

The Problems of Non-English Medium Engineering Students and Possible Solutions

T Murugavel

Background

In a college offering courses in engineering and technology a fair number of students respond freely – verbally and non-verbally – to the learning experiences, while a few fail to follow lectures. When asked, the latter respond with silence but in my office, they open up saying that they do not understand anything going on in the classroom; they find the ‘subject’ lectures incomprehensible despite their best efforts. Some have problems with the speed and some others, with pronunciation. In addition, all of them have difficulty with the words and their sequencing in sentence forms. Almost all these students enter engineering colleges on ‘merit’ through government quota which of course implies that they did work hard and do possess ‘intelligence’ – necessary qualifications to higher education and bright future. Yet they find English as the obstacle. The ‘technical’ vocabulary is Greek and Latin to them and the sentences are too complex to understand. These few have had their school education in the vernacular and are therefore unable to follow the terminology used in lectures, course books and reference books. Use and comprehension of the technical vocabulary is *taken for granted* by faculty because a few of these concepts have already been learnt by these few, of course, in the vernacular. However, the shift in the medium of instruction is *too abrupt* for these students to make quick and suitable adjustments. Colleagues in the other departments have also had similar experiences to report.

Such classroom experience of ours has been corroborated by faculty of engineering colleges functioning in the rural set-up (where exposure to modern technology and lifestyle is limited). The only difference is that ‘our few’ are the majority in these colleges.

Thus, to non-English medium students, learning in an engineering college has been a painful struggle. Some even fail to pass the subjects as they move from one semester to another. They hardly make any attempt themselves to seek help and not finding sympathy or help forthcoming either from their subject teachers or their English medium peers, they avoid contact and tend to stay only with other non-English medium ones; which makes the situation worse and thereby they lose a fine opportunity to mature as fluent communicators.

When in their final year, ‘recruiting’ companies visit our College for campus interview and selection, they fail to land a job. Realising the difficulty the vernacular students experience in gaining jobs and the ensuing frustration, Anna University, introduced, in 2006, a Communication Skills laboratory. This lab, meant for pre-final year students consists of two sections: career laboratory and language laboratory. In the language lab students are trained in grammar, listening and reading comprehension through specially designed software and in

the other, students are taught the nuances of presentations and group discussions; they are also trained to write job application letter and resume.

It cannot be denied that this laboratory was introduced as mandatory with the good intention of equipping and honing the skills that are necessary for students to get jobs. However, how involved the students are in these lab classes is a tricky question. Because students, including those who have had their schooling in vernacular medium schools and those who have joined college in their second year, after their study in polytechnic institutions, do not seem to realize the importance of this laboratory. They treat it as another subject that needs to be cleared as part of successful completion of the B.E. course. When they are asked to speak before an audience, they are ready with excuses and when, they have to, they write down something, commit to memory and reproduce it. Despite our best efforts, not much change takes place in terms of students' attitude towards acquiring the skills.

Conversely, these very learners do approach English teachers seeking help to perform well in group discussions and interviews as part of campus selection, little realising that the changes they expect to happen cannot happen overnight.

The Problem

Most vernacular medium learners hardly recover from the cultural shock they experience in the first few weeks of their arrival. The shock pertains to the apparently total incomprehension of knowledge content and the ensuing confusion in their minds about themselves and their competence at either conscious or subconscious level. Added to this is their inability to participate in day-to-day experiences academically and socially. Because of such affective blocks, they avoid using English and hardly interact with their English medium peers or faculty for they probably believe that they may be getting into embarrassing situations and see their errors as threats to their egos. The shock is complete with their intelligence stunned and self-confidence eroded; consequently, it leads to avoidance, isolation and total loneliness in body and mind. They go through the motions, move from one semester to another until the frustration and inaction ends, thankfully at the end of eighth semester.

Solutions

Humans generally expect, yearn or hunger for warmth, understanding, affection from others (whether deserving or not). And these few (in Chennai colleges) and these majority (in non-Chennai colleges) are no exceptions and do deserve all the three. It is not their fault that they are forced to learn to swim on their own in a sea they find turbulent.

1. English and engineering **faculty** cannot be faulted if they perform their duties efficiently and complete the syllabuses as their classroom and laboratory activities are time-bound.

But they could go beyond such 'mechanical'ness; As the students may not take the first step for they will not be sure of their faculty's response, they should extend their hands towards these few learners of theirs; consequently, they would earn the eternal gratitude of these few students (*if however, they declare*

I don't need their gratitude, I'm bothered about what I'm earning and going to earn', well it's a different story but I very much doubt if they would be so heartless, and I'm sure once they are made to see how they could inspire other less fortunate human beings, they'll be more than willing.), and besides, they could derive 'job satisfaction', which is a key factor to maintaining their 'motivational level' high. And these students would in turn help their juniors and others when they enter their professional world.

The faculty could and hence should find the time to help the students. Through Tamil and English and their body language, they should clearly indicate they care for them, they would like to help them with their academic and personal problems, they are willing to help them in their learning process, deal with their uncertainties, confusions, fears and complexes sympathetically, draw them out from their shells with concern and anxiousness.

2. They should strengthen these ties with a list of technical words and their Tamil equivalents, with patient explanation in Tamil and English of 'concepts' and their interpretation and with linking them to what these students had learnt in their higher secondary school. They should help these students understand sentences in technical books by breaking them up into shorter sentences, how they are linked to each other in the larger sentences, how larger sentences are constructed, how and why sequencing of thoughts occur in sentences and in paragraphs.

3. The **Universities** offering UG engineering disciplines should not make a pass in English obligatory, should in the first two semesters offer the vernacular students an English syllabus that helps them comprehend technical content in the sciences, mathematics and engineering disciplines, in the next two semesters that expects students to do the job which their teachers had performed in the previous semesters, and in the remaining four semesters, that prepares them to make paper presentations – individually and in pairs – to meaningfully participate in GDs, to face campus interviews and telephonic interviews through mock interviews.

4. The **Department of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education** should provide its Tamil medium students with a list of terms – scientific, mathematical, and even a few engineering concepts – and attempt to translate the Tamil sentences into English so that their minds can process and interpret concepts in Tamil and English simultaneously.

The first and the second will help provide the much-needed support in the immediate environment while the fourth and the third, in the five-year school environment (from eighth to twelfth standards).

5. Faculty and education system are external agencies and are only supportive in nature. The onus of learning, developing and growing lies with the **vernacular learners**. They should exploit the support they receive to the fullest and emerge as competent users of English in office and research environment.

They should also use newspapers, English journals, television programmes as extra sources of support so they develop into able listeners, speakers, readers

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and writers. Only if the learners are willing to help themselves they can learn to use English as a medium for communication.

Dr. T Murugavel
Professor of English
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Sri Venkateswara College of Engineering
PO Box 3, Sri Perumbudur 602105, India