Methods to foster oral proficiency in English in engineering students through innovative classroom teaching

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ABSTRACT--_India is a country where every second or every third student is an engineer but most of them are still unemployed due to various factors, oral proficiency being one of them. Traditional classroom teaching methods and outdated methodologies, owing to poor exposure result in a majority of engineers unable to fetch jobs for themselves. Exposure to the present trends and making them aware of the needs of the industry is the need of the hour. Inculcating new methods in teaching which give the students hands-on experience to deal with the interview pressure and sustain a job should be prioritized since day one of their engineering education. Eleventh hour preparations for interviews have never been beneficial. This paper aims at providing innovative classroom teaching methods to improve the oral proficiency of engineering students._

KEYWORDS-- _Engineering students, Innovative classroom teaching methods, Unemployment, Communication skills, Oral proficiency, Interviews, Mobile phones, Technology._

I.   INTRODUCTION

Oral proficiency in English: Oral proficiency is the ability to communicate one's ideas clearly, effectively and accurately while speaking. It includes the correct pronunciation of words, intonation, rhythm, stress, pitch, tone, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, articulation, brevity, and coherence in order to be effortlessly understood by the listener.

II.   IMPORTANCE OF ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS:

Human beings have evolved at such a fast pace that the world has shrunk into a global village. Communication opens doors, breaks barriers and keeps the relationships between people belonging to different ethnicities, cultures and backgrounds. To most people, mastering the art of speaking is the single most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language, and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language (David Nunan, 1991) [1]. In general, speaking is very important in one's life because it helps us to interact with one other and speaking is the most productive oral skill (David Nunan, 2003) [2]. Oral communication is a two-way process between the speaker and the listener and involves the productive skill of speaking and the receptive skill of understanding (Byrne, D 1986) [3]. Of all the four Communication Skills, i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (LSRW), Speaking is the most important skill according to Welty (1976) [4] . Speaking is a crucial social skill which is exhibited when we communicate with people at the workplace, parties,

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job interviews and while sharing knowledge. According to Byrne (1984) [5], Speaking is a two way process involving the speaker and the listener in the productive and the receptive skill of understanding. Language is used to communicate with people to send their message across and hence the involvement of the speaker who produces the information and the listener who receives the information is needed wherein the listener tries and understands the information given by the speaker during the communication process. Speaking is the best medium to express the thoughts we want to convey clearly to the listener.

III.   THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR ENGINEERING STUDENTS:

Oral communication skill is not only important for engineering graduates but also for everyone. But with more than 1.5 million engineers graduating every year and every second or third student opting for engineering education, the need for this skill is more in demand in engineering graduates as oral communication skill is tested as part of the interview procedure. Martin Bygate (1987) aptly said that speaking is a skill by which people are most frequently judged and hence the learners are often supposed to be able to speak confidently in order to carry out most of their basic transactions [6]. After graduation, engineers need to attend interviews and clear the specified number of rounds in order to be selected. The most important aspect which is looked at is oral communication skill. This skill decides whether a candidate qualifies to the next round, gets a job, sustains it and also helps in moving up the levels of the hierarchy ladder. Even if the engineering graduates have qualified with flying colours, it does not fetch them a job if they cannot verbally communicate with confidence and convince the interviewer about their skill set.

At present, according to AICTE dashboard as of July 2019, there are 6,276 institutions offering Engineering courses with an intake of 27, 12, 022 students for both UG and PG courses. Engineering courses top the list when compared to other courses, which clearly states that the engineering stream is the most sought after course opted by the students.

India Skills Report 2019, a joint initiative of All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and Association of Indian Universities (AIE), powered by Wheelbox with People Strong as the knowledge partner and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) as India partner, pooled in its data by conducting a survey among 3.1 lakh students from 5,200 institutions and more than 100 employers across 9 industries from 29 states and 7 Union territories. According to the report, the key job areas the companies are hiring from are Artificial Intelligence, Design and Research & Development and the domains with more employable talent is from BE and B.Tech.

