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## **English Language Communication Problems: A Study of Managers in Gujarat**

Abstract:

Human language is culture bound and is the foremost foundation of communication that includes verbal, non- verbal and symbolic communication. It is through language that humans share ideas and thoughts and businesses and other activities take place. According to Naved (2015) “Language is what separates us from animals and makes us humans as it allows us to interact for various purposes”. Thus, it can be said that language is the mainstay of both personal and professional lives; and communication, both written and oral, requires language. Joseph and Taylor, (2006).

Every culture has its own language of communication in which humans interact with each other and carry on their everyday chores. However, when it comes to the language of business, it is English that has taken that position, globally. Owing to ‘the historical efforts of England’ (Naved, 2015) all of its former colonies: United States, Canada, Australia, and India have adopted English as their primary or secondary language. Businesses, culture and finance are taking place using English as the main language. Thus, English Language Communication (ELC<sup>1</sup>) has become an integral part for business and cultural development.

The present study is a study of ‘communication that takes place in English’. Based on the internationally recognized testing systems<sup>2</sup> and mandates<sup>3</sup> of English language learning, the study will cover, four major aspects of English communication: Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing. Two terms ‘proficiency<sup>4</sup> and adequacy<sup>5</sup>’ are used to recognize skills in English. For this study, the term adequacy will be used as the primary focus will be on basic comprehensibility of spoken and written English based on the understanding of the message delivered in English. The study is not about ‘expertise in English’.

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<sup>1</sup> English language communication

<sup>2</sup> BEC, (Business English certificate, British council) IELTS, TOEFL and PTE

<sup>3</sup> Include: speaking, listening, reading and writing

<sup>4</sup> Expertise, Merriam Webster( ) and OEU (

<sup>5</sup> Sufficient Merriam Webster( ) and OEU (

These four sections: speaking, listening, reading and writing are connected to each other (Kilickaya, 2009). All four require knowledge of English grammar, comprehension and a reasonably good vocabulary that makes the user capable of understanding basic, everyday conversation in English (Bozorgian, 2012). In simple words to have a proper communication, there has to be harmony between all four. Like, 'speaking' on its own is of no use as it requires proper comprehension in the form of proper listening. According to Kaul ( ) meaningful feedback of speaking is only possible if there is meaningful listening, the two are "closely intertwined". Monippally (2002) has called proper knowledge of a language to be the 'main feature' for wholesome listening.

English language communication has become an important language to be learnt for business, education and research, in India. Owing to large number of companies that have international presence. Several Indian researchers, such as, Banerjee (2010) have said that English is 'the door to success' to the world and hence must be learnt for a prosperous career. Menon and Patel (2012) have called English the 'lingua franca' that is used for interpersonal and inter-institutional communication. Graddol (2012) has called English 'a symbol of better life'.

According to Gordon, Jr. (2005) there are 1.5 billion English speakers across the world and they use it for business purposes. Tsedal (2012) has stated "An estimated of 565 million people use English on the internet" (para. 7). Through the studies conducted by these researchers, it can be seen that English is the language of commerce and business.

Keeping this requirement of ELC in mind, almost all Indian companies aspire to hire managers<sup>6</sup> with adequate knowledge of ELC. To ensure that these companies conduct yearly need analysis to identify the areas of concern that their staff needs to be trained in. English language communication is an area that is repeatedly found wanting in the managers. As a result, a compulsory ELC training is organized annually. The researcher has been involved in imparting ELC training to both multinational<sup>7</sup> and national<sup>8</sup> companies.

Training procedure includes, administering of a mandatory pre- assessment test that ensures focused and customized ELC training. The pre-assessment test is given to determine the competence level of ELC of the managers, based on which the whole curriculum is designed. The test consists of four sections of English: Speaking, Listening, Reading and

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<sup>6</sup> Managers hired for their MBA degrees in various areas of specialization

<sup>7</sup> Companies that have branches in more than one country. (Source)

<sup>8</sup> Companies that has a branch in only one country. (Source)

Writing. Over a period of time multiple results of the pre-assessment tests, in various companies, revealed that English language communication of all the managers was not at par with each other. There were no apparent reasons for this discrepancy as the managers were all MBAs and had parallel positions in the company. Some could articulate reasonably well in English; the others were almost incomprehensible. Some could write effective emails while the others could barely put two sentences together.

