

ELT Voices – India

International electronic journal for the teachers of English

Volume 3 Issue 4 | August 2013

ISSN 2230-9136 (Print) 2321 – 7170 (Online)

ELT Research Paper 8

English Language Skills and Employability in the 21st Century in India

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to discuss the changing needs of courses designed to prepare students for careers. The English language skills shall have to ensure the students that they were sufficiently fluent in English to function in the workplace or in any professional context. Today, the needs are different and it is different for every individuals. It has morphed into a mix of English for Academic Purposes, and English for Social Purposes. After a keen observation and some data collected from the students and employers it was found that, needs keep changing. It is vital to keep abreast of the needs of 21st century office. The find out suggested that the students need to be fluent in English, be aware of the rules of written genres such as official letters, emails, press releases and taking minutes. Not only this but the students need to acquaint themselves or be familiar with etiquette, cross cultural communication and dinner mannerisms. The needs are many, but what the employees feel is that the graduates can barely spell and construct simple English sentences correctly, let alone achieve the multi-faceted tasks expected of them. The objective of this paper is to discuss what English skills are required of graduates from the perspectives of all stakeholders.

Keywords: Employability, Soft Skills, Corporate Expectations

Introduction

Ipsa scientia potestas est ‘knowledge itself is power’ is an old saying in Latin. However, in today’s world knowledge and power are two different entities, giving little or no dues at all to knowledge but stress is laid only to power. No doubt in recent times the purpose of education has undergone tremendous changes or has been influenced by changes due to reasons known or unknown. Nowadays no universities in the globe can survive or function in splendid isolation in their ivory towers. They have a larger role to play. Most societies are now calling upon higher educational institutions to provide training to make university graduates employable.

The objective of this paper is to discuss the changing needs of courses designed to prepare students for careers. The English language skills shall have to ensure the students that they were sufficiently fluent in English to function in the workplace or in any professional context. Today, the needs are different and it is different for every individuals. It has morphed into a mix of English for Academic Purposes, and English for Social Purposes. After a keen observation and some data collected from the students and employers it was found that, needs keep changing. It is vital to keep abreast of the needs of 21st century office. The find out suggested that the students need to be fluent in English, be aware of the rules of written genres such as official letters, emails, press releases and taking minutes. Not only this but the students need to acquaint themselves or be familiar with etiquette, cross cultural communication and dinner mannerisms. The needs are many, but what the employees feel is that the graduates can barely spell and construct simple English sentences correctly, let alone achieve the multi-faceted tasks expected of them. The objective of this paper is to discuss what English skills are required of graduates from the perspectives of all stakeholders.

Employability Skills

Communication means the exchange of information, ideas, feelings and thoughts. The type of communication which is used in the corporate world is business communication. It is not mere exchange of ideas, much lies beneath and beyond. In the world of business, the communication system is considered effective, only if there is some positive transaction. If the sender of information is just able to convey the message without any fruitful deal, then the communication is not effective.

A person is considered employable only when he gets the necessary qualification, experience, interest, learning attitude and expertise in the field where s/he wants to seek employment. The content knowledge in the area of his/her choice is the primary requirement. The necessary experience, if not, the interest and the attitude to learn the job assignments are much sought after by the employers. A person has to remain employable throughout one's career. Unless one is ready to update his knowledge in the field of work according to the ongoing changes and advancements, he lags behind from others and loses his job ultimately. Effective communication includes the ability to communicate effectively in any language. Academicians and researchers are divided in their opinion on the question; is English required for successful business communication? Is it not possible to communicate effectively in regional languages and get the work done? Those who are in favour of English for effective communication would say that English is the official language in most of the companies in cities these days.

So English is much required. But people who vote for regional languages for communication over English would rather say that English is not required as long as one communicates effectively to get the work done. The customers, for most of the products and services are people of a particular region where a local language is spoken. So what big deal in speaking in English to woo and impress them? After all, when it is a matter of money, people would rather concentrate on quality and service for the products than the customer care executive's ability to speak in English.

The reality is that the companies consider the candidate's ability or inability to speak fluently in English as one of the major selection criterion. The mere domain knowledge won't guarantee one a good job. The situation in most of the companies has changed from a scene where all employees are isolated and would concentrate on their individual performances. 'Team work for better success' is the mantra followed by most companies. So there is no space for individual glory. Employees are expected to be interactive and communicative with others in the team and outside.

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; whether it is meeting within or outside, presentations, training, conferences, letters, documents, reports etc. The purpose being people are expected to read, write, speak and understand English.

Since we inhabit in a multi-cultural society with many languages and many discourses, the selection of English as a medium of instruction is in itself a challenge, in an environment of diversity.