The hiring intent has been fluctuating every year and stands at 15% in 2019 with a 5% rise when compared to the last year, showing a slight growth. The software industry which is the darling of India Inc. would be back in the hiring game after 2 years of speculations and freezing in hiring. The hiring intent according to the educational domain states that engineering graduates constitute a maximum percentage of the total hiring requirements. The sectors which have hired the most in 2019 are Software, Hardware and Manufacturing which clearly states that there is a greater need for the Engineering graduates to be armed to the teeth in order to utilize the best opportunities available.

According to the AICTE dashboard as of September 2019, There are 6,276 institutions offering Engineering courses with an intake of 27, 12, 022 students for both UG and PG courses. From the intake of 2,712,022 students, only 1,399,662 enrolled themselves (338,868 Girls and 1,060,794 Boys) which clearly states that only 51.6 % of the seats were filled. From the total enrolment of 1,399,662 students, only 598,816 engineering students are placed till date across India which states that only 42.7 % of the engineering graduates are employed and a whopping 57 % remain unemployed unless they opt for higher education or take up entrepreneurship. (Figure1).
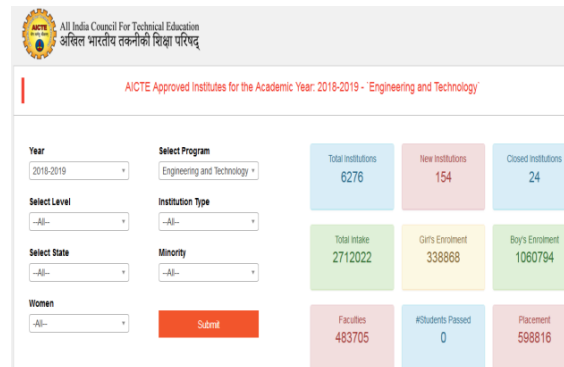

Figure 1: unemployed unless they opt for higher education

The following graph shows from 2012- 2013 to 2018 – 2019 according to the AICTE dashboard (Figure2) the number of students placed for the past six (6) academic years
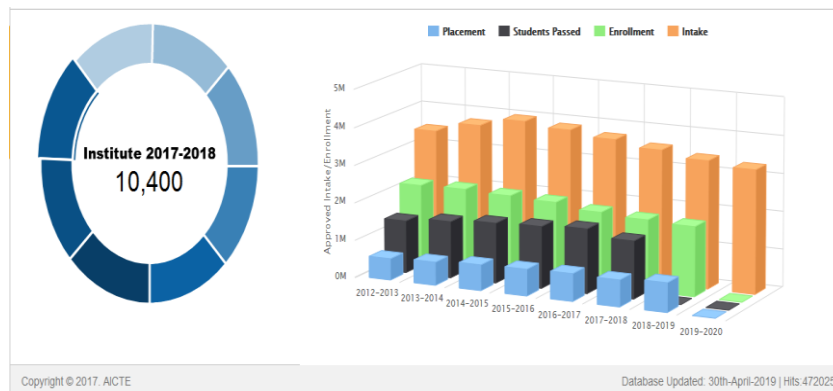

Figure 2: the number of students placed for the past six (6) academic years

According to India Skills Report, 2019, the employers when asked about the top 3 most preferred skills looked at while hiring stated that communication skills top the list followed by adaptability and learning agility, apart from domain expertise. The survey states that 63% of recruiters feel that "Some" job seekers or "No" job seekers meet the required skills expected to be hired (Figure 3). Hence the need for oral communication skills in engineering students is the need of the hour.

Most Preferred Skills

This year again we reached out to employers and asked them which are the three skills they hire for apart from domain expertise. If the preferences of the employers are an indication, candidates with better communication skills and those ready to learn and adapt to the changing business environment are preferred than others. Considering the change businesses are going through these days, this is not at all shocking.

