Role of English Language Communication Lab in Elevating Learning of English In Engineering Curriculum

A.Ruby Thangam,
Ph.D. Scholar.
and
Dr. S.Rasul Mohaideen,
Asst. Professor in English
V.O.C.college of Education,
Thoothukudi- 628008 India.
rubynajya@yahoo.co.in ,
ravoc2000@rediffmail.com

ABSTRACT

Scientists and engineers may be technically brilliant and creative, but unless they have communicative skills, their technical skills will be unnoticed. Today's engineer has to communicate with more number of his / her counterparts across the globe and has to travel to many continents and work away from their home country. The English language courses taught for engineering students in India were mostly knowledge based and not skill based. As a result, the engineers produced by the universities / colleges suffer largely due to lack of communicative skills to study in the world class institutions or work in global atmosphere. Considering all the above facts, the Anna University, Chennai has designed the English Communication Lab for engineering students which comprises of the four skills of learning – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in addition to their theory. The lab practice is divided into two categories as "English Language Lab" where the listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary and speaking tests are conducted, and "Career Lab" where writing tests on Resume / Report, presentation, group discussion and interview skills are conducted. 40% of the total marks (100) in final examinations are given for the English language lab practice and the rest of 60% is given for the career lab practice for which the test and evaluation are decided by the examiners during final examinations. The main objective of this course is to develop student's communication skills and send them for campus placement or recruitment. The present paper, in this context, highlights the syllabus of English communication lab. Besides, the data were collected from 50 English lecturers working in engineering colleges regarding the usefulness of the course. The respondents expressed a few barriers also. So this paper suggests some useful recommendations to overcome the barriers.

Key Terms: predominant, technically brilliant, English Language Lab, Career Lab

Introduction:

English has become the predominant language for communication. For engineering students whose mother tongue is not English, mastering English is more important not only for their academic life but also for their prospective careers. Today's engineer has to communicate with more number of his / her counterparts across the globe and has to travel to many continents and work away from their home country. But their language proficiency is not enough for them to be able to communicate effectively and efficiently. The engineers produced by the universities / colleges suffer largely due to lack of communicative skills to study in the world class institutions or work in global atmosphere. To overcome this, *"The Anna University in Chennai has circulated a note to all its affiliated colleges to set up language laboratories on their premises to enable students to develop their communicative skills. (The Hindu, 11/09/06*). The Anna University has introduced, "English Language Communication Lab", which develops student's communication skill. It acts as a platform for learning, practicing and producing language skills through interactive lessons.

English Language Communication Skills Lab (ELCS Lab)

Communication Skills Laboratory (GE2321), a compulsory course for engineering and technology students studying in colleges affiliated to the Anna University, Tamil Nadu, was introduced in November 2006. It is offered to all third-year students. The main objective of the course is to develop students' communication skills and prepare them for placement / campus recruitment.

The Anna University, Chennai has designed the English Communication Lab for engineering students which comprises the four skills of learning – Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The subject title is "Technical English", a theory subject and "Communication Skills Lab", a practical subject. The lab training is given with the assistance of Networked Computers and specially designed software. The objectives of the lab training are given below:

➢ To equip students of engineering and technology with effective speaking and listening skills.
➢ To help them develop their soft skills, which will make the transition from college, to workplace smoother and help them to excel in their jobs.
➢ To enhance students' performance at Placement interviews, Group Discussions and other recruitment exercises.

The lab practice is divided into two categories as "English Language Lab" where the listening comprehension, reading comprehension and vocabulary and speaking tests are conducted, and "Career Lab" where writing tests on Resume/Report preparation and Letter writing are conducted. Also the students are given training in presentation, Group Discussion and interview skills. 40% of the total marks (100) in final examinations is given for the

English Language Lab practice and the rest of 60% is given for the Career Lab Practice, for which the test and evaluation are decided by the examiners during final examinations.

Role of English Language Communication Lab in elevating learning of English

In the Indian context, an engineering student's success in the "on campus recruitment" is mainly based on their demonstrations of communication skills. Only very recently, Universities and colleges have introduced Skill based courses which focus on communication skills. An English language Communication Skills Lab (ELCS Lab) is a facility where a student can learn a language with the help and guidance of a teacher through a system, to improve his / her speaking and listening capacity. The Language Lab can receive inputs from recorded tapes, audios and videos, CDs, etc. A proficient teacher in the English language is the only external requirement to monitor the students during the learning process. Students will automatically receive pre-recorded lessons from the master source through the teacher while logging in and can use these lessons for practice. Students can be subdivided into small groups to either listen and respond to the instructor's programme material or interact with each other in conversational exercises. These labs have advanced remote monitoring facility, which enables the teacher to monitor all the students through a master control.

