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Is Fluency in English Beyond the Bound of a Graduate's Ability?

Abstract: Parleys about certain topics in the academic world is not going to be ceased until the last breath of this planet. How one can acquire fluency in English is such a topic. This article is prompted by the realization that even though the syllabi of English language papers of degree courses of Kerala universities have received much face lifts to shape them according to the necessity of today but still the ultimate goal-the acquisition of good communication skill-remains to be unachieved. If this is to be continued several working age adults would remain out of work force since proficiency in English language is considered a vital requirement not only in international job markets but also in our own country. Without much strain one can understand that in hectic semester system of undergraduate courses both teachers and learners are handcuffed and the former's main concern would be to complete the portions in due time and the latter's focus is to overcome the examination hurdle just anyhow. And the audio CDs attached with English Communication text books are seldom used by the

both parties. Verily, this is not a malady without any medicine. It is curable by applying some learning strategies. The development of collaborative learning strategies should be promoted and with positive exposures the goal can be materialised.

Key words: Language proficiency, learning hurdles, globalisation, lack of exposures, E-learning.

This study is prompted by the news that 51% of engineering graduates are not employable regarding their fluency in English language. But there is nothing new in this news since it is a well known fact that majority of the graduates irrespective of their courses of study have poor communication skill in this language. It is also not uncommon that there are several students who excel in their respective main subjects struggle enough to speak fluently in English. Over the last two decades the waves of globalisation and internationalisation have been knocking down the walls of boundaries of nations and discharging innumerable opportunities to the world job markets. Both techies and non-techies started rushing and jostling for chances. Their interview experiences made us to realise that good communication skill in English is not only counted as an added advantage but in many instances it is as important as the candidate's thoroughness in his/her concerned subjects. It generated serious discussions in the non-English speaking countries how to acquire proficiency in English. This question was also fuelled due to the cognizance of the following facts about this language. i. World's knowledge is enshrined in it and it is known as the world's library language. ii. English adorns the role as a language of education, iii. It is world's lingua franca, and one has to oil the wheels of communication in the fields of business, health, tourism etc. with English. iv. Computer compilers seem to only understand keywords in one language and that language is almost always English. All the more today's

tech-savvy students have a world of resources and information at their fingertips provided they should know English.

Meanwhile in Kerala serious debates have been going on why do the youngsters from this state stumble over when they face interviews. It is their impoverished communication skill in English which takes the toll of those young men whose academic performance is better than the candidates from other states. By acknowledging this fact serious thoughts were being generated what measures should be taken in this regard. Academics chalked out many actions. But it took a long period of time by the universities of Kerala to materialize these actions in to practice. Finally a revamping of the syllabi occurred. In the first semester of degree courses communication skill got the front seat and grammar had to satisfy with the rear one. Since then, almost every year new text books have been introduced without remarkable changes. Sadly enough instead of much anticipated surge of improvement, they have created only some ripples and the gist of the issue has still remained unresolved. So, what are the things missed or neglected in this regard and what remedial steps should be taken?

Problems and Issues in building fluency in English apropos to degree students:-

a) Difficulty of teaching students at different learning levels:-

A good majority of the students who join for undergraduate courses are without conceived standard in English. They have managed to pass the English language papers by the mercy of liberal valuation policies in higher secondary courses. There the teachers are under pressure to optimize success percentage in examinations more than elevating the standard of learners. One can mould and reshape a raw material in to a desired product only once it is keeping at least a minimum quality. So very often the college English teachers cut poor figures before these students. And our undergraduate curriculum presupposes that these students possess a working

knowledge of the languages. This presupposition coupled with over loaded syllabi, unscientific teacher student ratio are detrimental to a true language learning. These students unlikely get chances of speaking or practising English at home. Only very few of them especially from non-standard English medium schools have got exposure to communicate in English. They carry with them fear of this language. They have not received so far communicative competence which would include acquiring the knowledge of communicative functions of the language and linguistic means to perform different kinds of functions. No specific approaches are applied by the teachers in higher secondary classes to improve the student's proficiency in English to facilitate taking higher education where the medium of instruction will be English. No special programmes (such as activity based) are provided to alleviate their fear of English to increase their confidence.

b) Lack of Confidence:-

One should not unrealistic with his goal. It is not easy to learn a foreign language within a short time frame nor there is any magic formula to fulfil a complex task.

c) Aimless Participation:-

There are innumerable students who don't know what actually is the benefit of learning a foreign language. Parents too are unaware about its importance.