RANK	PREFERENCES
1	Communication Skills
2	Adaptability
3	Learning Agility

Figure 3: Hence the need for oral communication

IV.   REFLECTION OF TEACHING IN THE PAST

Altekar (1948) stated that the success and the achievements of an educational system depend to a large extent on the ideas that animate the teacher and the student and the nature of the relationship that exists between them. The teacher-student relationship was mutual in ancient India and the reverence that was given to a teacher was not to be seen anywhere else in the world. The teacher or the spiritual guru was functional in leading the scholar from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. A lot of importance was given to the proper accent and pronunciation in the Vedic recitation which was only learned by observing the lips of a well-qualified teacher [7]. The ancient universities of Takshashila and Nalanda taught advanced mathematics, Science and other subjects to students who came from all over the world. English education was introduced in India by the British but our country did not benefit much from the colonial school education system. Today, due to many reforms, new methods of instruction like flipped classroom method, Outcome Based Learning and learner-centric approach are slowly making their way into the system in order to bring out quality in the education system and noticeable changes are visible in the way we teach and learn.

Education at Shantiniketan which was established in 1863 opens our eyes towards a new approach in teaching and learning where the students sat on hand oven mats and had classes conducted in the open, beneath trees with an equal teacher-student ratio. The aim was to go beyond the confines of the classroom and give freedom to the students despite being in a formal learning environment as Rabindranath Tagore as the student felt claustrophobic within the four walls of a classroom which made him unable to think. Flexible class schedules were allowed depending on the seasons and Vocational education was given equal importance.

On the contrary, we see an altogether new system of education prevalent today.

V.   REASONS FOR THE LACK OF ORAL PROFICIENCY IN ENGINEERING

   STUDENTS

Oral proficiency cannot be achieved with a flick of a magic wand. The hard work of the teacher and the student are put to test when the results are analyzed. It cannot just be done over a short span of 15 or 20 days of Campus Recruitment Training (CRT) sessions that are given to the students in the third year of their engineering education. We cannot expect a student to master the art of oral proficiency with just a few hours of training sessions and

without any practice. During the CRT sessions, Quantitative Aptitude, Data Interpretation and Reasoning are covered along with Verbal Ability, Group Discussion and Interview skills. The distribution of time given to all the areas of training is not justified as training the students in the core areas is considered more important. Even if justified, oral communication is difficult to be achieved in such a short span without practice if the student lacks at it. Hence training should be given to the students, right from the time they enter their engineering education and it should be a continuous process until they are placed successfully.

The education received by the students until engineering also makes a lot of difference. Students who are fortunate enough to have oral proficiency owing to the institute they received their education from, the imposition of fine from the students to implement compulsory English speaking within the campus, face no problem. Most of the other students also manage as they received their education with English as the medium of instruction. The real problem is faced by students coming from the rural areas where they missed these opportunities of honing their skills. They find themselves at sea when they get enrolled in the Engineering colleges.

English subject is not given much importance when compared to the core subjects throughout their education over the past 18 years. The students take languages for granted though they cannot deny the importance accorded to it in the recent past. Added to this, universities like JNTUH (Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University Hyderabad) reduced the number of credits for English subject in the first year engineering from 3 credits according to the R15 syllabus to 2 credits according to the R18 syllabus and from 2 credits for English Language Communication Skills lab (ELCS) according to the R15 syllabus to 1.5 credits according to the R18 syllabus. Similarly, for Advanced English Communication Skills lab (ELCS), the number of credits according to the R15 syllabus was 2 which were reduced to 1.5 according to the R18 syllabus. Engineering education is considered to be the final phase of learning language skills and if the university decides to reduce the number of credits, then the students will definitely not feel its importance. They tend to take only those subjects seriously which are allotted more credits.

If more importance is not supposed to be given to the English language in India, then, a country like the United Kingdom (U.k) whose Mother Tongue is English need not have English subject as part of a compulsory national curriculum and as a core subject. It is a known fact that the English language originated in Britain and it is the de facto official language of the UK which is spoken by approximately 98 % of the population. If they can acknowledge the fact and give credit to it, then a country like India whose mother tongue is not English should give more importance to it as it is the global language today.

If the English language is neglected throughout their education, the blatant result would be very obvious as visible on the AICTE dashboard.

