

Technical Communication in India Trends and Concerns

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Abstract—This paper presents an overview of the current trends in technical communication in English in India. The use of English language has undergone a great change and has largely become industry-specific. The prescribed text books for college students, which earlier had a mix of prose, poetry, drama and essays, have now been replaced by text books in Business English or Communicative English. This paper examines the effects of learning English purely for the purpose of professional communication.

Index Terms—technical communication, presentation skills, language learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Technical writing could be as simple as writing a covering note or as sophisticated as developing a product brochure. It could include business correspondence, electronic communication, technical description, user manuals, feasibility reports, graphical representations etc., or any communication that seeks an action or follow-up.

Everyone writes business English but most people tend to compromise on the quality of writing while developing material that is intended to be precise, direct and focused. It doesn't mean one has to use rare words and phrases or use such language that the material becomes a hard nut to crack. Using plain, elegant, non-repetitive and direct writing makes one understand the contents at the first glance itself. There are still people who use language power in a bullying manner, without getting to know the importance of direct and simple communication.

It is extremely important in the modern world to conduct business through a medium that involves less time, cost and effort. It is the best medium to assess one's capabilities to interact with peers, superiors and subordinates ensuring effective team work.

Some writers, in an effort to simplify, make the whole process of technical communication bizarre by the excessive use of acronyms. They depend on the computer for spell-check and grammar check without actually understanding the nuances. Writing the way one sends an email, or the earlier style of sending a telex message, has slowly made its entry into the arena of professional writing. This causes a little dilution in what may be called the "standard way of writing". But it is always preferable to stick to the basic standards and parameters. The argument that "anything will do as long as it serves the purpose" may not always be justified.

II. BACKGROUND

25 years back in India, perhaps, technical communication had not been recognized as a specialized area of study. Everything was English then, whether technical or non-technical; spoken or written. People learned English religiously through the rudiments of grammar which had its own merits. Most of the users used to be good listeners and readers and also possibly good writers, but probably struggled a little with speaking. There was no particular focus on technical communication. The study of English was more 'literature-oriented'. There existed a system for learning literature even though the learners and researchers didn't diversify into the areas of teaching/ learning technical writing. The reason could have been the slow pace of industrial growth and low demand for Indian resources – human and non-human around the world.

III. CURRENT SCENARIO

The situation has substantially changed since then. Looking at the trend in India, one is compelled to fear that a few, if not many, of our Indian languages might even become defunct after a few years just because of the unprecedented use of or dependence on English in every area of business, social & cultural arena. People have started specializing in Communicative English, Business English, Technical English, Legal Writing and into the varied aspects of linguistics. This situation has set in primarily due to globalization, industrial and agricultural revolution and the boom in the area of information technology. It has become a boon to the Indian IT industry that primarily thrives on onsite/offshore model of communication unlike many other countries.

The factors responsible for this shift are many. They include educational reforms and importance assigned to English education in schools, colleges and engineering institutes. Common syllabi like CBSE and ISCE influenced this trend

quite positively. The language testing examinations like IELTS, TOEFL etc. added great value to strengthen the English language skills of students. It also made the students competitive and fit for employment in India as well as abroad.

The IT companies' dependence on Onsite/Offshore model with 24x7 delivery support, requiring competent associates having precise language skills, made learning of technical English spread quickly. Hiring of the services of agencies for teaching technical communication and soft skills is a part of the training calendar of many IT companies. Huge organizations have in-house trainers and training wings.

Many Engineering Institutes have included in their curriculum topics like proposal writing, report writing, development of business plan etc., in order to equip the budding managers to foray into competitive business arena. Some institutions have invested in expensive language labs and in-house language faculty. Work integrated language learning has also become a part of professional training. The shift from the conventional way of learning to the modern advanced learning methodology has paved the way for producing successful communicators.

In terms of quality, however, there are still concerns. Though India produces thousands of graduates and post-graduates supposed to be employable, their employable skills suffer because of their inability to communicate effectively in English. This flaw in the system needs to be rectified. The way English is taught at schools and vocational institutions is far from being scientific. There are two ways of looking at it. Conventionalists advocate that for learning a foreign language, one has to learn grammar systematically failing which one will not be able to differentiate between two sentences like "what is happening" and "what has happened." While there is some merit in what they say, learning grammar per se is quite monotonous for the students. Modernists argue that a language should be learned by living that language – may it be speaking, writing or listening. Learning by speaking and listening might be rather time taking, and may also need a conducive environment.

