Enhancing the Communication Skills of Regional Medium Learners of Engineering by Inculcating Lateral Thinking Skills

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Abstract - Today the education world has been greatly influenced by rapid development in information and communication sector. Engineering Colleges have advanced leaps and bounds in incorporating corporate necessities in syllabus. As there is a great need in corporate sector, today's education expanded itself from text book to 'e' learning, multimedia presentation, interactive sessions, video conferencing, educational games etc., which has become an integral part of the syllabus.

When the role of English language in building professional career was discussed with the engineering students from the Regional Medium Learners point of view , they opined that much importance was not given to language learning till their intermediate. That is, though they study English as a second language until Intermediate, they feel that it as a foreign language. This is because the teaching and learning is generally grammar-oriented and translation oriented. Above all, it is (written) exam-oriented. But when the students join a technical course like Engineering, the learners are expected to develop their language skills and soft skills on their own with later thinking. The present paper is based on the opinion of the RMLs on inclusion of Lateral Thinking skills in the regular syllabus.

Key words: E-learning, Engineering curriculum, Lateral Thinking, Regional Medium Learners, Soft skills, Target Language.

I. INTRODUCTION

The present Engineering Curriculum in English is not equipped with the challenges the learners need to meet outside the world. Traditional method of language learning and teaching is still followed in the classroom. The language materials usually available is not so challenging in exploring the potential of the learner. The classroom environment and the technology is not very conducive to the learner to move out from the syllabus and do experiments. Moreover the professional studies like engineering is studied in the English medium, the Regional Medium Learner who joins engineering stream would face difficulty in expressing themselves in the target language, English. This is because the teaching and learning is generally grammar-oriented and translation oriented. Above all it is written exam oriented.

Regional Medium Learners who learn the target language for ten years at varied levels, still struggles a lot to express themselves in formal situations. The present paper is an attempt to identify the English language needs of RMLs pursuing engineering studies, thereby to propose alternate methods of language leaning through LATERAL THINKING.

The term LATERAL THINKING was first promoted by Edward De Bono in 1967. It can aid oneself in enhancing intrapersonal and interpersonal communication skills. At the same time it develops the creative skills of the learner in problem solving and decision making. These skills are also called as soft skills which are predominantly tested in the present corporate world.

"Developing skills is as important as training. A larger effort is needed to create a skilled workforce with employment potential." – Pallam Raju (source- internet)

"It's simple fact: no individual can be good at everything. Everyone needs people around them who have complimentary sets of skills." – Naveen Jain(source- internet) while technology in education defines technical skills as core skills of competency, today's employment market identifies people's skills or soft skills as imperative to professionally excel in the global competition. An aspirant for a corporate job cannot be termed as competent if he exhibits subject expertise but they should be able to interact with people inside as well as outside the organization so that their technical skills might serve the purpose of utility to their profession.

During the earlier times, the employment market emphasized on leadership and control by top managerial people to control the large number of people working below them. Business establishments were the brainchild of people with vision, mission, determination and drive, all being considered vital for strong leaders. The assumption was that leaders were whole and sole in dictating policies and the followers or the other employees have to discharge responsibilities exactly given.

With the technological drive enveloping all areas of business, the limitations in the prevailing system became evident and the businesses started losing efficiency and profitability, the twin concerns of any organization. The corporate organizations were the first of their kind to have realized the value and importance of human resources and started

attributing prime importance to this factor. With the human being gaining significance in organizational growth the psychological and emotional aspects of human force which once had no value became most relevant to invoke the full potential of the employee. The industry realized that prior to training the worker it needs to understand that he/she is a human being, for what they are as well as what they can become. Soft skills have come to play at this juncture in the organizational structure.

"Cognitive and character skills work together as dynamic complements; they are inseparable. Skills beget skills. More motivated children learn more. Those who are informed usually make wiser decisions" – James Heckman (source-internet)

The term Soft skills refers to a cluster of personality traits, social graces, facilitating with language, personal habits and attitudes of friendliness, optimism, etc. It includes competencies in the areas of Leadership, Ability to work in a team, Articulateness, Assertiveness, Basic Etiquette, etc. These skills determine the individual's lateral thinking ability to perform in a given social setting such as business corporations, project teams, less complicated tasks such as performing with a small music group.

