Reforms in the teaching of English with reference to Polytechnic and Engineering colleges.

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Abstract

When we turn over the pages of history of the world, the foremost fact that comes to the light is, in the past centuries almost all parts of the world were under the British Governance. No eyebrows therefore should be raised if English has become the lingua franca in majority of the countries in the world. It can also not be overlooked at this juncture that scientific inventions and discoveries are made in European countries mostly, which have engulfed developed and developing countries all over the globe. The significance of English in terms of lingua franca grew more and more. Opposition to English language out of chauvinistic attitude stands uncalled for and unjustified in this light. Despite the tall claims by many Polytechnic and Engineering colleges, it has been observed that majority of the students who complete diploma or degree in Engineering do not possess the required level of proficiency in English communication. These students find it difficult to find jobs as proficiency in English language has become a necessity to work in modern globalized world. This paper aims at presenting some of the reforms to improve the teaching and learning process of English in Polytechnic and Engineering colleges.

Keywords: Curriculum enrichment, examination reforms, digital language labs
1.1 Introduction:

When we turn over the pages of history of the world, the foremost fact that comes to the light is, in the past centuries almost all parts of the world were under the British Governance. No eyebrows therefore should be raised if English has become the lingua franca in majority of the countries in the world. It can also not be overlooked at this juncture that scientific inventions and discoveries are made in European countries mostly, which have engulfed developed and developing countries all over the globe. According to David Graddol 'It is the language at the leading edge of scientific and technological development, new thinking in economic and management, new literature and entertainment genre'\(^1\). In the light of this position, the significance of English in terms of lingua franca grew more and more. Opposition to English language out of chauvinistic attitude stands uncalled for and unjustified in this light. In the present era every nation is leaving no stone unturned to ensure its progress and development in all the fields like medicine, engineering, technology, scientific research, banking, trade, business, industry, tourism so on and so forth. In all the above fields, English plays a very vital role.

English is called an international language. English is accepted as the most wide spread language in the world (the most widely spoken). When we know and understand English we can communicate with the citizens of most of the countries in the world without any hesitation and confusion.

Language is the effective mode of conversation and communication. So, English language is more useful internationally than almost any other language due to its spread. English is cited as the major language of international business, diplomacy, science and the professions. So importance of learning and mastering English has become 'a must' for all nations in as much as it is conducive to achieve the target of progress and development.

Interest of the students in Engineering and technical education is on the increase everywhere, in view of the ample opportunities of lucrative jobs available in this field as compared to others. But it is unfortunate that the students in the field turn blind eye to acquiring the proficiency over English language learning. They attribute their attention to mastering technical subjects (theories and practical) but they forget that these subjects are also taught through English medium. They are also ignorant about the fact that, how important English is in their education and career!

Not only this but after acquiring degrees when the students are poised to face interviews and group Discussions (G.D’S) at the campus selections, English plays important role for
getting selected for the jobs. The student who are good in English, have more chances to get a job because good communication is a key to success. Communication includes various elements such as oral, written, listening, visual intercultural, interdisciplinary etc. The students of technical institutes need to improve many skills to match the global environment of the new era. It has been said that communication skills should be fostered in engineering education … because they are qualities that employers look for … (and) should be part of any tertiary education.

Not only acquiring jobs but also in search of better jobs in the companies, the selectors attribute preference to those who are well-versed in English language communications. In multinational companies, day today communication among the employees and for business activities English is must. If they are placed at U.S.A. or in any European country during the course of their service, the significance of English reaches its height. From all these angles, technical students should restrain themselves from underestimating the importance and need of acquiring command over English language.

1.2 **Aim:** Despite the tall claims by many Polytechnic and Engineering colleges, it has been observed that majority of the students who complete diploma or degree in Engineering do not possess the required level of proficiency in English communication. These students find it difficult to find jobs as proficiency in English language has become a necessity to work in modern globalized world. This paper aims at presenting some of the reforms to improve the teaching and learning process of English in Polytechnic and Engineering colleges.