To understand these differences, a dialogue was initiated with the reporting heads<sup>9</sup> of the managers and the managers themselves. However, both the reporting heads and the managers gave flippant and rhetorical responses. Neither had any plausible explanations for the causes behind these obvious differences. Their responses were based on preconceived notions like, 'poor English' is a regular feature in Gujarat.

However, both hinted that there seemed to be one common ground between managers who had difficulties in ELC; it was the medium of instruction<sup>10</sup> at their primary and secondary school. Reporting heads had observed that managers who had received their education from Gujarati medium schools<sup>11</sup> were usually weak in English. Managers also hinted at the same reason.

### Background

Since English is not the native language of Indians, it is taught as a second language to school going students together with a regional language in school and mother tongue at home. Singhal (2012) has defined, "Second language acquisition or SLA as the process of learning other languages in addition to the native language" (para. 3). Thus, following the Indian education system, managers working in companies also learn English as a second language in schools. It is generally expected that since the managers learn English for 12 years in schools (Kannan, 2012) and pass their examination, they should have adequate knowledge of ELC.

However, a different scenario was seen during the researcher's interactions with them and the reporting heads. It was revealed that a large number of managers were poor in English language communication. As per managers' own understanding and

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<sup>9</sup> Reporting heads: Vice presidents, MDs and Presidents; to whom the managers were answerable to.

<sup>10</sup> "The medium of instruction is the language used by the teacher to teach. Teaching the language, or educational content, through the target language" (British Council).

<sup>11</sup> In the dissertation, the term 'school' has been used to connote primary and secondary schools.

their reporting heads' assessment, medium of instruction was one of the reasons for their inadequate ELC.

**1.3.1 Medium of Instruction.** The Indian education system follows three language formula that makes it mandatory for schools in every state to select one language for the medium of instruction that defines a school as a regional medium school or an English medium school. However, irrespective of medium of instruction, every school has to teach three languages. Rathi (2015) explained that according to this formula, (1) Every child has to learn the mother tongue or the regional language. (2) The official language of the union or the associate official language of the Union (3) Modern Indian language or a foreign language.

Thus, schools in Gujarat (Gujarati medium and English medium) teach three languages that include Gujarati or Hindi, English and a foreign language. However, according to the discussion with the managers and their reporting heads, for some reason students from the Gujarati medium schools do not possess adequate skills in English language communication.

Thus, to bring a deeper understanding of learning English in vernacular medium schools, studies conducted in the English language teaching in other vernacular medium schools were also investigated upon. Consequently, it was gathered from researchers like Punjabi (2016) and Rozario (2015) that situation was

no different forth English learners of other Indian States. In this context Rozario (2015) observed, "In vernacular medium schools, English is subject, but there is no development of speaking skills. Overall at the school level therein incentive to learn English. However, as the students move towards higher education, they experience the need to know English as the medium of study becomes English particularly in colleges that offer professional degrees. Students find it extremely difficult to cope with the situation which in turn leads to depression and develops an inferiority complex among[in]them" (p. 305). Murali (2009) has expressed similar thoughts,

The students in India can be categorized into two; one has the state language as the medium of study from the primary level and the other has English as the medium of study. Hence, the problem of teaching English as second language, to the Indian

students start from pre-schooling. (p. 14).

The above discourse shows that Gujarat is not the only state that has concerns with English language learning in vernacular medium school and its practical usage later. One of the facts that came out of the previous studies (Mehta, 2014 and Shankar, 2008) is that in vernacular medium primary and secondary schools, teachers fail to teach functional English. They concentrate only on helping the students pass in the subject; there is no learning of English to interact in real-life situations. (Kannan, 2009). Hence, English learnt is more theoretical than practical. Richards (1984) has pointed out, “English is invariably learnt after the mother tongue in somewhat artificial environment of the school. Consequently, it is often not the language of intimacy” (p. 83).

