude towards learning.

A Change in Perspective: With a fossilized kind of teaching-learning environment learners grow up passing examinations but do they really learn skills to deal with the practical issues of life? Are they taught to value themselves? Can they assess their worth? Can they make decisions and build strategies to solve problems? Can they judge what change would bring a positive transformation in their life? Have they internalized meanings of decency, politeness, open mindedness, self-belief etc? If not, we as teachers must tell them. Knowledge is not always embedded in textbooks. Language teachers realizing this fact must integrate soft skills in the classroom teaching. Soft skills are "the interpersonal human, people or behavioural skills needed to apply technical skills and knowledge in the workplace." (Weber et al.2009:356). Soft skills are not inborn; one has to learn them and practise them. English teachers in professional colleges can in fact opt various strategies to help learners to imbibe various soft skills necessary to widen their career prospect.

A crucial question arises here as to where the scope is to go beyond the set boundary in a language class. A language teacher often feels the pressure of completing the given syllabus in a stipulated time and the conventional exam-oriented approach often arrests a teacher's freedom. However, without being baffled by such challenges a teacher must remember that with proper planning he/she has to employ those innovative strategies which would result in promoting learners' academic as well as soft skills.

Defining Strategies: To experiment in the class, a language teacher has to have not only competence but also a clear goal. Unless there is a clear mindset and objective, in a classroom context using literary materials in innovative ways would not be easy. At the same time teachers also have to be competent to deliver lectures in a manner that induces interest in learner's mind and a sense of appreciation towards language.

Students' knowledge of his/her mother tongue can really be an asset that can be exploited to their benefit of enhancing communication skills. They do not come to an English classroom as an empty container. They already have basic lexical, semantic or syntactic knowledge of the acquired knowledge. To know the level of comprehension of a particular text in English, learners at some point can be asked to translate an excerpt in their respective mother tongue so that they enjoy the exercise and improve language skills. Instead of banning mother tongue completely in an English class a judicious plan of using mother tongue may boost language learning. "Translation/transfer is a natural phenomenon and an inevitable part of second language acquisition..., regardless of whether or not the teacher offers or 'permits' translation." (Harbord, 1992: 351). Hence to help the learners from vernacular medium or learners with very basic proficiency of English communication skills, teachers can make use of learners' natural tendency to translate. "There is little point in trying to stamp it completely" (Harmer, 2001:132). It will in fact help the teacher to understand whether learners are able to comprehend the given text. Initially to help students with vernacular background or with very basic knowledge of English bilingual method can be used judiciously. Once learners are on the right track to develop communication skills language teachers can train them to tailor communication styles according to various situations.

Utilizing Apt Materials: With a careful selection of suitable literary text learners can be given an exposure to various genres of literature such as poems, short stories, drama, famous speeches etc. Through reading different kinds of literary texts students will be aware of various communicative

functions and stylistic devices as well as build a strong vocabulary. Literature is widely considered as the suitable complement to teach a language class. Simultaneously it would enhance learners' cultural awareness as they are exposed to the world outside through these literary texts. Students can be encouraged to read biographies of great personalities so that they can emulate their qualities and values in their lives. Teachers must guide them to explore, interpret and analyse different layers of meanings of a text. Today's generation is blamed to have lack of critical thinking. To cater to this need, teachers can carefully choose texts for students according to their level, interest and language need which would result not only into proficiency over language but would also stimulate their imagination. Along with appreciation of literature a larger goal to teach soft skills such as creativity, sensitivity, flexibility, right attitude, emotional stability and an overall development of personality is possible through judicious use of literary texts in the classroom setting.

Today one may be concerned about a learner's Intellectual ability or IQ, but what about emotional intelligence or EQ? In *Put Emotional Intelligence to Work: EQuip yourself for Success* Feldman and Mulle points out that success is "being aware of your emotions and managing them so your behaviours are intelligently and proactively driven, resulting in intentional and successful outcomes" (2007:4). Emotions if not controlled or channelized it may have an adverse effect on one's performance. Empathizing with oneself as well as with others is very important. One has to be keen in observing oneself as well as others and it does not happen in one day. It is a lifelong learning process. A learner who has practised soft skills to be socially aware would be efficient in self-management and be able to keep stress at bay.

Use of Communicative Activities: Teacher should create a learning environment where initiative, risk taking, trust and humility are encouraged. Students must be taught how to feel responsible for their acts be it an individual task or team work. Their mind has to be conditioned in such a way that failures can not deter them to make several attempts. One has to be humble enough to learn from almost everyone. They

have to be trained to develop strong interpersonal skills through an exposure to different situations and thus build communication etiquette. Communicative activities such as group discussions, debates, elocutions, role plays not only help learners to improve their communication skills but also make them aware of their body language and other paralinguistic features. By participating in these activities learners become confident, self-reliant, focused and more empathetic. A teacher must train learners how to assess their performances which would result into finding their self-worth. Unless they know their own worth they can never be confident enough to take risks or challenges. Teachers must emphasize the need to cultivate assertive speaking, strong interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, positive outlook towards challenges, self-reliance, a sense of responsibility, resilience, perseverance, prioritization and the list goes on.

Teachers must try to create workplace simulation in class so that learners become aware of the formal and professional communication. With such an effort they would be good at self-management, planning and organizing things, decision making, learn professional etiquette, be mentally prepared to face challenges and find strategies to resolve issues. Through classroom activities their minds should be conditioned to accept criticism and develop a spirit of sharing. Students must be trained to work harmoniously with team members, weigh the seriousness of a situation and take necessary steps, accept changes and grow everyday with a never-dying hunger for knowing more. Teachers have to be vigilant in designing opportunities where learning is no more a mechanical, boring task; rather it becomes an enjoyable and exciting experience where the purpose of learning does not end with good academic scores but a positive transformation takes place and learners discover their hidden potentials.

A language teacher plays a vital role in molding the youth into well-mannered, disciplined and dedicated professionals equipped with social skills with an enhanced scope of job opportunities. A classroom can be effectively used by a dynamic teacher as a platform to develop the necessary soft

skills, much needed to sustain in the professional world. The change of an amateur student to a professional is an assiduous effort and English language teachers can prove to be real mentors in shaping those young, enthusiastic minds.

Conclusion

In his book *Challenges in Teacher Education*, Mohit Chakrabarty points out "The finer sensibilities and softer visions of life are continually at crossroads with the so-called education that has almost nothing to contribute sans unending demands of utilitarianism. Stuffed and hollow men as we are, knowing not the nuances and inner vastness of erudition and life, our educational objectives have failed to show the avenues of life revitalized in the spirit of Truth, Beauty and Goodness" (1). Keeping this in mind a language teacher will not stop teaching only what is given in the set syllabus rather would stretch his or her boundaries to bring about the finer sensibilities of the learners with a much flexible outlook where there would be scope to rethink and redesign the set syllabus to transform young students into successful personalities and with an assiduous attempt of learning and practicing soft skills learners would definitely reap the best results in terms of personal and professional success.

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