1.3 **Method:** thirty teachers from Polytechnic and Engineering colleges from the city of Nagpur were included in the sample for this study. A self designed questionnaire was used to seek responses from the teachers related to various aspects of teaching and learning English in Polytechnic and Engineering colleges. Based on the responses of the teachers, an attempt has been made to present some of the reforms to improve teaching and learning of English/Communication skills in these colleges.

1.4 **Reforms in the teaching of English:**

1) **Securing participation from all stake holders:** The first step to make any syllabus relevant and useful is to secure maximum participation from all its stake holders. In case of English curricula, it is necessary to understand viewpoints, opinions of all the stake holders including academicians, management of University/colleges, Psychologists, students and parents. The exercise of framing good curricula must seek the participation of all these
groups. Teachers who are expected to deal with the syllabus in the classrooms are better people to suggest what is relevant and useful for the learners. It is necessary to seek the feedback from training and placement officers of Polytechnic and Engineering colleges at the time of framing of syllabi. These are the people who are constantly in touch with the HR department of industry. They organize the campus interviews for their colleges. They know ins and outs of recruitment process of various industries. They can comment better on what industries look for in students. They can make their creative suggestions regarding various areas of proficiency of English that need to be improved in students to the various bodies which are entrusted with the task of making curricula. The involvement of training and placement Officers of Polytechnic and Engineering colleges in the process of framing of syllabi will help us to abridge the existing gap between what is taught in the classrooms and what is required by the industry.

Parents form another important segment of stakeholders. Modern educational theories have laid emphasis on continuous involvement of parents in the education of children not only at the primary level but also at under-graduate and post-graduate level. Recently, we have seen regular conduction of parents’ meetings in Polytechnic and Engineering colleges as well. The opinion of parents can surely enrich the exercise of framing of syllabi. Everything is meant for the students they should not been neglected in the entire process. Careful exercise of the need assessment of the students with regard to the proficiency of English will not only help the designing of the curricula but it will also provide much needed directions to the teachers to make their teaching methodology more relevant and suited to the requirements of learners. It would be appropriate to invite suggestions and recommendations from the newly recruited young people in industry who have completed their graduation during last 3 to 5 years. They will be more suited to point out to the lacuna of the syllabi that they learnt and what is required while working in industry.

Role of Psychologists has increased right from the design of curricula to the recruitment of students in industry. Their opinions, suggestions and feedback should be made an integral part of teaching and learning process.

2) **Enriching the contents of curricula:** All constructive and creative efforts in the process of design of curricula must ensure relevant and useful contents. The topics to be included in English/communication skills curricula must foster proficiency in four essential skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It has been observed that curricula should more emphasize on reading and writing than speaking and listening. In the present scenario,
especially, the students of Polytechnic and Engineering are not supposed to develop theoretical understanding of English language. They are required to communicate effectively with their clients, negotiate professional deals, conduct and participate in business meetings and handle different types of business correspondence. Therefore, it is necessary that contents of curricula must create adequate space for the orientation in spoken English. In order to facilitate this paradigm shift thrust should be given on such topics as group discussions, mock interviews, presentation skills, effective listening and proper drafting.

Traditionally, English has been a theory subject in colleges. The syllabus of English includes some prose passages, poems, letter writing, essay and a few items from grammar. This kind of syllabus cannot meet the present needs of students. Therefore, it is necessary that English subject should be introduced as a practical course in Polytechnic and Engineering colleges. If it is possible, theory subject can be retained to orient the students in grammar and other niceties of language. In many of reputed Engineering colleges, communication skills is taught as theory and practical course. As a practical course, teachers get two hours’ slot at a stretch that makes it possible for them to orient students in practical aspects of language such as presentation skills, group discussions, mock interviews etc.

Spoken English requires sound grounding in grammar. It is true that grammar has always been an integral part of English curriculum but the thrust has been on theoretical aspects of grammar such as parts of speech, types of sentences etc. It is necessary that teaching of grammar must be modified in accordance with the spirit of the time. Transformational generative or functional grammar should be taught to the students. Whether students know the types of pronouns and adjectives or not is of no much value. What is important is that they should be able to use right sentence construction with grammatical accuracy. In other words, the focus of teaching grammar should shift from theory to its applicability. Instead of using grammar books, it is strongly recommended that activity based approach should be adopted by the teachers to orient students in grammatical practices.