VI.   THE NEED FOR INNOVATION IN THE CLASSROOM

Innovation refers to the process of transforming or implementing ideas or methods that are new and creative for growth or to break the monotony. The comforts that we enjoy today are a source of innovation without which life would have become very boring. Innovation is also needed in a classroom as education is the foundation of our economy and students would definitely like a change from the routine rather than listen to the routine classroom teaching. According to the National Education Association, Dawn Dupriest in the topic titled "Creativity in the

Classroom" claims that there is nothing more satisfying than making something creative. Creativity can be involved in all the walks of life including teaching as it helps to synthesize information and brings joy and meaning into the educational experience of the students. The classroom is the best place for students to grow while they learn and the lateral thinking used by the teachers can create a more innovative and entrepreneurial classroom.

VII.   INNOVATIVE METHODS IN CLASSROOM TEACHING

MOBILE PHONES AS TOOLS IN CLASSROOM TEACHING

Education underwent massive changes since the past and today we live in a technological world where the whole world of a student revolves around his mobile. No phone policy or being strict on them, imposing restrictions would only lead to a disaster. Instead, a smart teacher can use mobile as a tool for enhancing knowledge in the classroom. The students become more receptive when technology is involved. For example, mobiles can be used to enhance the vocabulary, improve pronunciation, take pictures of notes in case of emergencies, have healthy discussions, to post homework, clarify doubts and so on.

When teachers encourage the use of mobiles in the classroom, they should ensure that the students download a dictionary app as students are not very receptive to carry a dictionary in their bags. While teaching, the teacher can encourage the students to use their mobiles to look up the meaning of new or unfamiliar words by breaking the monotony of the teacher straightaway giving the meanings of the words. The students tend to remember the meaning of words longer if they attempt at finding the meaning themselves. There would also be a competition for giving away an early answer to the question posed by the teacher which develops a healthy attitude to learn something new. The teacher will definitely have to take a stroll across the class to ensure that the students are working on the given job.

In order to check whether the students have really improved their communication skills over 4 years of engineering learning, the teacher can record the introduction given by each student on the first day of their course and compare it to the recorded self-introduction (taught for their interviews) at the end of their course by observing a change in their body language, pronunciation, intonation, fluency, accuracy, sentence structures, articulation, mother tongue influence, choice of words and whether they have presented themselves in a systematic order. It would be very encouraging if the student is shown the recording before leaving the college in order to measure the improvement that has been brought about during his/her stay in the college and ultimately the performance in the campus placements speaks for itself.

USAGE OF POWERPOINT PRESENTATION (PPT) IN CLASSROOMS

The attention span of a student is very less owing to various reasons. Added to this, the time and energy of a teacher are very precious during classroom teaching. A smart teacher saves her time and energy by using a PowerPoint Presentation (PPT) to explain the topic. For instance, if 'Prepositions' are to be taught, the teacher can show the prepositions using pictures with explanation for the students to understand it easily. The students also show interest in listening to a lecture where pictures are used. By doing so, the teacher is not completely exhausted and can reserve her energy for her next class or to clarify doubts in the same class.

In an ELT (English Language Teaching) classroom, the Teacher Talking Time (TTT) should be lesser than the Student Talking Time (STT) as we aim at the benefit of the students in the long run. If a lesson or a poem has to be explained, the teacher can spend the first five minutes of the class by showing a short video related to the topic; spend the next ten minutes allowing the students to absorb the content and asking them to discuss what they just saw. The remaining time can be spent on teaching the topic for the day. This gives students an opportunity to share their ideas, guess the topic, gives them an opportunity to speak and makes the class interactive. The students also retain the lecture for a longer duration as it was impactful. If every day a few students are given an opportunity to speak, they can get fluent, shed their stage fright and hesitation and become more outspoken.

INCORPORATING MUSIC INTO TEACHING

Lindy L. Johnson (2016) stated that English teachers shy away from attempts that bound the curriculum as they try new approaches. Their framework isn't meant to put students into boxes or favour one approach over the others but to consider other perspectives and stretch themselves by incorporating music into teaching [8]. Cambridge Assessment English states that songs are a fun way to learn English as they are a great source of real-life language and one can use music to practice a lot of different language skills. According to the British Council: Teaching English, music can be used at the beginning of the class when the students start entering the class and the volume can be killed slowly once the students settle down. It can be used to teach Adjectives, by asking the students to write down the adjectives they listen, from a song that has been played. Music can also be used as a source of giving a time limit for completing a particular task or activity in the classroom.

