Teaching English Communicative Skills to Technical Students: A Case of Difference for English as Second Language and English as Third Language

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Abstract

Effective communication is the essence of growth and development. The technical institutes in India have special courses designed to enhance and polish the communicative skills of their students. However, it may happen that some students benefit from the teaching practices more than the others. This does not always have to do with attention deficit from the students but the linguistic background of the students many times plays role subconsciously. It is the responsibility of the facilitator/ resource person to identify the students on the basis of the number of languages that they know and make groups where English communicative skills is to be taught as a second language or a third language. The research discussed in this paper presents the findings of four technical institutes where the underperformers in English mainly comprised of such students who were native speakers of another language using Hindi as their second language and trying to learn English as a third language. Proper intervention from the facilitators and the teachers and correct teaching practices can improve the skills of al students alike.

Keywords: Communicative skills, ELT for technical students, ESL, English as third language, ELT in multilingual setting, technical communication

Introduction

Technical communication refers to the activity of preparing or publishing specialized information in such a manner that non- specialists can easily understand and accomplish the task (Graves and Graves, 2012). They point out that in order to make technical communication with the readers effective it is important to consider some of the key- points like "level of experience with the subject matter, their educational background, experience with and attitude towards learning new points and relevant demographic characteristic such as age, sex, race, socio- economic background and first language". It is worth noting here that especially the first language (FL) of the readers/ users has been given precedence because that has a lot of precedence over the other languages learnt after that. In the present paper this aspect has been discussed in detail not just for users/ readers of technical communication but for those engineers and scientists in making who would produce such technical writings.The growing tendency towards globalization and modernization has left one and all for an urgent need for a perfect and homogenous medium of communication. It has become essentially important to be in consonance with the ongoing inventions and discoveries to keep pace with the intended growth and development all around the world. It goes without mentioning that the most common and the most suitable language for this purpose is English. The knowledge of English opens up immense opportunities for individuals to explore the fruits of science and technology among others. It enhances the comprehension capabilities of various types of academic books and research journals. It empowers the individuals to express and share the ideas and thoughts with the outside world. Or putting simply, it gives the power to *understand* and to *be heard*. With so much importance attached to English, the role of a teacher or a resource person becomes highly invaluable and pivotal. The task of an ELT (English Language Teaching) specialist becomes easy when the class s monolingual or

bilingual. The types of strategies and pedagogical techniques, the, need less improvisations and revisions and the approach applied yields more efficient output. However, the task becomes highly difficult when the student belong to different linguistic background. In such a multilingual classroom, the specialist constantly needs to change the approach and the resource material. Not just this, but the specialist or the resource person also needs to cater to the varying degree of knowledge of English of such students. Therefore, the point of concern is two-pronged: a) the diverse linguistic background of the students which might hamper or intervene with the learning of English and b) the varying level of knowledge of English among the students that might make the resources either too easy or too difficult to comprehend.

The Aim of the Study

The present paper studies the case of a typical multilingual Indian classroom comprising of undergraduate engineering students of different colleges. These students came from different linguistic and cultural background possessing highly inconsistent levels of the knowledge of English language. The main focus of the paper was to show the effect of their Mother Tongue (MT)/ First Language (FL) on the learning levels of English in the classroom and also analyze the different comprehension levels of English among them and to suggest a pedagogical technique that would cater to their needs of better language learning. The paper would also highlight the role of the resource person and the specialist suggesting some attitudinal changes which could improve the teaching techniques.

Hypothesis

The main hypothesis for this research was that the ability to learn the communicative skills in English for undergraduate technical students of Hindi speaking geographical belt largely depended on the fact whether it (English) was their second language (SL) or third language (TL). In that case, all those students who were native speakers of Hindi would be learning English as their SL and those students who were native speakers of some other language and who used Hindi as their SL would learn English as their TL.