Proper drafting skill is another area which needs urgent attention. Business correspondence has always been the part of English syllabi. In most cases, it hardly goes beyond the teaching of some type of formal letters, essay writing etc. The needs of modern industry have changed a lot. Therefore, the modern curricula of English/Communication skills must incorporate contemporary practices of business and professional correspondence. A great emphasis must be given on proper format of e-mail writing, drafting business report, drafting project reports,
writing proposal, preparing minutes of business/professional meetings, designing product literature, preparing promotional literature, writing abstracts and research papers etc. All these drafting skills will enable the students to perform their professional responsibilities effectively. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that drafting skills should be made an integral part of English/Communication skills curriculum and sufficient stress must be given on the orientation of this aspect.

3) Improvement in evaluation and examination system: Taking effective steps to improve the process of framing of syllabi or enriching the contents of curriculum would not be sufficient. To find out whether the curriculum has attained its objectives, it is necessary to put a proper evaluation on examination system in place. It has been observed that like many other courses a theoretical pattern of examination has been adopted for English/communication skills as well. It has already been pointed out earlier that the aim of these subjects is not simply improving the theoretical awareness of learners about prose and poetry in English but in technical institutes, English/Communication skills subjects are taught with the specific goal of developing spoken and written competency of learners. Therefore, a paradigm shift is needed to make an examination pattern suitable to evaluate the proficiency level of English among the students. This can be done by introducing innovative patterns of evaluation for example group discussion can be adopted as an effective technique of evaluating students spoken competency of English. On the similar lines, mock interviews, presentation, role playing, dramatics can be adopted as some of the other measures to understand the competency of learners in different areas of English proficiency. It is to be noted that learners must know how to make use of spoken and written communication in real life situations.

In order to adopt suggested pattern of examination it would be necessary on the part of colleges to have well equipped language laboratories and competent English teachers to do justice with the students.

4) Establishment of digital language labs: It is new and rapidly evolving academic field that explores the role of information and communication technologies in language learning and teaching. It provides fertile ground for leading edge, innovative and highly creative thinking and scholarly work.

During last few decades, there has been a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning of English in India. This transformation is visible from theoretical teaching of English in traditional classrooms to well equipped digital language labs which are fast replacing the
English classrooms in professional colleges. Effective use of digital language lab which is well equipped with multimedia facility goes a long way in improving the proficiency of English among learners.

Multimedia plays an important role in English language teaching and learning. It is a combination of various digital media such as text, images, audio and video. The teacher uses multimedia to modify the contents of teaching. It helps the teacher to represent the teaching materials in a more meaningful way. Multimedia can be converted into digital form and modified for the final presentation. By incorporating digital media elements into the project, the students are able to learn better since they use multiple sensory modalities, which would make them more motivated to pay more attention to the information presented and retain the information better. Multimedia provides a complex multi-sensory experience in exploring our world. There are many advantages of multimedia such as it helps teacher to represent well-structured information, students learn best by seeing the value and importance of the information presented in the classroom. In present condition the teacher plays an important role in teaching and learning process. As a result, of this practice in recent years, more students tire of this teacher-centered model of English learning and they complain that the English class is very boring and monotonous. They want something new and different. One attempt to solve this problem may be to develop a fresh teaching approach to stimulate students’ interest in English language learning. With the development of technology, multimedia is increasingly accepted as a means of English language instruction. More English teachers state that teaching English with multimedia makes the English class more active than the teacher-centered model. In traditional process of teaching English, the teacher has to spend time on writing the vital language points and information on the blackboard. But when the teacher uses multimedia in classroom, he can use the button and keyboard to show significant content in a few seconds as long as he is familiar with the operation of the multimedia. Beside this it is very useful to the students of English language. Multimedia provides a large amount of instructional information to the students for the purpose of English learning and speeds up the process of information searching. When we need some related information, we can easily find it from the large amount of information stored on the internet. With a wealth of updated information from the internet, multimedia is popular with the teacher and the student. But no one can say that multimedia is the substitute for teachers. Teachers are always the facilitator of the whole class, whether in the multimedia classroom or in the traditional classroom. A quality teacher would do more than press the button on the multimedia computer technology.
They would apply teaching methodologies accumulated from the many years of teaching experience from language teachers and experts while adding the use of multimedia in the teaching of English.

