



COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF THE TERTIARY LEVEL STUDENTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Strong communication skills have always been an extra credential for every student in his or her resume. Communication skills can reflect a lot in their career growth, especially with so much of competition at the workplace. Engineers in particular should possess that extra edge to prove themselves not only in their technical skills but also in their communication. An early emphasis to develop strong communication and interpersonal skills should be encouraged at the first year itself so that by the end of the final lap of their study the student is well prepared to enter a highly competitive job market. This paper closely observes the overall skills of the students in the contexts of Reading, Writing and Speaking. Listening has not been taken into consideration as it would involve a more elaborate analysis, the student's abilities and difficulties faced in effective communication were assessed using a questionnaire. Task based learning and voluntary interaction among the students have been suggested as methods to improve the students performance in the class room.

Key Words: *Communication Skills, DIALANG Scale, Task Based Learning.*

INTRODUCTION

In order to develop good communication skills, the classroom is considered as an ideal ground for learning and practising. It is only through the classroom that students learn to develop their personality and leadership skills. Communication is a two way processes where one becomes a listener and the other a speaker, but most of the time, in a classroom we often find the teacher taking a more active role, while the student remain as passive listeners. According to Lee (2004) emphasizes that though the method of teaching in a class by the teacher has a lot of its own weight age, "it indirectly limits and deprives the opportunities for L2 learners to produce output, learn how to negotiate meaning and develop communicative competence in language classrooms," (p.1) where as a best alternate method would be to encourage communicative tasks to acquire the target language in a meaningful way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of teaching Technical English to the first and Communication skills to the third year engineering students it is found that most of the responses which are received during class hours are from a same group of students who frequently answer or actively participate in the classroom. For the first year of engineering students, since the syllabus is based on grammar and Technical English, there is less attention given to their speaking abilities. Ur (1981) et.al stated (as cited in Ellis, 2003 ,p.7) assume that "tasks are directed at oral skills, particularly speaking", they have felt that "the material for the task may also involve some reading and if a planning stage is involved, learners may also be required to write, but the assumption is that the task itself is performed orally". A constraint on the specified time to finish the syllabus and to coach students for their exams is the prime importance of a faculty and hence there is not much of focus on the training and improving of the practical communicative skills of the students. To bridge this gap for the faculty and the students, Reading Comprehension and an essay is taken as an example to help students to develop their Reading and interaction skills.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted on the basis of a survey. The data were collected through a primary approach using a prepared questionnaire containing 37 questions, with the responses to be marked as Quiet Often, Often ,Less Often and Not at all.

The Questionnaires were distributed in the class room during the regular English hour among 53 students. Out of the 53, 50 of the students completed the questionnaires and submitted the same. A few Questionnaires were left as the students were absent for the test.

The Number of responses alone is considered as the analysis of this test as it is used for a specific purpose to check the level of participation of students during the English language class. However the suitability of the test can vary depending upon the needs of the teacher.

The Common European Framework had introduced the CoE (1986) "DIALANG", (p.231-234) scale which is an application system used for diagnostic purposes adopted by to test the learner's efficiency level. The DIALANG Self Assessment Statements is the tool that has been used for this study, which makes it as a self assessment diagnostic test.



DIALANG is not language specific and takes into account the needs of the users and learners all around the world. In this particular questionnaire minor modifications in the text were made to the questions, to make it more appropriate and suitable for the students. Initial consultations with various language experts were made and then alterations of the statements were worked upon by the Self Assessment Group. This test has ever since been used by a number of learners all around the world to check their proficiency levels.

The initial 'Can-Do' statements of the DIALANG Scale were changed to 'I can' statements. The need for this change was felt because the approach for the self assessment test should be more from the subject's point of view rather than the teacher's point of view.

Using the SPSS Package and extracting the most used factors using the Principal Component Analysis method three components were identified. As per the rule of thumb in the Rotated component matrix, values which are higher than 5 are to be taken into consideration, however in this paper factors whose value is 7 and above have been identified and presented for the convenient sampling method.

The next step was to find out what were the most difficult classroom tasks faced by the students and hence, to narrow down the difficulty levels the mean values of the Rotated component matrix whose values were 7 and above worked out. The data generated gave the factors whose mean value were arranged in the highest to lowest values Component No 3, had only 5 factors number and the mean value was 7.82, which is very less compared to components 1 and component 2 whose values were 17.32 and 20.06 respectively. The difficulty level was more in the speaking tasks.

This is a clear indication that students don't voluntarily come up and express themselves, if we look at the factors we can find out that their Reading and writing skills are stronger than their speaking skills in most of the factors listed in the table.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SPEAKING ABILITIES OF THE STUDENTS

It is found that the following factors - "I can briefly give reasons and explanations for suggestions, complaints, plans and actions" is a very difficult task especially for students to be able to suggest or give their opinion when the others are planning, it is clear that during class activities these students often find it difficult to coordinate with the other students. In the context of planning and acting there should be a feeling of being in a group or at least having the support of the group members to be able to suggest and to be a part of the team.

Followed by factors like "I can give short basic descriptions of events and activities", and "I can describe past activities and personal experiences", and "I can and I'm able to take a topic and present it to a class" are similar speaking tasks which are some more difficult tasks for the students.

SUGGESTED REMEDIES AND MEASURES

Teachers have been adapting different strategies and methods of teaching and one such effective methodology is Task based learning is a method through which students are able to develop their interpersonal skills, in their book by Erry and Schollaret (2003) have written about classroom interaction as the essential element for an active classroom, "Whatever methods we follow in our classroom, most of us hope for our students to be motivated, and for our classrooms to be positive spaces for learning".

Step 1

An essay was taken from the first year technical English text book and each student was made to read the essay, consisting of 5 to 6 lines. Even though the essay was finished within 15 minutes it was made to be repeated.

Step 2

Considering the fact that the essay was being read as a repetition for the students to listen attentively in the class, an interactive session discussing the content of the passage were debated and talked about. Students were able to give their suggestions and form their own opinion with matters related to the discussion.

Step 3

As the students were finishing the essay it was found that students were into discussing, debating and giving their suggestion.



Step 4

The same methods were followed for the Reading Comprehension exercise, since Reading comprehension is not only used for learning skimming and scanning techniques, it also encourages an interactive class room.

The aim of this exercise is to encourage public speaking and encourage group discussion tasks which are very essential for engineering students during their recruitment.

It is often noted that students who have studied in non-English medium schools often don't express their ideas due to the lack of spoken English. So when an exercise like this is performed in the classroom especially when an essay or Reading passage is found it is suggested that reading the essay or the reading comprehension

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