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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING FOR UNDERGRADUATE ENGINEERING STUDENTS: A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

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Abstract

This research paper discusses the importance of the Learner-Centered Approach and Communicative Language Teaching to undergraduate engineering students. This approach emphasises every learner's educational and communicative needs. English language communication skills are very important for engineering students to cater to their needs and technical development in their academics and employability. Effective language teaching-learning can only be accomplished when teachers are cognizant of their students' needs, abilities, and preferences. The teachers of English working in engineering colleges need to be trained in the use of the latest methods and strategies of teaching and learning English. This approach makes learning possible only through techniques by involving students actively. They are taught practically to use grammar and to relate the teaching of grammar to real-life situations. Students should be trained to use technical and general vocabulary with precision for more effective communication. Teachers should enable students to actively involve in learning the content on their own; strengthen their integrated language skills and capabilities; stimulate their interest and sharpen their critical thinking skills; give them opportunities to communicate either in pairs or groups; promote their autonomy to be successful academically and professionally.

Keywords: Needs of Engineering Students, Learner-Centred Approach, Needs Analysis, Technical vocabulary, CLT Approach

Introduction

If a teacher is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind. – Kahlil Gibran

English is regarded as the *lingua franca* of the world, and it is regarded as "the major language of international business, diplomacy, science and

professions" (Rierner 2). It has become the most important source of communication in every professional establishment. Students can improve their English and communication skills if teachers provide an appropriate learning environment and opportunities to communicate in English.

The student-centered approach originated from a constructivist theory in which students are

motivated to learn more by doing actively and practically rather than by merely observing and understanding the teacher's active teaching in the class. Students acquire knowledge practically with this approach, instead of passively receiving theoretical knowledge from teachers. At the beginning of the 20th century, this theory was first developed by John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky, whose collaborative work laid on student-centred learning. In this connection, Brown (2008) remarks:

In student-centered classrooms, students are involved in creating strategies that teachers can use. In fact, some of the best teaching strategies come from students, because the students are the ones that are being taught. Often no one knows better how students learn than the students themselves. Student-centered teachers encourage them to come up with new ways of doing things. This can be done through a written reflection done in or outside of class time, or by simply engaging in dialogue in or out of the classroom environment (31).

Teachers should enable students to actively involve in learning the content on their own; strengthen their integrated language skills and capabilities; stimulate their interest and sharpen their critical thinking; give them opportunities to communicate either in pairs or groups, and promote their autonomy to be academically and professionally successful. Apart from the aforesaid objectives, the learner-centred approach, at the undergraduate engineering college level, is given importance to its basic language skills and sub-skills and their priority such as: Listening, professional speaking, grammar, reading, and professional writing. The teachers of English in engineering colleges need a special set of competencies more than those of the general English teachers. They should be facilitators, knowing the strategies of modern classroom teaching and conducting activities in the classroom by making them active participants. They should teach Phonetics to students in an English language laboratory, equipped with the latest technology and multi-media software, to learn correct pronunciation, word stress, and intonation practically.

II

Teacher-Centred Class or Learner-Centred Class?

The majority of English teachers follow the conventional methodology of teaching in a teacher-centric classroom where teachers play an active role, and the students play a passive role. This is where the students do not get an opportunity to learn and exhibit their skills except the written part. This inappropriate methodology does no good for any student, aspiring to learn communication skills pragmatically. This is happening in many colleges, established in Telangana state while teaching the textbook of English, prescribed by the affiliated university. However, it is to be acknowledged that the teaching and learning process is a time-specified activity. So, teachers find themselves in a hurry to complete their syllabus in a teacher-centred classroom. Consequently, students are unable to learn effective communication skills, as they are passivised in learning communication skills.

The teacher-centred classroom, therefore, needs to be transformed into a learner-centred one such that students can be exposed to an active communicative language learning environment and get many opportunities to learn these skills practically by developing their confidence and dispelling their inferiority complex and inhibition of fear and jitteriness. After considerable practice, students will be able to assess their level of communicative competence. The role to be played by an English teacher is supposed to be that of a manipulator or facilitator. Be that as it may, English teacher needs to give indispensable inputs to the students occasionally.