India has always had English as the medium of instruction in most universities, however how successful we are in achieving employability today is a million dollar question. Here we can ask a question to ourselves regarding the English curriculum that we use in our universities. The issues that rise quite often are that is our curriculum addressing the unique needs of the learner? Hence it is essential to internationalise the curriculum at the discipline and programme levels. This implies that either we redesign existing curricula to include global themes or supplement it to fulfil this requirement or more so to give a second look at the curriculum and make it learner friendly keeping global context into consideration.

There are many ways English is taught in a University. For example, in most of the Universities in India, the English Language Teaching departments would concentrate on English for Professional Purposes and Soft Skills for Final Year students, where Department of English teach courses such as Effective English and Business Communication, English for Effective Communication, Communicative English, Business Communication, so on and so forth.

However, how far the students are inculcating the English skills is still not definite. The vital point here is that the universities and the educational institutes that prepare a student to project himself/herself as corporate ready, first has to bridge the gap between the existing curriculum and students/learners needs. For this, we require a need analysis.

Comments such as “Social etiquette was the best thing in the course” are common from grateful students who consider the course Projects and Presentations offered as a core course by the Department of English in many private or government institutes to be the most useful course due to its pragmatic approach. The course includes application procedure, preparation

for interviews, mock or practice interviews, writing memos, reports, official letters and emails; business etiquette; cross-cultural communication and presentation skills.

Some students believed that a pro-learner centric approach is beneficial to them. English for employability is perhaps an umbrella term under which the courses like Effective English and Business Communication, English for Effective Communication, Communicative English, Business Communication survives which help the students to learn, to write concisely and to the point. The general belief is that discipline-specific knowledge cannot suffice the great demands of employability; it needs to be matched with exposure to the workplace.

Some employers from the private sectors highlights a problem that is the new graduates even with distinctions and high scores cannot stand up to the expectation of the employers as far as their soft skills are concerned. The graduates refuse to take responsibility, since they are under confident and lack communication skills. Such kind of comments from the private sectors employers underlines the problem faced by employers in recruiting eligible graduates for employment, such as engineers.

Corporate Expectations

As the ability to speak and write in English is considered very important by the recruiters at the time of recruitment, let us discuss the expectations of corporate world in this regard. 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. The ability to express formal communication in oral as well as in written form is equally considered important by the prospective employers. As one moves higher in the vertical direction in the organisational hierarchy, it becomes naturally necessary for an employee to be good presenter, negotiator, and convener of meetings. The mastery over English will help a person to conduct his duties efficiently.

One of the important deficiencies found by the employers and recruiters in candidates for different jobs is the lack of oral as well as written communication skills. Many candidates don't know how to answer to the point at the time of the interview and can't phrase a simple formal letter or report. It becomes a handicap for the candidates who have good domain knowledge.

Interviewers will be in dilemma when they encounter such candidates who have technical expertise, but poor communicational skills in English. Left with no other choice they may take the candidate, but will make sure that they are groomed and trained properly.

Employers would be happy to interview and recruit who have both communication skills in English and job skills. It lessens their burden of giving too much orientation training at the time of induction or on the job training.

The overall need is to establish a firm link between higher education and industry. Nowadays universities are openly wooing the corporate world in order to become financially self-sufficient. Many universities are tying up with the corporate sectors to pursue an edge over another university as there is a cut-throat competition to be the Number One. As a spin-off, the universities are able to establish internships at corporate sectors. Such liaison between university and industry are gradually coming up in India. It has leveraged exchange programmes with other universities or scholarships agencies rather than sponsor of courses.

To create employable graduates for the 21st century is a challenge and it seems to fall on the shoulders of the teaching community. This is because the employer needs, student needs and institutional needs find their way naturally into the classroom. The new employer requires team players with team spirit. To work in teams is challenging since most of the universities in India fosters competitive and sometimes combative play by the students at examinations and competitions.

Conclusion

The paper however does not only concentrates in highlighting the importance of communicative competence but also grammatical competence because mechanics of language; spelling and punctuation etc. cannot be ignored. Along with communicative and grammatical competence another factor that equally plays a major role in academic domain is improvement of social skills. Much is expected from the future managers and leaders by the employers. Employers set their eyes not only on the high scores of the new graduates but also the business etiquette and their polished behaviour. Therefore, the need for English for Academic Purposes seems to have given way to English for Social Purposes. Preparing undergraduates to face the challenges of work place is a challenge in itself. However the

teacher-educator needs to work closely with the employer and design or redesign the course to suit the needs of the workplace. We cannot deny the fact that it is time consuming and also difficult to implement as change is constant in language. But the good news is that learner as well as the employer are anxious to open up a new world of knowledge since ‘Jnanam saktisvarupam’ i.e ‘Knowledge is power’.

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