Coping Mechanism of Students from Vernacular Academic Background in A Technical Institute

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Abstract

This article reports a study on the problems faced by students coming from a Vernacular Background into a Technical Institute where the medium of information dissemination is mainly English. The motive was to analyze the problems in depth and understand the student’s personal Coping Mechanism at entry level (F.Y.B.E) and in the various years as they progress through four years of sustained education in the English medium and its success. The aim of this study is to structure a stronger and more viable coping mechanism which develops the overall personality of the student and makes him/her a more effective learner. The participants were 20 students each from FYBE, SYBE, TYBE, BEbelonging to both the English medium background and the vernacular medium Background. The Control Group consisted of 10 students from the Vernacular Background only belonging to SYBE. This Control Group underwent several sessions of interviews, counseling and training using a methodology conceived by the researchers. After a period of continuous training their results were analyzed. They showed a distinct and overall development. Their respective teachers also mentioned only positive effects in the students due to the alternate Coping Mechanism inculcated in them during the training sessions.

Keywords: Stress, Coping Mechanism, Counseling, Creative teaching methodology.
Expansions of Abbreviations: VBG (Vernacular Background), ATKT (Allowed to Keep Terms), PCM (Personal Coping Mechanism), CM (Coping Mechanism)

Stress: Researchers define stress as a physical, mental, or emotional response to events that causes bodily or mental tension. Simply put, stress is any outside force or event that has an effect on our body or mind.

Types of Stress: Depending on the stressors and the types of changes or events we are dealing with, stress can manifest itself physically, emotionally and/or mentally.

Physical – this occurs when the body as a whole starts to suffer as a result of a stressful situation. Symptoms can manifest in a variety of ways and vary in their seriousness.

Emotional – these responses are due to stress affecting the mind and include anxiety, anger, depression, irritability, frustration, over-reaction to everyday problems, memory loss and a lack of concentration for any task.

Anxiety is normally shown as a response to loss, failure, danger or a fear of the unknown. Depression is frequently seen as an emotional response to upsetting situations such as the death of a loved one, illness and failure.

What accounts for this stress? The following are common college stressors:

- Regular Old Academic Stress-
  - Not surprisingly, the workload of college is significantly more involved than the high school workload, and it comes with less hand-holding from parents and teachers. With challenging classes, scheduling issues to coordinate, difficult tests and other academic obstacles, coupled with the more independent nature of the college learning structure, many new and returning students find themselves studying long, hard hours.

- Social Stress-
While college freshmen face the most obvious social challenges that usually involve leaving one’s entire support structure behind, creating a new social network, dealing with being away from home for the first time and finding less parental support, most students face social stress. Finding and living with a roommate, balancing friends with school work (and often part-time jobs), and dealing with the dynamics of young adult relationships can all be difficult, and these challenges can lead to significant stress.

- **Other Stresses**-
  There are also many miscellaneous stresses that often come from college life. Many students keep crazy hours from staying up late to study, getting up early for classes, and trying to cram in all the work and fun that can possibly fit. Often the logistics of living more independently can cause stress. Most students struggle with who they are and where they’d like to be, at least at some point in their college career.

- **The Impact of Stress**-
  What affect do these issues have on students? Just as everyone deals with stress in a unique way, college students experience a range of consequences from stress, from mild to severe. Here are some of the common effects of stress:

  - **Experience of Stress**-
    One of the most commonly felt consequences of college stress is a feeling of being overwhelmed. While trying to find a balance of how hard to work (and play), many college students struggle with perfectionism or unhealthy habits like heavy drinking and smoking.

  - **Dropout Rate**-
    You may be surprised to hear that roughly 50% of American students who enter college don’t end up graduating! (According to U.S. Census figures, 6-in-10 high school seniors go on to college the following year, but only 29% of adults 25 and over had at least a bachelor’s degree.) Certainly finances and life circumstances play into that figure, but the stress of college life cannot be ignored as a factor as well.
Similarly in India, we have seen that due to the ATKT system, the students end up carrying forward multiple subjects to their progressive years, thereby deteriorating the quality and quantity of academic knowledge imbibed by them. By then it just ends up being a race for clearing papers.

Coping Mechanism: Coping mechanism can be described as the sum total of ways in which we deal with minor to major stress and trauma. Some of these processes are unconscious ones, others are learned behavior, and still others are skills we consciously master to reduce stress, or other intense emotions like depression. Not all Coping mechanisms are equally beneficial, and some can actually be very detrimental.