The discussion above has brought methods of teaching English in picture. Examination oriented, theoretical teaching of English is given precedence over its functional use of English that points towards a faulty vision of teaching English. Therefore, if the reason of teaching English itself appears to be shortsighted, the methods of teaching are somewhat myopic.

However, before getting an insight into the methods of teaching, the background check was done on similar ELC problems in other professions. Commonsense said that if medium of instruction was at fault for poor ELC, then it had to be a universal problem and could not be limited to managers. Professionals from other fields should also be facing the same ELC issues. Renuka devi's (2013) research, conducted on English language communication of engineers, stated lack of English language communication as one of the main reasons for poor placements of engineers.

Similar plight of the engineering students has been expressed by Anand (2011). “Articulation in halting English and inability to comprehend fluent English speaking interviewers made placements difficult for them” (Anand, 2011, para. 7). These researchers have considered lack of English language communication as one of the primary reasons for poor placements and further professional growth. Studies have stressed upon the requirement of English Language Communication as one of the most important skills for the engineers. Padhi (2008) said that most of the engineering students did not pay enough attention to English in their schools and colleges. So, due to lack of adequate English, they did not get placed or they had to compromise on their choice of companies.

He further added, “English language proficiency in India is an essential requisite for professionals. It is also source that can eventually open doors into the world of professional employment in India and abroad. Thus, English is immediately linked to employability” (para. 6). These researchers have insisted upon adequate usage of ELC to be one of the key subjects in shaping the careers of professionals from diverse fields (Padhi, 2008).

Similarly, Anand (2011) has shown astonishing statistics of call centres and their frustrations in not being able to hire required number of executives. Only three out of 100 (Anand, 2011) executives were found to have adequate skills of ELC. Studies have shown that professionals like doctors, IT graduates, lawyers and call centre executives have been continuously facing placement and promotional issues due to inadequate English language communication. Even after placements these professionals are plagued with several English communication related issues that lead to setbacks in promotions.

It was an alarming revelation that such a large number of professionals have problems in English language communication. Mainly because all of them have learnt English during their school. Also because except for the call centre executives, who are graduates from general streams, the others are with professional degrees and all professional courses are taught in English.

In view of this information, methods of teaching English in schools were examined. It was found that according to previous studies poor English language communication had a direct link to methods of teaching English in schools. Ali, (2012) Anand, (2011) and Borah (2013) have pointed out that the way in which English is taught in schools is one of the primary reasons for poor English language communication. Researchers have said that amongst all the four sections of ELC: speaking, listening, reading and writing; speaking suffers the most. Their main concern is ‘speaking’ (Rozario, 2015) as poor articulation prevents them from giving proper interviews. Reason being that schools give almost no practice of spoken English.

Consequently, in order to have a better understanding of the methods and processes of teaching English as a second language, methods propagated by prominent international scholars were investigated upon. Research showed that experts like Skinner (1957) Chomsky (1965) and Krashen(1981) had a very different view of language learning than what is used by Indian schools to teach English. Skinner (1957) approached a child as a

blank slate that was to be filled up by knowledge; Chomsky (1981) believed that every child had an ‘innate acquisition device.’ Krashen (1981) believed that language acquisition did not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules or any tedious drill but could be learnt effortlessly in a comfortable environment.

Hussein (2012) has given a detailed mention of the methods of learning a second language as elaborated by the international thinkers. According to him, Sapir, (1931) the earliest of anthropologists, was the one who had advanced the idea of “strong impact that language has on the perception of humans”. Later, Whorf (1956) pursued the same idea of ‘implication of a language on humans’ .It is pertinent tonote that the language theorists, such as Sapir, (1931)have propounded that the main problem in learning English lies in the thinking patterns<sup>12</sup> of the non-English speakers. A lucid explanation of the ‘thinking patterns’ can be seen in Boroditsky’s, (2017) example,

Even basic aspects of time perception can be affected by language. For example, English speakers prefer to talk about duration in terms of length (e.g., "That was a short talk," "The meeting didn't take long"), while Spanish and Greek speakers prefer to talk about time in terms of amount, relying more on words like "much" "big", and "little" rather than "short" and "long" Our research into such basic cognitive abilities as estimating duration shows that speakers of different languages differ in ways predicted by the patterns of metaphors in their language. (para. 15)

Similar examples can be observed in differences in the thinking patterns of Gujarati and English speakers. English has an expression ‘late evening’ that specifies a short period between evening and night, however, in Gujarati, there is no equivalent expression for ‘late evening’. Consequently, Gujarati speakers find it difficult to understand the concept of ‘late evening’ as for them it is either evening or night.