To investigate the role of ELC lab in elevating learning of English, a survey was conducted among the 50 English lecturers from 17 engineering colleges in 3 southern districts of Tamil Nadu. It is evident from the result that 90% of the lecturers were positively inclined towards the use of ELC lab in engineering curriculum. The reasons for their preference are listed below:

- Listening to native accent in ELC lab is interesting.
- ELC Lab enhances the listening skills of students.
- Doing record work for ELC lab (English) is interesting.
- Students are attentive in the lab than in the theory class.
- ELC Lab gives freedom to students to learn at their own pace.
- English Language Communication Lab builds self confidence.
- ELC Lab develops the skill of presentation with power point.
- Learning stress pattern, phonetics and grammar in ELC Lab is useful.
- Active participation in ELC Lab results in effective spoken language.
- ELC lab cultivates the habit of reading passages from the computer monitor.
- ELC lab meets the employers' demand - communicative competence in English.
- Students like to devote their leisure time to carry out practical work in ELC Lab
- ELC Lab helps the students to acquire comprehension skills after listening to a text.
- ELC Lab trains students to face interviews, group discussions and public speaking.
- Both fluent and less fluent students improve their effectiveness with the help of ELC lab.
- As students are asked to work in pairs & groups, they can speak English with confidence.

- The shy learners can get more benefits as they are monitored individually by the monitor.
- ELC Lab motivates the learners to read English news papers and listen to B.B.C and T.V English news.
- ELC Lab motivates the language teacher to incorporate computer technology in the language teaching.
- Students can practise the sounds according to "Received pronunciation" in ELC Lab.
- ELC Lab trains the students in soft skills, interpersonal skills, decision making, business communication and pre-placement training.

Barriers:

The respondents expressed a few barriers also. The following table shows the barriers faced by the teachers and students in implementing the ELC lab effectively.

Sl No	Barriers	% of lecturers facing barriers
1	Lack of well-equipped lab with listening components.	98
2	Lack of spoken English environment outside the lab.	96
3	Lack of TV, LCD, CDs, DVD and Internet.	94
4	Examination oriented Teaching.	92
5	Lack of curiosity in learning phonetics and stress pattern.	90
6	Using sub-standard software.	90
7	Language proficiency is not a Criterion for selecting students.	90
8	Inability in reading materials on the computer screen.	84
9	Lack of technical skill among the English teachers.	84
10	Lack of previous knowledge about this new technology.	82
11	Inadequate supply of computers.	80
12	Unawareness of the current trends of ELT among English	80

	lecturers.	
13	Lack of preference given to English.	78
14	Setting up of ELC Lab is very expensive.	74
15	Lack of supportive Head as well as colleagues.	74
16	Inability of faculty members in conversing about technical topics while testing speaking skill.	74
17	No periodical Internal assessment test.	68
18	Fear in handling Computers and technical setting.	68
19	Lack of special training for English Lecturers.	66
20	Insufficient time duration.	66
21	Inability of English lecturers to play different roles.(teacher, soft skill trainer)	66
22	Influence of mother tongue.	62
23	Lack of willingness to attend workshops.	56

Recommendations to overcome the barriers

1. The English teacher should be competent enough to play different roles such as an English teacher, a communication skills consultant and a soft skills trainer.
2. As the English teacher has to converse about technical topics with students while testing their speaking skill, he is expected to be familiar with those matters.
3. Use of mother tongue by the English teacher made it difficult for the students to practice their own English speaking skills. So English teacher should develop a classroom environment of interaction in English.
4. Lack of willingness and interest among the lecturers to attend workshops, seminars, symposium to know the new trends in language teaching should be eliminated.
5. English teacher should help the students to cultivate the habit of reading from the computer monitor, thus providing them with the required facility to face computer – based competitive exams such GRE, TOEFL, GMT etc.

6. The management should be aware of ELC lab's vision and provide well-equipped language labs with many listening components.
7. Teachers should be provided opportunities on regular basis to participate in teaching training courses, seminars and workshops.
8. English teachers who can conduct multiple classroom activities for developing communication skills like presentations, group discussions, and role-play activities are to be recruiter.
9. The external examination method is not enough to measure one's depth of knowledge because very few examiners are sincere in judging student's English proficiency while conducting university practical exam.

CONCLUSION

It is high time that our traditional teaching methods underwent change. Unless the new technology is adopted in English language teaching, we cannot impart language skills in our learners at the rate of growing competition. ELC lab is an elevating tool in learning English language skills through technology in the present generation. It will be more effective if ELC lab is introduced from the elementary level.

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