The details of the courses commonly offered in technical communication to engineering students should be reviewed for a better perspective. The learning objectives of the course should be clearly defined. The course plan must include the approximate number of lecture hours needed to cover each topic. The scope and objective of the course needs to be clearly defined so that the students know what to expect. The course must ideally begin with introductory classes about the process of communication. It should give an insight into the importance of communication in day-to-day activities. The importance of each and every element of the communication process, like, sender, receiver, message, channel, noise, feedback etc should be clearly explained with suitable, practical, day-to-day examples. The features of business communication should be highlighted. The subtle differences between general purpose communication and business communication should be brought out. The students should be able to understand that general purpose communication is informal in style and approach and deals with general content and vocabulary. It is mostly oral and does not have a set pattern of communication. It can be both objective and subjective and may not always have a specific audience. Whereas, technical communication is formal, factual and has a structure. It can be oral or written and is usually meant for a specific audience. The students should understand that technical communication usually has a pre-determined purpose.

The various aspects of verbal communication and their significance in professional presentations should also be explained. Students must understand the creative characteristics of language. They must be introduced to different levels of communication that takes place, especially in an organizational set up.

The importance of face-to-face communication and the understanding of non-verbal communication complements the knowledge of technical communication. One must have a thorough understanding of gestures and postures while speaking. A knowledge of common body signals will be an important lesson of a life time. Students can have interesting activities to understand body language. Some common actions like nail biting, lip licking, foot tapping, rubbing one eye, scratching the head during a technical presentation, instantly conveys the message that the person is nervous. Similarly, vocal features play a great role in communication, whether technical or non-technical. Students should be given lot of practice in using their voice. They should understand the various aspects of voice like volume, tone, pitch, articulation, voice modulation etc. Oral forms of communication like face-to-face communication, seminars, meetings and conferences are as important as written forms of communication like research papers, brochures, bulletins, newsletters etc.

An important aspect of professional communication is report writing. When a student joins an organization to work after completion of his studies, his job usually demands that he generated a lot of reports on a regular basis. Some times he may have to prepare the report himself, or review the reports made by other staff. Hence it is important for him to know the purposes or the objectives for writing various types of reports. The purpose could be as brief as a laboratory report or as lengthy as an annual report. He also needs to understand the characteristics of a report. Once the importance of the report for its factual details, relevance and objectivity is understood, one realises why it is an important tool for communication across organizations. The student should also be familiar with the different types of reports. Various examples of reports, oral and written, taken from everyday life situations, should be discussed in the classroom. The student should be given a situation and asked to generate various types of reports. He should have the ability to invent necessary details and make a report. He should also have the ability to distinguish and understand the significance of an oral or written report. The student should be able to spell out, in clear times, the purpose of his report. He should also understand the various formats of a report and choose the most appropriate one, depending on his purpose. Prewriting is an important exercise for report writing. It helps in organizing the report well. The strength of a report is in its structure.

A well-defined structure gives a lot of clarity to the report. The use of visual aids like tables and charts should be done carefully.

It is important to define technical reports and discuss their characteristic features. The different purposes of reports, whether it is a project report, a lab report, annual report, inspection report etc should be clearly explained. The characteristics of a good report should include precision, factual details, relevance and reader-orientation, whatever be the type of report. The importance of report as a basic management tool should be emphasized. Students should understand the need for pre-writing to organize their thoughts. One of the objectives of the course should be to give the students the criteria for classifying the reports and give them practice to prepare routine reports. The steps to collect data for writing the report and their significance in different situations should also be introduced. It is important to make the students understand how sources are different from methods of data collection. Details of different methods of data collection should be given to the students. Questionnaire is an important tool for survey. Students must understand and practice the principles governing the preparation of questionnaires. They must be given adequate practice for making questionnaires. They should also be acquainted with different types of illustrations for providing data.

The process of communication can face many barriers. These barriers could be because of various reasons like differing backgrounds, limited vocabulary, cultural variations, poor listening skills or when there is noise in the channel. In an organizational set up, barriers could be because of fear of superiors. All these will hamper the effectiveness of communication. One must first identify the barrier that's hampering effective communication and try to deal with it patiently. Learning to effectively communicate is like learning to drive. Watching the best power-point presentation on driving a car will not teach the learner how to drive one. One needs to practice to get over the fear. Similarly, Communication can become effective only when it is practiced regularly.