 Today, soft skills are an indispensable part of any organization to succeed in this global scenario. The corporations started moving in this direction by investing huge amounts in the Human Resources Development (HRD) activities to foster the desired values and attitudes in their employees in addition to their professional knowledge and skills. Competencies started being assessed not just on professional skills but on a whole range of soft skills which a major role in Lateral Thinking, since they determine how well an employee can relate to and communicate with others. The productiveness of the organizations prove better when employees exhibited strong interpersonal skills as organizations primarily relied on customer satisfaction in terms of services offered by them. Hence, soft skills have become the most sought after skills by the employers.

The technology institutions started inculcating the soft skills among their learners along with the regular academic curriculum. Because of proliferation of corporate business across the world, communication has become much more of an urgent in the professional world. Certain problems which may go unnoticed in general communication can get dramatically highlighted in the context of professional communication and can have unforeseen consequences. This is the reason future engineers and business managers are required to undergo courses in communication and soft skills. The same points are reiterated by 2nd and 4th year RML students. Their opinion is shown in the form of graphs.

Statement of the Problem:

The need of amalgamation of language with soft skills for Regional Medium Learners to fill the existing gap to perform better in their job prospective besides developing their aural and oral skills of the English language.

Objectives of the study:

o   To make classroom learning more creative and learner centered.
o   To develop the cognitive, behavioral aspects of the learner along with soft skills.
o   To shift focus on the current trends of language teaching and learning which suits corporate needs.
o   To design some activities for the learners to learn and practice both language and soft skills inside the class room.
o   To facilitate the role of the teacher and help learners to acquire skills required for lateral thinking.
o   To encourage learners to discuss issues and ask questions.

II. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The RMLs 30 in number from MVSREC, Nadergul were given prior information on the need of collecting data and the specific purpose of the diagnostic test in developing the Soft Skills which are specially aimed at techniques required while facing interviews, participating in Group Discussion, Debates, Public Speaking, Jam sessions.

The questionnaire was divided into five parts :

1-4 questions related to the RMLs Knowledge on Soft Skills

5-8 questions on Non Verbal Communication which is very much required in both formal and informal situations.

9-12 questions were addressed on the importance of Team Spirit while participating in the group activity.

13-17 questions were on the importance of Assertive Skills which should be exercised by oneself in the group.

18-21 questions are to know the learners enthusiasm in learning new aspects of soft skills.

22-25 questions are on the ability of Problem Solving Skills.

Description of the Questionnaire:

1-4 questions were given to probe the learner's knowledge on softskills, whether they are aware of soft skills in intermediate or for the first time they have heard in engineering , they were also asked whether they have practiced it along with the course books, or were they given information about the today's demands for soft skills in job market. The choices were (a) always (b) occassionally (c) never (d) none of the above. The students said that they were aware of the importance of soft skills in job sceinario but were not taught

during their intermediate, but occassionaly discussed during the engineering course.

1Q- 4Q KNOWLEDGE ON SOFT SKILLS

	1	*2*	*3*	
a	3	20	12	
b	11	7	11	
c	4	26	5	
d	27	7	1	

Knowledge on Soft Skills

|	1	2	3	4
a	3	20	12	0
b	11	7	11	6
c	4	26	5	0
d	27	7	1	0
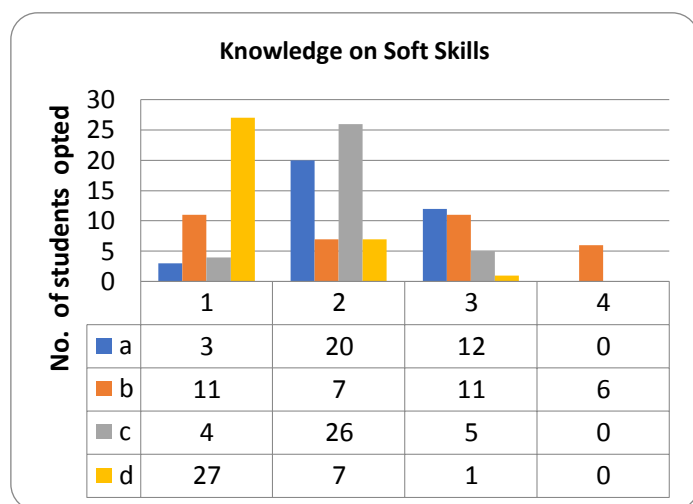
5Q-8Q were on non verbal communication they were asked whether they maintain open body position while speaking and listening, do they adjust body position to attract the attention while speaking or listening, do they intiate the talk amongst the new people, do they maintain appropriate space while speaking or listening to other. For this the choices were (a) yes, (b) No (c) Never paid attentin (d) None of the above .