English teachers often complain that most students have linguistic and communicative problems. Do they mean that students are not good at the basic skills: Listening, speaking, reading, and writing? Or, do they mean that students have an inferiority complex, or they are nervous, or they lack certain skills to communicate efficiently? Yes, it may be right to some extent because a good number of students come from rural and regional medium backgrounds. Unless the teacher teaches with a student-centred approach, students cannot learn effective communication skills. With proper

motivation and counselling, teachers, without a shadow of a doubt, can make students communicate well in any academic, professional, or social situation. Peyton et al (2010) state that "Teacher-centered approaches have been described as emphasizing a passive transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, while student-centered approaches seek to engage students actively in learning in ways that are appropriate for and relevant to them in their lives outside the classroom" (33). She remarks that the student-centred approach is used to encourage communication to take place realistically and practically among learners, connecting lessons with their lives and teaching-learning strategies. Students share their communicative problems like 'I'm unable to talk facing other students or audience'; 'I'm unable to meet strangers and talk to them; 'I don't feel confident in participating in group discussions or debates, and 'whenever I'm asked to speak standing in front of the audience, my mouth becomes dry, and I start sweating on my palm and face, etc.' In this connection, English teachers should boost the confidence of students, making them understand the role and importance of effective communicative competence, which can make them successful in their academic and professional careers. It can easily be made possible for students with a student-centred approach.

Students give their technical paper and project presentations in seminars organised for students. The evaluation process of the aforementioned activities is not appropriate. It only evaluates the students' memory and the technical content of the presentation. Technical teachers do not focus on the essential component of English language learning. Task-based English language teaching, as a part of the learner-centred approach, is recommended to improve technical students' English language and communication skills. This approach has several purposes. Willis (1996) identifies eight purposes:

To give learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know; to give learners experience of spontaneous interaction; to give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express

similar meanings; to give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak; to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively; to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences; to give learners chances to try out communication strategies, and to develop learners' confidence that they can achieve communicative goals. (35-36)

In the present competitive world, students should be provided with an individual learning environment to learn communication skills for their survival and employability. The learner-centred teaching approach is an important strategy which encourages students to make plans and select what to learn according to their interest. In this way, the individual ability can be motivated effectively. No doubt, globalisation has brought new requirement and challenge on education, and the inter-disciplinary talents of high quality are needed to meet the needs of world market. Adams says "providing opportunities for students to use the target language in order to negotiate meaning with teacher and other students in a group work, project work, also task-based interactions while providing guidance, modeling, and feedback about progress" (Adams, 2008). In teacher-centred learning, the teacher's role is active and the students' role is receptive and passive. In the learner-centered approach, students need to be active in their learning.

Why Learner-Centred Teaching?

- Using learner-centred teaching, students are motivated to get some control over their learning processes.
- It promotes their effective communicative competence among students.
- It promotes their peer communication.
- It reduces their misbehavior in the class.
- It builds strong student-teacher relationships.
- It promotes discovery/active learning.
- It makes students feel responsible for their learning actively.

- It persuades students to know and reflect on what they have learned.
- It helps students how to develop critical, logical, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills.

Things to Be Considered When Implementing This Practice:

Because the focus is on individual students rather than whole class structures, teachers often offer choices and adaptations within lessons, which empower students' independent growth. This is a role teachers must be comfortable with if they are to implement a learner-centred learning environment. Many teaching-learning methods promote learner-centred learning. They are asking questions; group discussions; debate; practical work; situational dialogue/role-play/drama; discovery / inquiry learning; problem-based learning; project-based learning etc.

Inquiry Learning Method

This is a student-centred method of learning and teaching focused on asking questions. Students are motivated to ask questions which are meaningful to them. In a learner-centred approach, an inquiry is an important part of learning, and the instructional design is made in such a way that the necessary learning takes place in the viewpoint of responding to questions and solving problems. As the students gain more experience with this approach, the teacher may use more open-ended questions or problems. Unlike a traditional teacher, the teacher employing the inquiry method should act differently.