The above discourse has shown a number of issues related to ELC in India. These are related to English learning in Gujarat too, its actual use and the impact of its effectiveness in professional careers. These are briefly discussed below:

**1.3.2 English learning in Gujarat and related problems.** Learning of communicative English continues to beat difficulty for many learners who have to make use of English professionally later in their lives. There seems to be a gap in the classroom

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<sup>12</sup> Refers to how people who speak different mother tongues conceive things differently.

learning of English and its practical usage. According to Kannan, (2009) “The learners of English as a second language are ill-equipped to use it orally, most of the times. It is mostly their lack of confidence and fear of being laughed at that stops them from even trying to speak in English” (p. 4).

**1.3.2.1 Two mediums of instruction in schools in Gujarat.** As mentioned earlier in the chapter, most linguists have found foundation of English learning in childhood. Like Chomsky (1950) have stated that the best age of language learning is from 3 to 10. However, in case of Gujarati medium schools, English is taught only from class 1. By this time, the child is six years old, which means that she or he has already lost three years of language learning life.

Earlier, in Gujarati medium schools, English was taught from class 5 (them an agers under study belong to that age group) by then the students were not as young to effortlessly learn English.

**1.3.2.2 Methods of teaching.** Other major factors that have adversely affected the learning of ELC are: Translation, black board teaching, memorizing of rules and lessons and poor-quality teachers. According to Shankar (2008), teachers employed effective English teaching methods and instead of following structural and functional<sup>13</sup> approaches, they follow the traditional approach<sup>14</sup>. Faulty methods result in poor learning of English and almost no absorption of the structure and situational use of English. These defective methods of teaching English are the main reasons for poor English language skills of the students, especially English conversational skills. Below is the discussion on some of the methods that the researchers have found to be ineffective.

**1.3.2.2.1 Translation.** In Kannan’s (2009) opinion, despite the fact that the students learn English for almost ‘twelve years’, they are still not able to make proper use of it. Translation is used by the teachers as most of the students come from the rural background and do not understand when they are taught English. Students continuously ask for the subject(English) to be translated in Gujarati.

Following the same thought Mehta (2014) has shown the limitations of the translation methods given by Dawson (1998). According to Mehta (2014) Dawson has said that translation limits the learning of English and in word to word translation the actual

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<sup>13</sup> Refers to teaching of practical usage of English, that is speaking English fluently and with confidence.

<sup>14</sup> Refers to black board and exam oriented teaching.

meanings lost. Further, depriving learning in the second language (which is English in this case).

*1.3.2.2.2 Conventional method.* Ali (2010) is of the opinion, “In the past, students were introduced to English only in their 4th or 5th standard. Students learnt English just as another subject like Physics and Mathematics and got very little opportunity to use it within the school as well as outside the school” (para.5).

Hence, unconventional method, students barely interact with each other in English. So, even though, they learn English grammar rules, due to lack of practice, they are not able to practically use these rules. Thakur (2009), observed, “No attention is ever paid to pronunciation practice, listening comprehension and structure practice. So, when they clear their exam, they are as ignorant as they were when they first entered the English class” (p. 127).

*1.3.2.2.3. Lack of skilled English teachers.* According to Rozario (2015), in India, lack of skilled English teachers was an important reason for poor quality of English language teaching in schools. Teachers are not trained to teach English in an efficient way that makes for effective learning of English. Teachers, merely read out the text books and related chapters and ask the students to memorize the answers. Most of the time, the teacher even dictate the answers or give the answers in the form of written notes. Consequently, students do not learn effectively

Use of English.