The body has an interior set of coping mechanisms for encountering stress. This includes the fight and the flight reaction to high stress and trauma. A person perceiving stress has an automatic boost in adrenaline, prompting either action or inaction. People have a variable level of physical reactions to different levels of stress. For some, merely getting interrupted from a task can cause an inappropriate fight or flight reaction. This can translate to “fight” mechanisms, where a person gets very angry with others for interrupting him. Alternately, flight may include physically leaving, or simply being unable to regain focus and get back on task.

Coping Strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioral and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize stressful events (Aldwin and Revenson, 1987). Two general coping strategies have been distinguished: Problem Solving strategies and Emotion Focused strategies. Problem solving strategies are efforts to do something active to alleviate stressful circumstances. Emotion-focused coping strategies are efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events. Research indicates that people use both types of strategies to combat most stressful events (Aldwin and Revenson, 1987). The predominance of one type of coping strategy over another is determined by personal style and by the type of stressful event.

Other distinction in Coping Strategies is between Active and Avoidant Coping Strategies. Active Coping strategies are either behavioral or psychological responses designed to change the nature of the stressor itself or how one thinks about it. Avoidant Coping strategies leads
people into activities (such as alcohol use) or mental states (such as withdrawal) that keep them from directly addressing stressful events (Carver, Scheier and Weintraub, 1989).

Methodology:

Our aim in this research study was to figure out problems faced by students coming from the Vernacular Background (VBG) in the existing system where the medium of education is English, and to help them overcome the same. It has been noticed over the period of years, and as statistics also proves that students entering the institute after their 10+2 tend to score well in pure engineering subjects such as BEE, Mechanics, ED and CP. However their results drop drastically in subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Communication skills and Math.

A survey conducted amongst the Second Year students led us to understand that the students from English medium background tend to fail in Basic Sciences as they have a casual approach to it since they have already been inducted in these subjects at their school level. Whereas students from VBG might fail the subjects due to the Language barrier as English is essentially required to answer the examination paper.

However again these same students from the VBG tend to pass in CP, Mechanics, BEE and Mathematics, as these are not only new introductions, and according to them directly relevant to the field of Engineering (core subjects), but also that very little of the English language is required in answering or solving the respective examination papers. This survey led us to undertake the research in whether Language was the only stressor faced by the students from the VBG, or were there several other stressors which led to the rise in the no. of ATKT’s or dropouts in the Engineering education system in the first year.

Materials and Methods:

Surveys were conducted among 80 students (20 each from F.Y., S.Y., T.Y., and B.E.) to find out the answers to various queries. (Questionnaire is attached) The statistical analysis is as follows:
Statistical analysis

1) It has been found that 32 vernacular students have language as their stressor, 8 have other stressors like college environment, teaching methodology etc. We test the significance that language and stressor is dependent or independent using $\chi^2$ test. Null hypothesis being the language and the type of stress are independent. On the basis of this hypothesis the expected frequencies are as shown in fig 1.1 below

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lang stress</th>
<th>Other stress</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vernacular</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2_{cal}=46.02$

For the degree of freedom 1 the $\chi^2$ table value for the 5% level of significance is 3.84 which is less than the calculated value. Therefore we reject the null hypothesis. From this we conclude that medium of education and stressors are dependent.

2) It is analysed that the language is the main stressor in VBG students: 80% of the VBG students say that their main stressor is the English language. 20% say that they have other stressors also. With null hypothesis as the language stress is greater than the other stress, using left tailed test for large population, the ‘z’ value is 1.367. This value falls in the region of acceptance for the left tailed test therefore we conclude that VBG students have Language as their main stressor.

3) Students Coping Mechanism:

The same questionnaire had questions related to the students coping mechanism. The results were as expected. A majority of these students used the Avoidant or the Flight technique (which has been discussed in the Introduction to Coping Mechanism on page 3) to cope with their stressors in college. It was noticed that these students from the VBG ended up forming groups based on language and happened to form a cloister which completely avoided facing any barriers that would come in
their way. These students, also, rarely approached teachers with their problems unless the teacher was also comfortable speaking in the language that this group used for informal communication. For example: the students from the Marathi speaking BG would intentionally avoid clarifying their doubts from an English speaking teacher. They would specifically form a ‘herd’ which is ‘shepherded’ by a teacher who shared a similar language.

When asked if they were satisfied with the Avoidant technique that they used, around 60% replied that they were not happy and would rather approach other teachers as well. However 40% were content with their situation as they felt ‘safe’ as shown in fig. 1.2.