“Parents do not necessarily know how to help students excel in academic duties. This is especially true of parents in both rural and urban low-income communities. It is important to hold school lectures for parents how to motivate students, how to help them organise their time, how to improve their conditions where students do homework to read, and above all, about the importance of learning a foreign language in today's world.” (Ramos and Aguirre, 2014, P. 138)

d) Untrained Teachers:-

It is imperative that the teachers should be properly trained. No emphasis is given to train the teachers how to enhance and nourish the learner's communicative ability. For teaching in colleges post graduation with NET/SET or PhD is enough and no training in teaching techniques is necessary.

e) Incompetent and over-ambitious syllabus and dull text books:-

Even though many changes have been brought in to the text books and syllabi still they fail to cater the need of the day. "Rigid curriculums and huge syllabi continue to threaten students who speak regional dialect but love to excel in English" (Dr. Vitthal V. Parab, 2015, IOSR-JH.SS Vol. 20 Issue-6)

f) Lack of Exposure:-

Lack of sufficient exposure to the language being learnt is a great barrier in its acquisition. The environment affects to a great extent one's language learning. They should feel comfortable in their language learning. The acquisition process will be difficult if there are no much chances to practice the language in the daily life situation. Key to successful speaking lies in practice. Inside the class room the teacher can provide various items like magazines, books, CD displays etc. There is no limit to the scope of using internet facilities. But tight schedules and compact time frame doesn't permit the teacher to use them properly. There are many language teachers who do not know to use modern equipments and electronic devices.

If we equate the term exposure to the contact outside the class room, it has innumerable benefits. But unfortunately learners receive less opportunity and encouragement to practice speaking English not only at home but also at outside. Majority of the learners are shy to speak in English. So, the skill they attained become stagnant.

g) Trepidation and Shyness:-

These two frailties are arch rivals of language learning. Some are painfully shy and nervous in speaking a foreign language. Some others are worry about making mistakes. They simply fail to understand that when we learn anything we make a plenty of mistakes and it is really a part of that process.

h) ICT and Teachers:-

Language teaching and electronic media are inseparable companions nowadays. But sadly enough a good share of teachers in higher secondary schools and colleges do not know how to make use of advancements in the fields of Information and Communication Technology in teaching and learning process. And many colleges do not have modern facilities.

i) Overcrowded Class Rooms:-

Unhealthy student teacher ratio an overcrowded class rooms are great barrier for language learning. In colleges students from different branches of studies huddle together in a single class room for English language classes. Here individual attention is remains to be a mockery.

The following suggestions may be useful in this regard.

a) Syllabus and Text Books:-

The syllabus should be a road map which identifies the specific skills and knowledge students will be able to manifest after the completion of the course. According to Lee Trepanier a good syllabus should answer the three questions of students “What will I learn? How will I learn it (Which also implies how will I be evaluated)? and why should I learn the material and method that you have proposed?” Syllabus for under graduate courses should focus on all four skills and by understanding the immediate necessity of today due thrust will be laid on communication skills.

Now let us see what are the features of good text books. Primarily text books should fulfil the requirements of both students and teachers as well. It should be made taking into consideration the level of interest, curiosity, inquisitiveness and psychological effect it would create in the students. It is concise in size and attractive in all respects and cherishing the aim of what it intended to be. It is accurately written with clarity of expression. Text books on English communication skills should provide human verbal and non-verbal transactions in a variety of contexts with attractive illustrations, pictures and narratives. Business and non-business formal and informal-it should render justice to the learner's needs. Every page of that should incite the reader's curiosity by giving interesting dialogues, conversations, proverbs, idioms, phrases and usages. The text books would be the products of experts. Much emphasis will be given to conversational English. Nowadays communicative English text books are coming with CDs, indeed it is a welcome sign. In short these books should make learners able to deliver dialogues at serious levels and to very casual contexts like to clear out some stuff with family. After learning this text book the learner can't ask for more! In short the book can break those large ice cubes that stop one from communicating with others. By providing effective communication skills it can take a reader very far on the way to success.

b) Teachers in English Communication Classes:-

“The best teachers are those who show you where to look but don't tell you what to see”

-Alexandra K. Trenfor

Duties of language teachers are well defined in the following lines. ‘Typical responsibilities of the job include: planning, preparing and delivering lessons, preparing teaching materials, helping pupils improve their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills via individual and group sessions.’

English communication teacher has a very challenging job. Students do expect a great deal of assistance from them. First of all he/she should boost their morale and inject confidence into them. He should make them feel that learning English is not so difficult but instead it is rather interesting and should drive out from them the archrival of language learning i.e. fear from them. He may take the students outside of the class room. Let them enjoy the drama given in the text books at open air. Students will be assigned with roles from these plays. Picnics and parties with exchanges exclusively in English is a good idea.

Teachers should remember that they are also answerable if the learners competence do not get better after a few years in college. If there is a combined effort by the English teaching faculties in organising events such as discussions, campus dialogues, debates, literary and linguistic programmes etc. between classes and branches it would be beneficial for the learners.