Some of the students mentioned that they maintain open body posture, but 6 out of 30 said they never paid attention to it. Majority of the learners said that they do definetly adjust the body posture and maintain space while speaking and listening to others. And very few said that they would initiate talk amongst new people.(But this was taught to them in school and at engineering level).

5Q-8Q

Non Verbal Communication				
	5	*6*	*7*	*8*
a	22	18	18	25
b	5	11	11	3
c	6	5	5	7
d	2	1	1	0

Non Verbal Communication

|	5	6	7	8
a	22	18	18	25
b	5	11	11	3
c	6	5	5	7
d	2	1	1	0
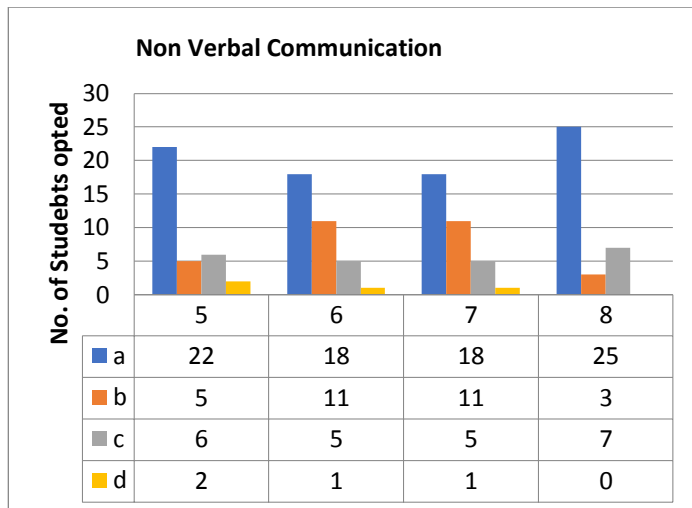
9Q-12Q were on the Team Spirit, they were probed to answer questions like, whether they believe in common goal while working in the group, whether they feel anguish if some of their friends surpass them in studies, they were also further asked that do they pay timely attention to others if they them selves are in crisis and are willing to share their recognition and rewards with others. The choices provided were (a) yes (b) No (c) never paid attention (d) none of the above

The graph shown below says that all the learners said that they believe in working groups which in turm promotes team spirit. Few learners said that though their friends top in the given task, still they are willing to mentor and share awards and laurels with them. A very few learners negated all the options.

9Q-12Q

	9	*10*	*11*	*12*
a	29	23	21	22
b	6	4	13	6
c	0	8	1	6
d	0	0	0	1

Team Spirit

|	9	10	11	12
a	29	23	21	22
b	6	4	13	6
c	0	8	1	6
d	0	0	0	1
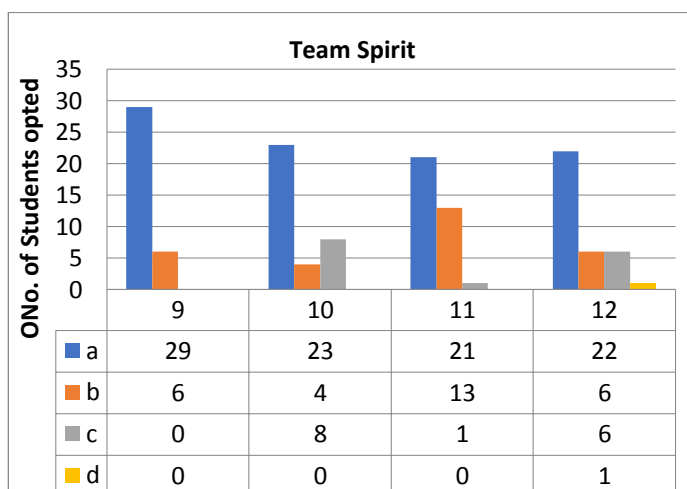
13Q -17 Q were tried to elicit about the learners confidence and self respect in all the situations and whether they can control emotions even in the circumstances which are not favorable to them and discuss freely with co-participants, even if their work is critisized. The choices were (a) yes (b) No (c) never paid attention (d) none of the above

For these questions learners responded in a very positive manner and said that they can control their emotions upto an extent. Less than five students mentioned that they are not able to control emotions during discussions. The subtle difference between ego and self respect are not so clear for them.