Researchers like Green and Meara (1995) have advised the English teachers to follow Chomsky's (1965) language learning theory, to make way for effective teaching of English. According to this theory students naturally learn their mother tongue and the rules of grammar of the mother tongue do not come in the way of learning to use it practically. English also must be taught in the similar manner. Parallel view has been expressed by Krashen's (1981), “Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules and does not require tedious drill” (p.85). Krashen's (1981) further elaborated,

The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from

supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production (p.97).

**1.3.3 Areas of Concern in English.** Owing to ineffective methods of teaching English in schools, certain areas concern of English has been brought into picture. Areas like fluency, pronunciation, expression of ideas and vocabulary have taken a backseat due to heavy concentration on the passing of examination.

**1.3.3.1 Fluency.** Academicians believe that fluency in both reading and speaking are equally important as they bring clarity of thought and ideas. Lack of fluency is a result of lack of practice. Reading fluency involves rapid and accurate processing of the written words (Grabe, 2010). Same goes for speaking fluency too, studies have shown that the more the users use English, the better they become at it (Leong and Ahmadi, 2016). However, in Gujarati medium schools, there is no practice of either reading or speaking.

**1.3.3.2 Pronunciation.** One of the most problematic areas of English speaking, in Gujarat, is pronunciation. Faulty enunciation of vowel sounds is one of the primary concerns. Examples: saw is pronounced as so, cheek is pronounced as chick and red is pronounced as raid. Other problems in pronunciation include: difficulty in the sounds of: sh, f, ph, z (as in measure) and gh. This basic flaw in pronunciation makes the speech difficult to be understood. In this relation Sriprabha (2015) has said, “When we begin speaking in the second language (i.e. English), we initially use sounds from our mother tongue (p. 296). Sriprabha(2015) further said that the learners felt safer when using sounds from their own mother tongue and thus ended up having faulty pronunciation. “Most L-2 (second language) learners subconsciously transfer language rules of L-1 (Mother tongue) to L-2 (second language) sound system or word order. Mother tongue influence happens because your native language sounds have not yet been replaced with the second language sounds” (Sriprabha, 2015. p. 297).

**1.3.3.3 Confidence.** Confidence is also an area of concern for the Gujarati medium users of English. The main reasons could be the lack of practice and exposure in dealing with English language in different social situations and the fear of being laughed at. Rose (2008) conducted a study on Spanish English learners who had migrated to the United

States and reported that the immigrants felt like a different person' when speaking in English. The immigrants used the word 'cohibida' (embarrassed) to express their feelings when they spoke in English.

**1.3.3.4 Vocabulary.** Limited or no vocabulary, background study revealed limited and insufficient vocabulary amongst the users. According to Rozario (2015) most Indian English learners had little or no word power, which is why their expression of English was either repetitive, poor or appeared to be out of context. Green and Meara's (1995) in their study have made a noteworthy observation that poor reading habits as one of the reasons for lack of vocabulary. They have also commented upon the fact that the English learners are aware of the problem of poor vocabulary and, therefore, they find English speaking a challenge. Green and Meara's (1995) stated,

If the language that learner is hearing or reading has many unknown words, then that language is not comprehensible and therefore cannot be input. In other words, without vocabulary, comprehensible input is neither comprehensible nor input. Adult ESL learners are keenly aware of their "vocabulary plight. "Learners need vocabulary and see acquisition vocabularies their greatest challenge (p. 97).

**1.3.3.5 Grammar.** Butterfield (2008) defined, "Grammar is the set of structural rules governing the composition of clauses, phrases, and words in any given natural language. The term refers also to the study of such rules, and this field includes morphology, syntax, and phonology, often complemented by phonetics, semantics, and pragmatics" (p.42). For a student who learns English as a second language, grammar is daunting. Cook (1985) observed, "To acquire language, the child needs not only universal grammar but also evidence about a particular language; he needs to hear sentences of English to know how to fix the parameter for the order of Verb, Subject, and Object" (para, 7). Unfortunately, the second language learners of English in Gujarat, only get to hear (limited) English from their teachers in school. However, even that, most of the times is translated, in order to make English learning easy.