Literature Review

ELT is one of the most researched areas in the modern world of globalization. Academicians and researchers are focusing on almost all possible aspects of ELT. It is therefore, impossible here to review such huge amount of literature. For the purpose of this research few theoretical works were shortlisted to provide a guideline and a continuum for future research. Staples and Ornatowski (1998) pointed in their book that three areas of study seem to be most central to technical communication: 1) audience, 2) the writing process and 3) style. What they keep implicit here is the language that would be used to establish such technical communication. The positivists use the "windowpane theory of language" and the greatest supposition that has prevailed in technical communication is:

"[It] provides a view onto the real world, a view which may be clear or obfuscated. If language is clear, then we can see reality accurately; if language is highly decorative or opaque, then we see what is not really there or we see it with difficulty." (Miller 2007)

Technical communicators will need to learn about the role of diverse modes of communication in an organization, including inter- personal, visual and electronic communication as well as writing. There are four distinct groups of studies on technical communication out of many. They are the cognitivists, the ethnographers, the composition theorists and the positivists. Composition theories developed in the 1980s laying importance on "social perspective" (Faigley, 1985). This later evolved into the social constructionist approach. They established complex relationships between authors, audience and social contexts. Many such theorists viewed social context as the "discourse community". After the composition theories emerged the cognitive and the ethnographic

theories. By their experimental methodologies, cognitivists are bringing scientific rigour to the study of many of the untested precepts in technical communication such as the use of headings, passive voice and embedded clauses, and their effects on readers (Sprydakis and Wenger, 1992). Ethnographers too are similar to cognitivists; however they pay more attention to the identity issue that the reader attaches to his reading (Holland 1992). The most recent theoretical development is the positivism. Carolyn Miller (2007) uses the "windowpane theory of language" and suggests that we see exactly what and how much the language chooses to show us.

Methodology of research

Since the paper was aimed to present the case study of engineering students from different linguistic background, therefore, eighty such students were selected from four different engineering colleges of Bihar and Jharkhand who ranged widely in their knowledge of English language. One out of four colleges was privately aided, two were semi- government and one was purely government aided. The study was kept longitudinal (4 months) to achieve better understanding of the comprehension levels of the students and to develop the knowledge of the techniques used by the specialist and teachers. These eighty students were classified in two ways. The first classification depended on their Mother Tongue (MT)/ First Language (FL) broadly dividing them into Hindi and non- Hindi speakers. By non- Hindi speakers it is not meant that the students did not speak or understand Hindi at all. The use of the term must be considered in a different light. Here it means such speakers who use Hindi as their second language while using some other language as their first language. This would be discussed in details as the paper would proceed. The second classification took into account the different levels of the knowledge of English as a communicative language. In this classification the students were categorized into four distinct categories each representing a different level of the knowledge of the language. No major criterion was fixed to differentiate between the spoken and the written form and the present study essentially considered the spoken or the oral conversational skills of the students and their comprehension ability.In the first classification that was based on the MT/FL of the students, the group was divided broadly into:1) Hindi speakers and 2) Non- Hindi speakers. The number of speakers in the two categories has been represented in the figure as under:
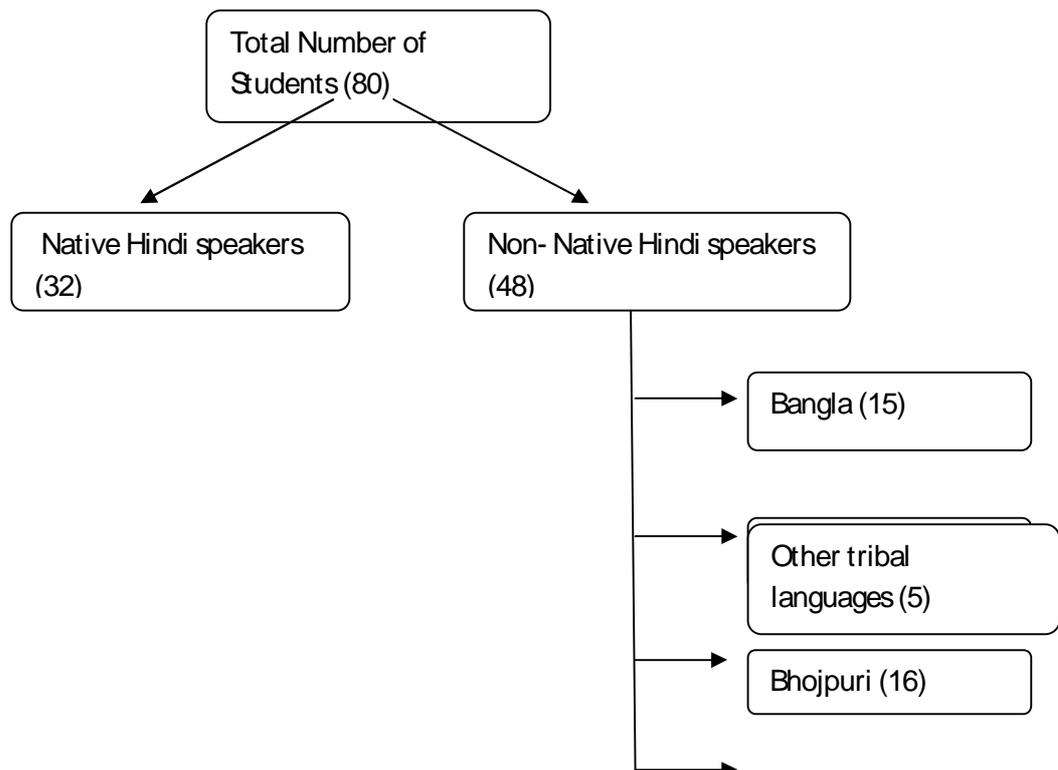
Figure 1. Number of speakers with respect to the MT/ FL