Today's students are techno savvy that demand the teachers should at least know how to amalgamate modern technology and teaching learning process, otherwise he will be regarded as a second rate one. It is an urgent necessity before the successful implementation of a new syllabus or text books the teachers should be able to appreciate them. As the teachers comprise with all age groups it is necessary to organise workshops and training sessions regularly as the seniors and the freshly joined hands can meet together and former can pass their teaching ideas which are the products evolved and moulded by experience and the second ones who are fledged with latest technical know-how to each other.

Since non-native English speaking teachers represent more than 80% of English teachers worldwide, it is useful to form a common platform to communicate new ideas, techniques and developments evolving time to time particularly alongside advances in technology in different places. Technology has made this 'cross fertilisation' easier now.

c) Learners-at right perspective:-

We can get down to business now. Does it a long shot or a 'Himalayan' task to attain communication skills matching to international settings? Of course the answer is an emphatic no. First of all it is the curse of our students facing English language with fear. Let them encounter it boldly. The teachers in first semester classes itself should try to inculcate confidence in them. Change the monotonous routines to an attractive affair, let the vessel sail from the rough oceans of prose to the bright breezy plains of poetry and stories. Systematic feedback of the students is a must because it plays a key role in the assessment process and it also enables the teacher to switch over in to the pastures more viable. As the emphasize for passing the examinations lies so heavy on the students they opt for not so desirable methods like cramming, using guides having translations in their mother tongue etc. If the teacher can alleviate their anxiety they will adopt healthier methods.

It is imperative for the teachers to improvise the teaching methodology with new techniques in ELT. It is possible to deal with 'tough' students to improve their communication skills in a very easy manner by using the latest methodological trends and computer/web based language learning. Both teachers and students can make use of plenty of online resources available nowadays. Audio visual aids, will help to develop ability to listen but also help them to understand the concepts better. Language is primarily verbal and ability to understand and speak is hence beget more prominence. Proliferation of tablets and smart phones would make E-learning handy if dexterously used. Emailing, blogging,skyping and application of i-pods and such multimedia devices would be handy in this respect. More and more new age devices are flooding each day and also can be applied if proven to be useful. Internet facility is the most lucrative modern factor which has an overwhelming influence.

d) What learners should do:-

First of all the learners should get rid of their shyness. Adopt a great mindset toward off fear and replace it with confidence. Don't miss any chance to converse in English. Don't

wary about making mistakes since it is a part of language learning. One need not worry about being judged. For speaking in another language there is no any other way but to speak. Speak before one think otherwise it would take too much time for the delivery. Let the words come out quite naturally like a running brook.

Don't create ideas in mother tongue and then translate it in to English as it would be a tiresome exercise. One can prepare himself some dialogue prior to attending a function. Before going to a supermarket he can assume what he is going to tell at there. Form a group of friends who are interested in speaking English. For increasing vocabulary be curious about surrounding and find out words corresponding to them. First learn words related to one's interesting habits or things, say for example cooking. Go for an English only picnic (at least mouths would get sound holidays!). Communicating people online, watching on television news, debates, discussions, listening running commentaries of games will help in a big way. Watching plays (theatre) and singing songs would have wonderful effects. Trying to reach out in English speaking environment will do miracles. Brush up grammar through talking. The Shadow's English CDs will help to polish one's rhythm and intonation. Reading aloud with CD on display is suggested by many to improve one's pronunciation and command. Reading newspapers, magazines, and fiction is excellent remedy. Reading aloud before one's family members will not test their patience! Drilling with proverbs, idioms will nourish his language.

To sum up, even though students learn English about twelve years before completing their under graduation, why are they still not acquiring sufficient proficiency? This is of course not a question. It has been asked for years and there are some stock answers for them. Nor the suggestions mentioned above are new to many, but still they are valid and not obsolete. Instead if they are considered with careful concern it will reap benefits. China is also haunted by the same issue. Even though it has invested large sums of money and time for

learning English language education, its impacts has been minimal may be because it has not enough qualified teachers and good teaching materials and scarce financial aid. But when it was granted Olympics they have to get down to business. They found that they had to begin from the ground up. Eventually when the days of the mega event came world found thousands of zippy Chinese college guys who were running far and wide speaking English fluently to the guests from other countries. How was it possible for them? Miracles would happen if things are done systematically with conviction. Obviously India has outnumbered other non English speaking countries with thousands of young men who speak English so sweetly even mesmerising the native speakers. India is the largest English speaking country outside USA and UK. But sadly enough their origin is either limited to *haut monde* or *beau monde* or urban areas of our country. Wards of proletariat and rural, folks lag and not going anywhere. So, if a combined effort involving government departments faculties, experts etc. is initiated with well-defined and stipulated goals, verily we can herald the origin of a new English Spring that will not be 'far behind'. Let us quote Roy Romer before we conclude, "we can do better in higher education. And it is more than technology. It's also an attitude on the part of faculty. We need to think through how we can produce a better quality product at less cost".

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