Music can be used as part of the listening activity to hone the listening skills of the students instead of playing recorded conversations. Listening skill is also very important as a student cannot answer well if he/she did not listen to the question properly. It is also tested as part of the skill in competitive exams. Selection of songs is very important as pronunciation plays a pivotal role in understanding the lyrics of the song. Initially, the teacher can select a slow song with easily understood lyrics and accent and later, once the students develop a flair for English music other fast tracks can be explored. As part of classroom activity for listening skills, the teacher can first play the audio of a song and see what percentage of the class could follow the lyrics. It can be repeated to give the students an opportunity to grasp the lyrics. Once done, the students can be shown the audio version of the song with lyrics twice. Later, the lyrics of the song with blanks can be displayed on the projector asking the students to guess the missing words of the lyrics. It gives the students, a spirit of challenge and entertainment along with learning. This hard work is required only in the initial stages. Once the students get a hang of it, selected songs can be asked to be downloaded and the students can listen to them while traveling or when at ease. The vocabulary and the sentence structures used along with the right pronunciation in the songs can be used by the students to develop their speaking skills.

ROLE-PLAYS

Role-plays should become part of daily classroom exercise because while conversing, the students use language which is not part of their lessons from the textbook. They get good exposure to speak on varied topics in different circumstances to different people. It also helps them to become confident and improves their interpersonal skills.

TEAM BUILDING GAMES AND ACTIVITIES (ACTIVITY BASED LEARNING

"Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand" was said by Confucius in 450 BC which was never taken seriously by the educational institutions of late. We have been using the traditional teaching methods though Confucius said this in 450 BC. Activity-based learning should be promoted in the classrooms as the bottom line of our education system is to lead a happy and peaceful life by getting a good job. If the task of getting a job is achieved, the immediate task is to survive it. Team building is very important in order to survive in the workplace and in society. If students are exposed to team-building skills by giving them more activities to be worked out in teams in college, they will develop public speaking and people skills which can help them sustain anywhere on earth. The teacher should be very judicious in forming teams so that all the students benefit out of the activity. In order to develop speaking skills in students, the teacher can come up with unique games and activities that can be used in a classroom setting by giving strict instructions to follow English language as a medium of communicating and ensuring that it is being enforced.

PRESENTATIONS

Student presentations can be an excellent source to develop their speaking skills. In the Communication Skills Lab, as part of presentation skills, the students can be given a week's time to present on a topic of their choice using a PowerPoint Presentation (PPT). Do's and Don'ts should be instructed regarding the same during the announcement. Individual presentations should be encouraged which help the students to present boldly on a topic of their choice using the right pronunciation of foreign names and new words if any. Two students can be allowed to share the presentation if they are willing to share the slides they present and not be passive. Presentation skill not only develops fluency and pronunciation of students but also helps them at their workplace.

INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING

Research states that Inquiry-based learning is one of the most powerful teaching strategies to be used in a classroom because students learn best when they construct their own meaning while teachers become facilitators during the process. Heather- Gawron, in his Edutopia article titled "What the heck is Inquiry-based learning' mentions that as part of Inquiry-based learning students develop questions, research on the given topic in the given time frame, present what they have learned and reflect on what worked and what did not work in the process. Unlike traditional methods of teaching where students are only expected to listen to the lectures delivered by the teachers and are less likely to ask questions, inquiry-based learning, on the other hand, allows students to conduct research and pose queries, which helps in converting the information gathered by them into knowledge transfer. Engaging the students in a learning process is very important as students remain attentive because of their involvement and it bourgeons their enthusiasm in the learning process.

FLIPPED CLASSROOM METHOD

The students love to see the role reversal process and enjoy controlling the wheel when the flipped classroom method is adopted in the classroom. The students take it as a privilege when such opportunities are given to them.

They also develop leadership skills along with people skills while shedding their inhibitions. Well planned activities particularly meant for revision can be used through a flipped classroom method.