**1.3.4 Importance of English in the Corporate World.** The discussion above has shown that there are several issues that have led to inadequate English language communication amongst the managers. However, regardless of the existing English learning and

teaching problems, corporate world demands adequate ELC from their managers. Reason being that corporate work culture in India requires one common language that connects the working professionals with each other. India is a multilingual country and people have different mother tongues; English acts as a 'link' language between professionals from different states and cultures. It is also the language that connects corporate world with in India to the corporate world outside India.

Borah (2013) said the job profiles of managers necessitated competence in English language communication. Both within and outside the country, Borah (2013) further said,

As we have multi-cultural and multi-linguistic work force in the companies, English is the language which connects people by default. It is the language used for official communication; whiteites meeting within or outside, presentations, training, conferences, letters, documents, reports etc. The purpose being, people are expected to read, write, speak and understand English (p. 37).

Jyothi (2016) added "Companies want people who can basically read and understand written words in the form of instructions, reports, letters, memos, notices and other any form of official documents" (para. 6). Another noteworthy feature required by the companies is the expertise in formal communication: oral and written. This is because the companies are global in nature and do not deal with isolated industries but have international associations. Tsedal (2012),

English is now the global language of business. More and more multinational companies are mandating English as the common corporate language—Airbus, Daimler-Chrysler, Fast Retailing, Nokia, Renault, Samsung, SAP, Technicolor, and Microsoft in Beijing, to name a few—in an attempt to facilitate communication and performance across geographically diverse functions and business endeavors (para.1).

**1.3.4.1 Setback to English in Corporate India.** In the course of the study, it was learnt that in spite of the growing global requirement of English in the business world, there have been some policy makers who have tried to curb the spread of English. However, their efforts have failed mainly in the business world. As stated earlier, for a proper and

harmonious communication between multilingual Indians, English is essential (Borah, 2013). Expressing similar thoughts, Menon and Patel (2102) have cited an example,

A few years back the U.P. state government was trying to implement only Hindi in all offices and public places in place of English. It did not succeed. Now with the advent of multinational companies and they being professionals getting number of jobs with them need to know not only workable English but good presentational and communication skills too. Therefore, English has become a 'welcome' phenomenon all around (p. 43).

Though it may not be a major factor in the poor learning of ELC, yet this 'ping ponging' of the status of English. And the policy makers' now aversion and now liking for English, must have affected teaching of English in vernacular medium schools.

Despite all the difficulties, corporate world appears to be clear in its demands of adequate ELC from its managers. Little can be done about this requirement as English is used as the language of commerce and business internationally.

### **1.9 Summary**

Previous studies and the state of ELC of the managers show a considerable gap between the learning of English at school and its functional usage. One of the strongest reasons stated is the two mediums of instructions: Gujarati and English. Studies and managers' own experiences have exposed specific challenges faced by the students of Gujarati mediums schools. Gujarati medium schools introduce English at a much later period, therefore, the students find it difficult to effectively use English. This has led to identification of four objectives of the study that shall be discussed in the later chapters.

English as a second language is taught in India since many years; however, as discussed in the present chapter, the same ineffective and traditional methods of teaching English are being used in schools, despite the knowledge and the visible results on the management professionals. As discussed, some changes seem to have been made. Earlier, English was taught from class 5, now it is taught from class 1. However, there seems to be very little improvement even with this change. Even in class 1, the students are way past the language learning age (Chomsky,) and thus unable to grasp the nuances of ELC.

Second language learning has had a number of theories, different language theorists have propagated their own language learning theories; however, Krashen's (1981) theory of 'language acquisition' is observed to most appropriate in English language learning in Indian context. Which is why the students of English medium schools, owing to a number of English related activities and their subjects being taught in English, are reasonably better in ELC. Whereas those students who study in regional medium schools only learn English as a subject and thus find it difficult to use it practically. According to Spada (2007) "There is little doubt that Krashen's work has been highly influential in shaping and supporting CLT"<sup>15</sup>(p. 274). Hussnain said the same, "most teachers and many researchers find his [Krashen's] views intuitively appealing."

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<sup>15</sup> Refers to communicative language teaching.