The second classification categorizes the students into four categories from *poor* to *good* through *average* and *satisfactory*. These four categories present the level of conversational and comprehensive skills of the students based on silent observation and certain diagnostic tests. The number of students in each the four categories obtained has been listed as under:

Table 1. The distinct performance levels of students

The qualitative level of communication skill	Poor	Average	Satisfactory	Good
Number of students in the category	30	35	10	5

The diagnostic test consisted of the testing of English listening, speaking and writing skills. To test the skill to listen and comprehend a two way approach was employed. In the first approach the students were made to listen to their usual lecture and their responses were noted down as part of silent observation. In the second approach they were made to listen to ten minutes of BBC documentary on wild life and then they were asked to write down what they understood. The overall performance was then evaluated and tabulated on a number scale of ten. The students were also made to speak what they had written and were also made to discuss the impact of the documentary. This again was tabulated on a number scale of ten. So the overall performance was evaluated on a scale of twenty marks. Those who obtained < 5 were the poor performers. Those who got between 5- 10 were the average performers; those who got between 10- 15 had satisfactory performance and those who obtained between 15- 20 were categorized as good.

Analysis

The results obtained after the diagnostic test were subjected to analyses on different parameters. The first analysis was to determine the role of MT/FL on the performance levels of English. The results were surprising.

Table 2. Distribution of students based on their performance levels

Performance Level	Hindi	Non-Hindi				total
		Bangla	Magahi	Bhojpuri	Tribal	
Poor	----	07	10	13	04	34
Average	25	03	02	03	01	34
Satisfactory	05	03	---	---	---	08
Good	02	02	---	---	---	04
Total	32	15	12	16	05	80