ADOPTING HUMOUR IN CLASSROOM TEACHING

A noisy classroom can never become a center for learning and development. An effective behavior management strategy is very important to earn respect from the students and ensure that they are attentive in the class. The students should be taught and reminded the concept of mutual respect for a productive classroom. Chaotic classrooms become a hindrance in the teaching – learning process. The classroom ambiance should foster the overall development of the students where the students have enough freedom to express their views and opinions. It should become a platform for learning by adopting humour in the classroom. A strict teacher is most likely not to be a student's favourite. By adopting humour in a classroom, the students get the confidence that the teacher is approachable and they can express their doubts or approach without hesitation. Jeremy Harmer (1998) said that students enjoy being entertained and amused, and, the students who are happier during the learning process feel they will be more successful [9]. Humour makes student involvement possible in a class as it develops a rapport between the teacher and the students which are very essential for facilitating communication. Humour also helps the students shed their inhibitions, come out of stress and depression, overcome fear and shyness and become more optimistic.

FAILURE MANAGEMENT

According to 2016 report, the number of suicides in young adults in India ranging between 15 – 29 years was 230,314. Failure Management is the most important thing to be taught to Gen Z students as they are not able to withstand failures in life. This training should be given to the students in educational institutions as well by telling them that they need not be successful always. Each student should be encouraged to ask queries in the classroom and encourage them to answer. The passive learners should be brought to attention by posing questions and encouraging them to answer or present on a given topic keeping in view the sensibilities and the comfort of the student at the same time. The students should be encouraged to answer the questions regardless of whether the answer is correct or wrong. They should be encouraged to accept failures or the teachers should prepare them that there is always some learning out of a wrong answer. The students should be taught the fact that it is all right to fail while they learn and failure is a part of life. There cannot be a better place than a classroom to teach that they can fail while they learn and carry this lesson throughout their lives. The students who answer the questions should be applauded or given a pat on their backs so that they get motivated and continue doing a good job.

A SELF-HELP GUIDE FOR DEVELOPING FLUENCY IN ENGLISH

According to Brian Tracy, communication is a skill which can be learned like riding a bicycle or typing, if a person is willing to work at it to rapidly improve the quality of life. The students, after reaching engineering should be encouraged and motivated to communicate in English from the time they join the institution. The language used for teaching should be exclusively English and the students should be encouraged by all the faculty members to

ask doubts and communicate only in English as long as they are within the college premises. The students living in dorms have an advantage when compared to the day scholars. They can choose to communicate in English not only in college but later as well. They can hold discussions about the day's events, discuss the subject taught, or gossip in English. This can be a boon to the students from the rural background to hone their skills.

The students should be encouraged to read English Newspapers out loud, watch recommended English movies with subtitles and speak at every opportunity they get so that they develop fluency in the language. The students should be encouraged to think in English as there is a time-lapse when the students try to translate the sentence from their mother tongue to English. Once the students get tuned to 'thinking' in English, fluency will definitely be noticed. Fluency is preferred over accuracy at interviews as it is more important to express one's views and opinions to convince the interviewer.

ONE MINUTE PAPER FEEDBACK

A one minute paper feedback is a method of taking anonymous feedback from every student on a piece of paper giving their opinion. At the end of every session, the teacher should ensure to take one-minute paper feedback from the students just to ensure that the newly attempted method used in the classroom to develop oral proficiency is accepted well by the students and it does benefit them in the long run. It also gives the teacher new ideas for trying further teaching methods and to improvise on the existing ones. The teacher will be the best person to analyze which method worked in a particular class and which did not. By doing so, the students also get satisfied as their opinion is valued and show more enthusiasm towards participation.

OUTCOME

The outcome of the paper is that there are many students graduating engineering every year but unfortunately most of them are unable to find a job for themselves due to various reasons. One of the reasons that has been identified and highlighted by India Skills Report 2019 is poor communication skills. Having identified this reason, my paper presents a few methods that can help the students to improve their oral proficiency in the classroom and some self-help methods that can further help them to clear interviews with confidence.

VIII.   CONCLUSION

The given methods in the paper are a few ways to help the students develop their oral proficiency. The teachers can come up with varied methods based on their student's level of proficiency. Oral proficiency can be achieved with a little bit of hard work and dedication bearing the future of the students in mind. A happy learning approach should be adopted rather than an imposed approach for better results.

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