Definition of Multimedia

Multimedia may be defined in various ways. Some definitions are given below:

- Multimedia is the use of multiple forms of media in presentation of information.
- Multimedia is information in the form of graphics, audio, video, or movies.
- Multimedia comprises a computer program that includes text along with at least one of the following: audio, sound, music, video, photographs, animation, or high-resolution graphics.

Use of Multimedia in Teaching English

It is true that there are teachers who use multimedia technology, but the majority of teachers still teach in the traditional manner. None of these traditional manners are bad or damaging the students. In fact, till date they have proved useful. However, there are many more opportunities for students to gain confidence, practice and extend themselves, especially for ESL students who learn the language for more than just fun. For them to keep pace with ELT and gain more confidence they have to come into the world of multimedia technology.

Advantages of Multimedia Technology

**a) Increase Students' Interest in Learning:** In modern world, the traditional teaching methods and environment are not popular while Multimedia technology having audio and visual effects naturally makes us more interested in the process of teaching and learning. By using multimedia we can get abundant-information in short period of time. It increases students' involvement in class activities.

**b) Promote Students' Interactive Capacity:** Traditional teaching process is not so helpful to students to comprehend certain language and also understanding the structure, meaning and function of the language. Therefore it is difficult to achieve the target of communication. But the use of multimedia technology provides the students greater opportunity and incentives to improve their capacity of communication. The PPT program activates students' thinking process and makes them alert. In-class activities such as group discussion, subject discussion, and debates can also offer more opportunities for communication among students and between teachers and students. In short multimedia technology has inspired students' positive thinking and communication skills in every area of life.
c) **Useful to Gain Knowledge of Western Culture:** The multimedia technology helps the students to get abundant information from all over the world. It provides information not only about textbooks but also about cultural backgrounds of many countries. Through multimedia technology students can learn about western culture and their customs. And having the knowledge of western culture the students can check their own culture.

d) **Improvement in Teaching Effect:** Multimedia technology improves teaching content and breaks the teacher centered pattern of teaching. It also improves class efficiency. Due to large classes it is difficult for the students to have speaking communication. But multimedia sound lab gives chance to every student for speaking. The traditional teaching pattern gives stress on instruction of teachers. On the other hand, multimedia technology goes beyond time and space and creates more vivid, visual, authentic environment for English learning.

e) **Build Rapport between Teacher and Student:** A major feature of multimedia teaching is to train and improve students' ability to listen and speak, and to develop their communicative capacity. During this process, the teacher's role is of that a facilitator of language. Using multimedia in the process of teaching and learning creates a good platform for the exchange of thoughts between teachers and students. This practice creates an atmosphere which improves classroom teaching. In this way communication between teacher and students increase and this helps to build rapport between them.

f) **Creates a Context for Language teaching:** By using the multimedia technology the teacher can make the class lively and interesting. In multimedia technology we have audio, video and picture technologies which enhances the initiative of both teachers and students. This technology helps to enrich the content of classes. Students in the class can use multimedia to understand the class in a clear way. Through the whole interactive process, it is apparent that using multimedia in ELT is effective in nurturing students' interest in learning English, as well as enhancing teachers' interest in English teaching.

g) **Provide Flexibility to Course Content:** There is no doubt about the flexibility of the multimedia technology. According to the situation and matter we can bring changes in context. And this happens only because of multimedia technology. It is obvious that the context can be created not only in the classroom, but also after class. Multimedia language teaching can also create a multimedia language environment for the purpose of conducting language teaching. English teaching itself must focus on the guidance of teachers and be student-centered which we believe is one of the principles for language teaching. Students
are bound to have some problems in classroom teaching, which can be addressed under the guidance of teachers.