Teachers should talk to students mostly by questioning and especially by asking divergent questions. They should not accept short and simple answers to questions. Students should be motivated to interact directly with one another in the class, and teachers should not judge the answers or responses given by students. They should not sum up students' discussions. They should not plan the exact direction of their lessons in advance and allow them to develop in response to students' interests. Their lesson plans should pose problems to students. This can transform every student into one who can learn

the subject by improving the grammatical structure in the use of sentences, vocabulary, and, more importantly, the students can dispel the inhibition of the fear of speaking developed due to jitteriness or inferiority complex.

Group Discussion/ Debate

A group discussion or debate is the most important activity. Even multinational companies ask the applicants to participate in group discussions as a yardstick to assess the applicant's communication skills. "Far too often students do little questioning in our classes and less tough thinking. Discussions can help them learn how to learn" (Rao et al 278). Students are asked to participate in a group discussion or debate on a given topic. Here, the role to be assumed by a teacher is that of a facilitator. This activity is completely learner-centred or student-led, i.e., students play the roles, such as initiator, organiser, observer, group presenter, motivator, leader, etc. By these activities, students' communication skills, management of time, leadership qualities, presence of mind, emotional intelligence, etc., are evaluated. After their performance, students are given feedback individually. They are also informed about the errors they have committed while participating in a discussion or debate. Having corrected the errors committed in the previous performance, they get mentally prepared for the next one. In this way, they can ensure their improvement gradually.

Advantages of Working in Groups

- It promotes communicative competence among students.
- It ensures active and deep learning.
- Students feel less isolated.
- It encourages the development of critical thinking.
- Students get themselves involved in their learning.
- It promotes social skills and interactions.
- The passive students get an opportunity to talk and be received in small groups to

overcome the passivity and become active learners.

- It gives a chance to students to learn from one another.

Question and Answer Method

Teachers can involve students in active learning in the classroom, using the question and answer method. It leads to a student's deeper understanding of the subject matter. Teachers, with this old and useful method, use questions more effectively than any other activity. They are essential to such strategies as discussion, review, inquiry, and problem solving, etc. Cotton remarks: "In classroom settings, teacher questions are defined as instructional cues or stimuli that convey to students the content elements to be learned and directions for what they are to do and how they are to do it." (1)

Teachers are required to do the groundwork to implement this method to make it beneficial for students. They have to prepare questions and plan them in a rational order to be used in the classroom activity. These questions, when asked by teachers, should arouse curiosity and a spirit of enquiry among students. Linking to the students' responses, teachers should ask new questions and engage them in the continuous learning process. Questions asked by learners offer an opportunity to clarify the material, and they also provide feedback for the teacher/instructor.

Advantages of Question-Answer Method

- It helps in developing the felicity of expression of students.
- It can be used in all teaching situations.
- It is helpful to ascertain the personal difficulties of students.
- It is used to reflect students' attitude and their experiential learning.
- In the absence of any other appropriate method, it is very useful to the teacher.

Learning must be an active process. Asking a question is an action; answering a question is an action, and debating what makes a good question or

an appropriate answer is also an action and can be a personally and logically challenging one.

Role- Play Method

Students are formed into groups, each consisting of three to five students. They assume and play a role given by the teacher. They are given various roles or situations and are instructed to come prepared to take part in role-playing activity in the subsequent session. Thus, students prepare themselves for the prearranged role and perform in the class or laboratory. They are given several roles or situations instantly and asked to participate in a role-play on any role or situation given by the teacher. This way, students are trained to participate in it without any prior preparation. The teacher evaluates all the performances exhibited by the students individually. He or she identifies the mistakes committed by the students and correct them individually.