As per the data presented in Table 2 above, forty percent of the total students were Hindi speakers and sixty percent were non- Hindi speakers. The most shocking result is the percentage of poor performers coming from the non- Hindi speaking background which accounts for sixty nine percent. If the poor performers and the average performers are taken together then eighty nine percent of them come from the non- Hindi background. The following pie charts provide better factual understanding.
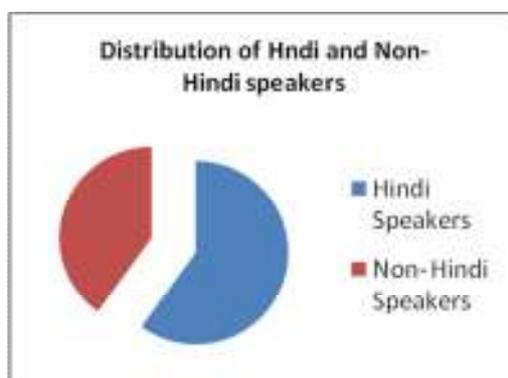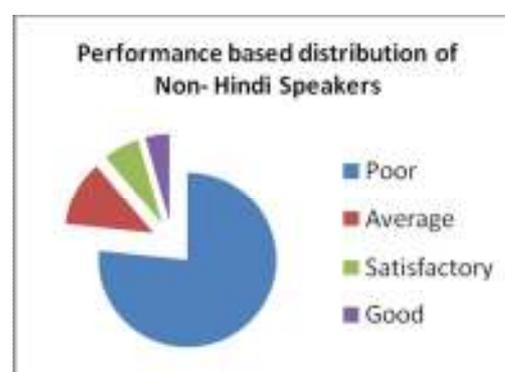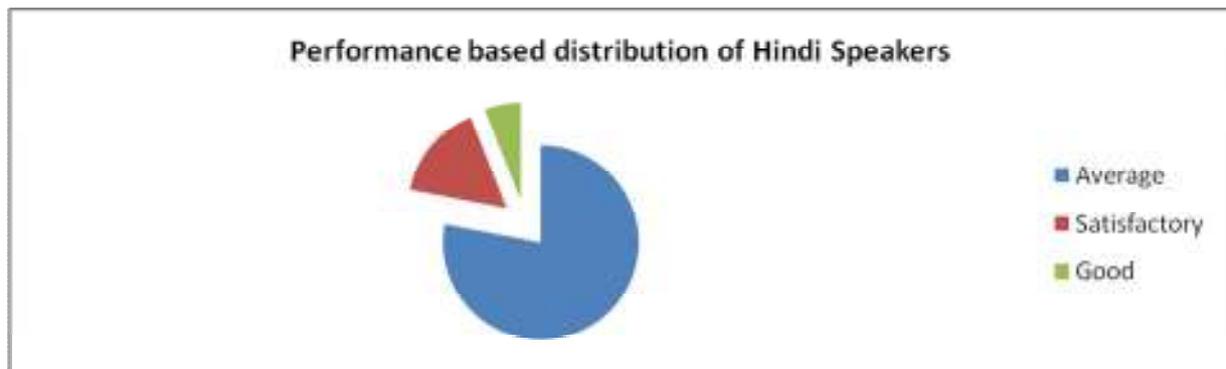

Chart 1

Chart 2

Chart 3

A close look at the three charts above clearly shows that the major share of under performers belonged to the non- Hindi speakers. Or it can also be deduced that the performance level of students in communicative English largely depended on the fact whether English for them was the second language (as in the case of Hindi speakers) or third/ other language (as for the non- Hindi speakers who used Hindi as their second language).

This analysis can be used very effectively and usefully in language and communicative classes in technical institutes. Once the resource person or the facilitator is able to find out the native language of the students he/ she can easily formulate strategies for better language teaching. A small classroom survey asking the students to tell about their native language and why do they think they belong to particular native language group can reveal the much needed information. After this the facilitator can divide the class into smaller groups depending upon how many languages the students speak, i.e. the facilitator can divide the class into groups in which English is to be taught as second language or third language. Once this is done then the path becomes easy and beneficial for the teacher and the taught alike. These groups would need different types of input and at different rate. Formation of groups would ensure better attention and better performance.Brandt (2006) suggests that facilitators must "spend an hour or two in the resource room of the centre" to check out the courses for various levels. She suggests that "examples of students' writing can also tell you something about what to expect".

These procedures can be undertaken in all the institutes where English communication skills are taught but for technical institutes these are highly recommended because the students devote most of their time in scientific and technical work leaving very less time for communication skill enhancement. The formation of groups would yield better results in less time ensuring personalized approach to the students. It may not be out of place to mention here that language teaching has different aspects: the organizational, the technological, the psychological (language acquisition, memory, motivation etc.), the sociological (attitude to language, use of language, language in society etc.), the pedagogical (selecting, grading, presenting and testing) and the linguistic (scientific description and comparison. (Alam, 1999)

Conclusion

The entire research was undertaken with the sole aim of finding out if the learning of English communication skills was different when it was taken as a second language and when it was taken as a third language or fourth language. The assumption made in the hypothesis seems correct. The analysis of the data and the different communicative performance level of the students as in Table 2 justify the claim. It can also be said that English is learnt well when it is the second language. The best that a teacher/ facilitator can do is to make groups in class depending on how many languages the students speak. More attention must be given to the group where the learners are trying to learn English as their third language. The research carried out here opens up scope for further research in this field. In multilingual countries like India, language, especially English becomes very

important in order to establish wide and effective communication. So great care and diligence is required I teaching it especially to students of technical institutes who have less time to brush up their communicative skills.

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