![Coping Mechanism Strategies](image)

Fig 1.2

When the above mentioned 60% were asked if they would use a more Active technique if they were introduced to one, they said that they preferred if the initiative to change came from the teacher’s side.

The survey, therefore, led us to the result that these were the two specific stressors amongst the students from the vernacular BG. The first being Language Barrier and the consequence of it being Low Self Esteem/ Low Confidence.

COUNSELLING AND LEARNING:
On the basis of the above mentioned result 10 students from the VBG of Semester III(Mechanical-2009) were selected for special sessions on counseling and language problem, as Confidence and Language barrier were found to be their biggest stressors. Five sessions were conducted, 2 for Counseling and 3 for Language problems.
SESSION 1 (Motivation)

A Control group of 10 students gathered. They were introduced to the project. They were told about the reason, duration and result expected from the project. They were also informed about the nature of their involvement (Motivation).

It was explained to them that they would have to participate proactively in the formation of the module/instrument which would help students from the VBG to join the main stream student body, and make the transition from the regional language medium of education to English medium of education.

SESSION 2 (Interview and Analysis)

Interview: The students were asked 12 questions which were formulated to understand their personal coping mechanism (PCM) in the first year. The questions asked were pertaining to their academic BG, student-teacher relationship in past and present institute, the medium of language between student-teacher and student-student, what is their biggest barrier and has their PCM succeeded.

Analysis: The result showed that psychological barrier topped the ranking followed closely by Language and Status barrier. The Status barrier was experienced by them not just in the student-teacher relationship but also in the peer group. This status barrier is coincidently linked to English language as a barrier. This control group also used ‘avoidance’ as their major PCM, as was also seen in the sample group of 80 students earlier.

However this control group realized that the solution was temporary and would not really work in their favor in the long run. Further counseling made them realize that their PCM might just inhibit them further in case of negative feedback from their teachers and peers.

SESSION 3:

Students were informed about their strengths and weakness that were observed and analysed during their technical presentation which was conducted on an earlier date. They had been asked to work on certain factors individually to improve their body language and presentation skill.
SESSION 4 & SESSION 5:
These sessions were conducted to inform the students about more active methods of coping with various stressors.
These students had been kept under observation before and after these sessions by the researchers and respective subject teachers. The result showed there was a distinct improvement in their academic as well as in their personality. However their English speaking skills remained unvaried, and they realized that further improvement in that direction was required.

Recommendations:

- What teachers can do (General Strategies)
- Identify through classroom interaction, students who have Language barrier as a communication problem.
- Give quiet students special encouragement and tactfully correct wrong answers.
- A strong partnership is required between teacher and student. The teacher should help the students assert their right to speak in class.
- The teacher should give them specific, time bound task (power point presentation in the classroom environment, a talk on the specific topic of the chapter, classroom discussions.)
- During Teamwork, teachers should purposefully create groups which are a good mix of the English BG students and the VBG.
- Students Coping Mechanism:
- Students should firstly participate actively in all classroom interactions, and here the Teacher plays a major role as mentioned in the section on What Teachers Can Do. The VBG students have to enforce a more Active coping mechanism, wherein they realize the root of their stressor (with the help of counseling) and start working on changing the causes of their stress. For ex: A student from the VBG would have to make a proactive
effort to learn the English language as its usage is unavoidable. And also he would need to be an active participant in classroom sessions conducted by the teacher. This goes to prove that a motivating and healthy student teacher relationship is an integral part in helping students from VBG to overcome these stressors. And furthermore Student counseling should be made an integral part of University education, especially, Technical Education.

Further progress:

On the basis of the above recommendations three control groups of students from mixed background were formed and a fourth neutral group was identified.

The three control groups had the following category of students:

- English language (weak) Confidence (strong)
- English language (strong) Confidence (weak)
- English language (weak) Confidence (weak)

These four groups underwent a test to analyze their LSRW skills. Then the three control groups of students were subjected to a once a week one hour session of training in language skills. Specialised modules were developed for each of these groups, viz.: Reading module, Listening module and Speaking module. These modules were implemented on the students for a period of ten weeks. And a final test will be conducted on these three groups and the neutral group to verify if any changes will occur either in the language skills or the personality of the student, thereby trying to prove the success of recommendation 1 given above in helping students from vernacular background to cope in the environment of a technical institute where the medium of information dissemination is largely English.
REFERENCES

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