Advantages of Role-Play

- It is an energising and funny activity for students.
- It allows participants to contribute actively to learn communication skills
- It enables students to learn complex concepts simply.
- The teacher/facilitator needs a little preparation for the selection of appropriate roles to be given to students to take part in a role-play

Communicative Language Teaching/ Learning:

The CLT approach plays a vital role in enhancing the learners' communication skills. A learner-centred approach facilitates learning through techniques involving learners either in pairs or in groups. It is suggested that the teachers should consider the CLT approach to make the learners have a clear knowledge of the linguistic, phonological, cultural, functional, interactional, grammatical, lexical, socio-linguistic, and social-cultural competence to attain 'communicative competence' in English.

Grammatical Competence

Teaching English grammar—drawing the attention of students to the structures and forms of the English language and giving them governing rules of usage—is as old as language teaching itself, and it is regarded as an important part of language teaching. Most principles of teaching grammar are derived from the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies. As stated by David Nunan, general learner-centred teaching “emerged as an offspring of communicative language learning” (179). Grammar should be taught in a communicative context and in relation to language skills. While teaching English grammar, teachers are advised to provide meaningful input through context, and learners are given an opportunity to use grammar and relate the teaching of grammar to real-life situations. Enabling students to work things out for themselves is the need of the hour to prepare them for building their self-reliance and, as a consequence, provides them with learner autonomy. Using the learner-centred approach, English grammar can be taught to students, using short stories, games, songs, and rhymes. Situational contexts are useful for teaching English grammar effectively. A situational context permits students to give a presentation of wide-ranging language items. They need to be actively involved in the preparation of the presentation as well as in solving the problems of grammar. This makes us understand why teachers need to prefer student-centred teaching to a traditional grammar explanation.

Technical Vocabulary

Nowadays, it is widely accepted that teaching vocabulary should be part of the syllabus and taught on a well-planned and regular basis. Every field of science, engineering, technology, trade, etc., has its list of words and phrases that are known as technical vocabulary. On account of its subject-specificity, technical vocabulary varies distinctly from one area of subject to another. As Khoii and Sharififar state, “vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how well learners communicate with each other” (199). Undeniably, “without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be

conveyed” (Wilkins 111). Students can be trained to use these words correctly and also to enable them to learn effective communication skills.

Strategies for Learning General and Technical Vocabulary

English teachers need to give a concrete direction for students to learn the meanings of root words, prefixes, and suffixes. Students must learn advanced vocabulary to go abroad for further studies immediately after the completion of their undergraduate course. To serve their purpose, these aspirants need to take Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and other competitive examinations. One of the components of this examination is verbal ability. It poses a serious challenge to the aspirants of the exam. It is the responsibility of English teachers to

- enable students to acquire general skills of recognising technical vocabulary and understanding definitions.
- ensure that students learn the appropriate pronunciation of the new word and practise saying it loudly. Focused learning of the syllable division and stress pattern of the new word can be retained in memory.
- facilitate students to connect new words to something with which they are already acquainted.
- provide students with the innovative tools to deal with technical vocabulary. This way, teachers do not need to actively get involved in teaching the technical words, but, as a facilitator, can give direction to their attention to vocabulary strategies.
- help students learn new words by reading technical/term papers and other related materials selected by the teacher.
- provide opportunities for students to interpret the definition of a new term so that they can recognise the main idea related to the term and identify specific chunks of information that simplify its broader and general core idea.

III

To sum up, the Learner-Centered Approach provides an individual learning atmosphere to students in their learning process. The use of this

approach to teaching English proves to be more effective and beneficial than the Teacher-Centred Approach for several reasons: Firstly, because what is taught is not necessarily learnt, so teachers need to be able to nurture students' interest in learning. It is important to note that what the learner learns is more important than what the teacher teaches in the class. Secondly, the Learner-Centred Approach is more practicable because language learning involves skill development and knowledge transmission. So teachers should focus on ways to develop students' ability to use language effectively in real-life contexts rather than their ability to simply reproduce it. Finally, the Learner-Centred Approach is more effective because it aims at developing students' awareness of themselves as learners, and it consequently enables them to figure out what their best learning strategies are.

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