13Q-17Q

Assertive Skills					
	13	*14*	*15*	*16*	*17*
a	28	17	22	25	23
b	2	11	11	4	8
c	4	6	2	3	4
d	1	1	0	3	0

	13	14	15	16	17
a	28	17	22	25	23
b	2	11	11	4	8
c	4	6	2	3	4
d	1	1	0	3	0
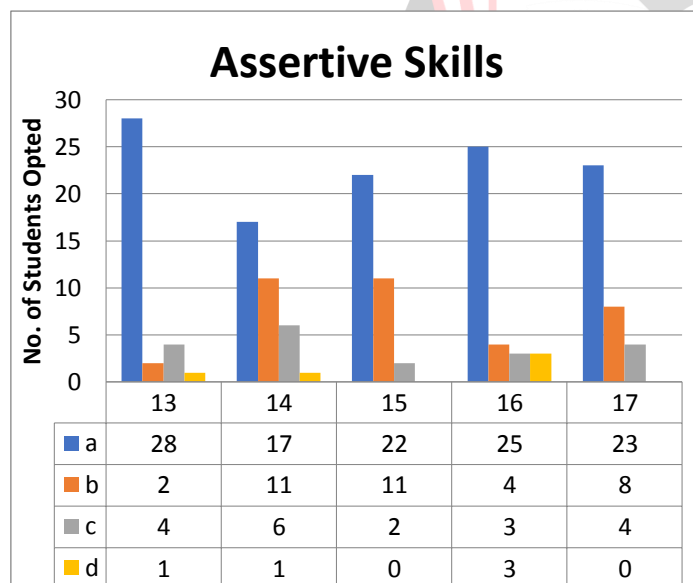
18Q-21Q were related to Learning Skills which are quite necessary for all the learners and they were probed to elicit reponses by asking that whether they believe in updating knowledge, are methods of learning constantly same or different, are innovate methods used in expressing both writing and speaking and do they take time to think about new ideas. For which the choices are (a) yes (b) No (c) never paid attention (d) none of the above

The figure shown below says that learners are highly eager in updating knowledge levles, they regularly use innovative

methods to acquire knowledge and this innovation is used in speaking and writing as well. Unanimoulsy most of the learners are into new methods in acquiring knowledge but a very few learners mentioned that they are not aware of any new methods or rarely they experiment in Learning Skills.

18Q-21Q

Learning Skills				
	18	*19*	*20*	*21*
a	29	25	26	23
b	5	3	4	2
C	2	5	4	3
D	0	2	1	2

|	18	19	20	21
a	29	25	26	23
b	5	3	4	2
c	2	5	4	3
d	0	2	1	2

22Q-25Q were intended to elicit the learners capacity of identifying a prolem within a short time, can they make decisions without fear of being fail, are they willing to revise or edit the work they have done and finally are they willing to do multitasking. For which the choices are (a) yes (b) No (c) never paid attention (d) none of the above

The below graph shows that the responses are affirmative, majority of the learners are not afraid of being failed, they are willing to take decisions whatever might be the outcome.Only 20 learners come under this category .The rest are divided in their opinion mentioning that they never paid attention or they never took chance.

22Q-25Q

Problem Solving Skills				
	22	*23*	*24*	*25*
a	14	15	24	24
b	10	17	4	7
c	6	3	5	3
d	5	0	2	1

Problem Solving Skills

	22	23	24	25
a	14	15	24	24
b	10	17	4	7
c	6	3	5	3
d	5	0	2	1

No. of Students Opted (y-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30)
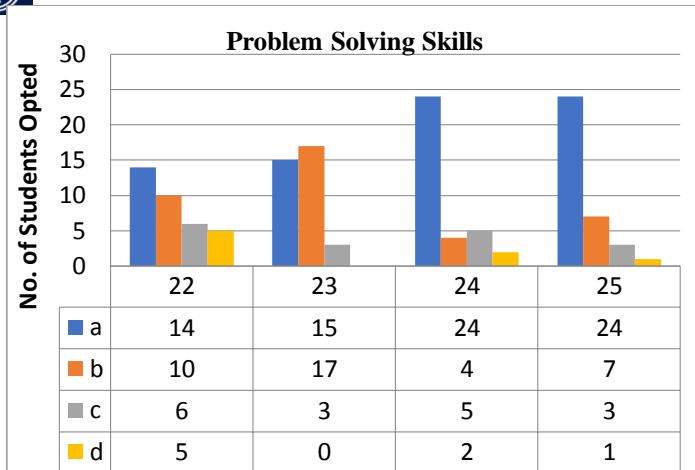
Findings from the Student's Questionnaire:

It has been observed from the responses of the students of 2nd & 4th year RMLs and MNC employers that the learners posses basic knowledge of soft skills which are required to sustain in the employability sector , but having knowledge is different from using in day to day activities. Learners agree that productive skills like speaking and writing are indeed connected with soft skills . But exactly what kind of soft skills are required is always a confusion. For example, talking about maintaing apropriate space while speaking, majority of them are not aware that atleast 2 to 3 feet distance needs to be maintained, especially in formal situations. Though they mention that they are comfortable at working in groups, again maintaining the decorum of group is a miss. The subtle difference between having smart intelligence and over smart intelleginece is a blur. As a result a Group Discussion turns into Debate. Intrestingly most of the learners are aware of Soft Skills but truly the usage of it to enhance their growth in the career prospects is again a blank space for them to fill.

Intially 4 questions were administered on the knowledge of soft skills , though the result was affirmative but the learners were not aware of list of soft skills required to sustain in this competitive world. When it comes to difficulties, they admit that they often feel uncomfortable during some situations, like how to handle the commemorative situations, or congratulating someone on their success, without repeating the same phrase. Also they are confused about the proper body language to be used during these situations.

Next four questions were addressed about non verbal communication, the learners said that they are quiet aware of non verbal communication, but they are oblivious to the knowledge of positive body posture, while sitting, standing, speaking or listening to others, especially nodding the head, if they have to say "YES" they nod horizontally and have to say "NO" they nod vertically, whereas exactly opposite they are supposed to do.The paralinguistic features like volume of

the voice, number of words used per minute, pitch, stress, intonation etc, are not used in their speech.

It has been observed that even though they work in groups, following group dynamics is a challenging task for them. Hence next set of four questions were directly addresed on team spirit. Though they mentioned that for them 'team is first and self is next' but few students said maintaining neutral voice in the team is a difficult task . Especially when an activity like group discussion is needed to be performed, the voice becomes a great hindrence, either they sound strongly agreeing or disagreeing to their partners. Aspects like patience, calmness, responding whenever it is required, helping others if they stuck with words, are to be taught to the learners.

Next five questions were administered to know whether they understand the concept of being assertive. The learners said that they need to recognise difference between being aggressive and assertive which can be possible only through exploration of personal reactions to given situations. They said that being honest, giving a direct and appropriate expression of one's feelings, thoughts and beliefs are at times misunderstood by others as an aggressive nature. They need to be taught that assertiveness increases one's ability to reach goals while maintaining the self respect and dignity.

Findings reveal that most of the learners think that they are enthusiastic to learn new things but not very sure of innovative learning methods . They are stuck with traditional methods of learning. For example if they have to learn new concept, still so many learners feel that rote-learning is better from examination point of view. Since understanding the concept needs the knowledge of vocabulory, sentence structure, style of content etc., are time consuming. Learners need to be taught that learning skills include critical thinking,creative thinking, communicating and collaborating.

Finally, the last four questions were given with regard to problem solving skills. According to the dictionary a problem is a situation, person or thing that needs to be dealt with or solved. One cannot ignore problems. Best possible solutions have to be searched. It requires two distinct types of cognitive skills, analytical and creative. Analytical or logical thinking includes skills such as ordering, comparing, evaluating and taking decisions. It's a chain process where any aspect cannot be ignored. Though learners agree that they do take decisions but most of the time it is very impulsive and the desired results are not achieved. Though they receive help in time of need from their teachers, but they wanted to improve their decision making skills given an opportunity in the form of a trainning programme. As they are not trained and they have to carry out certain activities without prior knowledge, maximum of them go with intuitiveness.

It can be concluded from the findings of students' responses that the present English course does not cater to the needs of communication skills and soft skills adequately and there is a need for change in the present English syllabus and RMLs need to be given extra practice hours to master these skills.

"The truth won't set us free – until we develop the skills and the habit and the talent and the moral courage to use it" – Margaret Heffernam (source- internet)

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