Multimedia computers have to be adopted as a better option which are configured with the right software, permitting the students to view websites to read the world's great literature to facilitate person to person communication through e-mail, chat, moose, internet phone, low end video conference etc. Voice recognition software allows the students to choose and practice better idea of their accuracy. If an institution has electronic classrooms the instructor with a laptop, demonstrates the orientation feature and a good instruction sheet will take care of the rest.

Computers should be used to make classes more effective. There are two ways to use them. The one way is for the teacher to present pictures, videos and written text with or without sound. The other way to use computer is to have students use the computers themselves. The second method of using computer which leads the students a better understanding of computers as well as languages learning.

DIFFFERENT TYPES OF LANGUAGE LABORATORIES:

A) Career lab: Language lab is one of the most innovative tools in teaching learning for the students of English language. It acts as a platform for learning through interactive lessons and communicative mode of teaching thus fostering “information literacy”. Language lab includes English lab and career lab modules. English lab includes topics like Comprehensive listening; fundamental language skills, communications skills, vocabulary, phonetics, conversations and auto speak. Comprehensive listening improves the listening skill ability of the students thereby developing the quality of empathy. To increase the vocabulary word mentor like crosswords, word traps, guess the word etc. can be played. With the help of any audio device students can be exposed to standard punctuations by playing poems, songs, thus making the student phonetically empowered. The lab is beneficial for assessing student's speech. Students learn accent, stress and other aspects of the phonetics of the language. The student wearing a headset and controlling his pitch is the master of his own fate. Similarly making the students speak into microphone and listening through the headphone conversations, improves correct pronunciation and thus makes language learning a whole new interesting activity.
Career lab includes resume writing, presentation, group discussions and interview skills. It also includes information on soft skills like time management, creative thinking, stress management, personality development which is important from the point of campus interview and placement of the students. Thus language lab effectively facilitates the use of technology for the purpose of communication and language acquisition purpose. Direct involvement of the students in the activities will definitely give a better exposure for their own creativity “Tell me and I will forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand”.

Newspaper: an effective tool of teaching English

There are a lot of reasons why ESL teachers should use newspapers in the classroom.

Provide readily available, regularly changing original texts at an appropriate language level.

Deal with topic of current interest.

Provide the language of today: modern words, expressions and phrases which are used today some newly coined words may be found in the newspapers.
Promote an understanding of the concept of conventions which is important in text processing, grammar and style.

Develop critical thinking skills-inter-textuality in the processing of texts.

Can use effectively with a wide range of levels from Elementary to Advanced.

Help to make teaching-learning more concrete, meaningful, permanent and interesting.

Learning with media is a complementary process. Allen et. Al. (1988, as cited in Baird, 2004:2) maintain that the strategies students develop in comprehending authentic texts can help them develop writing proficiency in the target language it leads the students a better understanding of computers as well as languages learning.

B) Conventional Lab: Mostly, this type of laboratory is outdated except at some places. This type of laboratory has a tape recorder and some audiocassettes to teach the learners. Learner learns the pronunciation by listening tapes played on the tape recorder.

C) Lingua Phone Lab: This laboratory is a little advanced than conventional laboratory. In it some distractions in listening are minimized by using headset. In it an electronic device works as a cassette player with all the features of a normal cassette player on the left side, and as a repeater on the right side that helps one to record one’s voice and replay it for comparison.

D) Computer Assisted Language Laboratory: In this type of laboratory computers are used to teach learner. Already the course material is fed into the computer and is used according to the features available in the system. Today in some laboratories internet connection is also being used for teaching.

E) The Dial Access Lab: This type of laboratory needs more space and technicians than the Conventional Laboratory. It is basically a broadcast operation. Depending on the size of operation, any number of students can access a particular tape at any given time.

F) Wireless Lab: The wires connecting the sources to student headsets are replaced by radio transmission in a wireless laboratory. The console contains a small transmitter that serves this purpose. Monitoring and intercom are not possible in this lab G) Multi Media Hi-Tech Lab: In the market, there are several software available which can be used in Multi-Media Language Laboratory. For instance: Renet, Aristoclass, Hiclass, Globarina, Histudio MHi Tech, Online Software, etc.

Advantages of the Language Lab: Teachers and researchers claim that there are advantages of using language labs in teaching, some of them are as follows:
1) **Auditory Oriented:** The direct sound transmission gives step by step guidance from the teacher to the students with clarity. Students can listen to the instructions of the teacher more clearly and follow it more effectively. It enables them to learn effectively and properly.

2) **Better Attention:** The Lab software is more attention enthralling for the students, where they are engaged with individual systems. By using separate systems they can concentrate and keep better attention than learning in a general classroom.

3) **Quick comprehension:** The Laboratory increases the pace of comprehension as students coaching are purely based on the level of study. Due to use of Language Laboratory students can understand quick and better.

4) **Effective learning:** The lab provides to learn the foreign language practice in a focused setting that eliminates the feelings of self-consciousness.

5) **Focus on Actuality:** By using text, audio and video can easily be integrated with actuality in everyday situations. Students can easily understand and acquire knowledge by learning from actual things.

6) **Guidance the Group:** In Language Lab, it is easy to guide the groups by monitoring each student separately undisturbed other students.

7) **Self-evaluation:** The students can do a periodical self-evaluation to measure the progress as well as evaluate his/her language with that of the expert.

8) **Independent learning:** Access to resources beyond the timetable encourages independent learning. Any student can learn independently with the help of Language Laboratory. It provides a facility which allows the student to listen to model pronunciation, repeat and record same, listen to their performance and compare with the model, and do self assessment.

9) **Creates skillful learners:** It takes care of the learners to become skilled at the language which they are learning. It helps students to learn pronunciation, accent, stress and all other aspects of the phonetics of a language.

10) **Remove the fear:** The automated learning environment removes student's fear and creates a happy learning situation.

11) **Learn the need:** The lab fulfills the need of the learner that is learning the language skills in an effective way. The use of a modern language lab will allow the students
to learn any language or improve their own reading and speaking skills and develop their own native language comprehension at an accelerated rate.

12) Medium of interactivity: The students can record their own voice and play back the recordings, interact with the each other and the teacher, and can store the results.

Limitations of language lab:

   a. Recordings are not useful for the learners of second language for they are more interested in meaning of the word, phrase than pronunciation.

   b. Teacher listens randomly to students around the room. Individual student correction is not easy.

   c. Language learning in laboratory becomes a process of mechanical habit formation instead of natural activity.

   d. The installations are usually maintained under contract by service Engineers, but these often served a county or similar wide area, and would only call at 3-monthly intervals. This meant that if several booths malfunctioned, then for much of that time the laboratory is out of action.

1.5 Conclusion: This paper has made an attempt to provide a wide range of suggestions to improve the teaching of English/Communication skills in Polytechnic and Engineering colleges that would lead to improve the level of proficiency among students. Wholehearted efforts must be made to seek active participation of all the stake holders in the design and development of curriculum which is sure to lay a solid foundation of teaching and learning of English. All efforts need to be made to enrich the contents of syllabi of English and communication skills on a regular basis to make it relevant. There is an urgent need to introduce many reforms in evaluation/examination pattern. Focus should change from assessing the theoretical understanding of English by the students to adopt an evaluation pattern that is concerned to find out the competency level of students to apply the knowledge of spoken and written language in real life situations.

One thing can be emphasized that irrespective of technique and approach which is adopted by teachers, they must make wholehearted efforts to orient students in such a way that they should acquire minimum competency level in four basic skills of language i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing.
One of the most effective suggestions is that all the Polytechnic and Engineering colleges must establish well equipped digital language laboratories. The role of ITC in English learning cannot be overlooked.

It has been established beyond doubt that the students, whose level of proficiency of English is good, have the better chance to get good jobs. Effective communication skills are something which enhances the prospect of the students to be absorbed in industry. Good communication skill is directly associated with the development of other soft skills among students. Command over English language is sure to add to the effectiveness of student’s personality.

References