Students should be familiarized with the structure, layout and form of different types of letters like business letters, sales letters, claim letters etc. Thorough practice in writing these is also required. Similarly most students tend to be ignorant about how to write a simple notice. In many organizations a notice is a very effective form of disseminating information. Students should be clear about all the important details that a notice should reflect. Similarly making an agenda for an important meeting should also be taught to the students. They must know how to list out various items of the agenda according to the order of importance. The format should be clearly understood. Knowing how to record the minutes of a meeting is also important. The minutes need to be factual and every bit of the discussion should be noted down carefully. There is no room for error here as minutes of a meeting is a documental evidence and has tremendous value, especially in the court of law.

The elements of effective writing should be introduced as part of the technical writing course. The students should be familiar with the elements of effective writing and understand what constitutes a good writing style and how to attain that skill. The basic guidelines for effectiveness should be well understood. These include using specific, concrete words, avoiding clichéd expressions and too much of jargon, and avoiding redundant words and foreign phrases. They should be given ample practice of revising the ineffective sentences and paragraphs. The principle steps of precise writing should be well understood by giving them practice in writing concisely and precisely.

Technical communication that is taught to undergraduate engineering students has its limitations. Students usually spend a semester or four months learning it. Considerable improvement can be seen in their presentation of technical papers, participation in group discussions, team presentations etc, by the end of the semester. But, ideally, it should be a component in some form or the other throughout their course. The students have a lot to gain. The theory and practical aspects need to blend well. Normally students do the theory part well, but when it comes to implementing what they learnt, there is tremendous scope for improvement. Language and expression become a big barrier. For the successful use of language, "putting into practice" needs to be done at every stage. Lot of activities should be designed to make the class room teaching effective. In India, where students are not native speakers of English language, a conscious effort has to be made continuously by the student as well as the teacher to use English effectively for all communication purposes. The temptation to shift to the native language whenever there is a block in communication, owing to the inability to find the appropriate word, happens often. The comfort derived by the student in communicating in the vernacular language cannot be denied. Students often speak in a language that is a mix of English and the local language or their mother tongue. Sometimes they also come up with versions of English that has good doses of local flavour. They Indianise English by adding *ed* or *fied*. at the end of a word in the local dialect or a vernacular word.

Students are increasing comfortable in using short text messages. They use a lot of short forms and abbreviations in their communication with their friends through their mobile phones. In this kind of communication, there is absolutely no importance given to the right use of spelling, grammar or syntax. Sometimes, this style of writing penetrates into their formal style of writing also. Very often, they tend to ignore the thin line that separates a formal piece of writing from the informal. In an organization where the hierarchy is loosely structured and where the boss is friendly with the subordinates, the problem of formal and informal communication getting mixed up is common. This can happen in both verbal and written communication. With a lot of organizations having relatively young people as their work force, the flow of communication and the networks of communication have undergone a drastic change. There is a complete shift in the way a youngster communicates with his counterparts as well as his boss. Though informality in the office atmosphere pulls down communication barriers to a great extent, it is still desirable to follow a formal pattern in written communication.

IV. WAY FORWARD

Technical communication should be supported by or offered along with soft skills and personality development modules to serve its purpose effectively.

Engineering colleges and technical universities tend to focus only on technical communication components. A literature component will enable them to feel the language, enjoy it and express themselves better. Language skills alone might not help in the overall personality development. Some technical universities offer literature courses as electives which is ideal. Apart from literature courses, courses in journalism and theatre arts will be of great help to students to hone their skills. Courses in Theatre will be helpful in many ways. It will introduce the students to the techniques of voice training and practice. It will help them in their interactions with others and make them more confident. Exercises in speech delivery will give them practice in content writing, script writing, tonal effects, voice control, emoting, dialogue delivery, maintaining the right posture etc. Participation in writing and enacting a monologue or a one-act play will teach the students all the aspects of body language and team work.

The modern trend is to look at the factors that contribute to the speaker's fear or hesitation that he might commit a mistake while speaking English. Once the fear factor is removed, the aspirants learn like a parrot that pecks words. This might serve the immediate purpose of the organization where the training methodology is need-based, but it might not survive the purpose of English. Learning a language the way a native speaker speaks is often difficult. Sometimes, even those who do not know reading and writing might speak, whereas for learning English the grammar-way, one should know reading and writing which one learns in schools and colleges. However, there is no foolproof mechanism to remove the element of fear/hesitation while learning the language.

Technical writing should be made a part of the curriculum not only for the vocational and engineering students but also for high school students. Writing, editing and presentation skills should be integrated with English studies. Reasonable level of grammar, word building and abstracting skills will boost the confidence of learners as they continue with their higher studies. Team presentations and group discussions which are currently taught in vocational and engineering colleges should start from high school itself.

Technical Writing in the present scenario, may or may not require the involvement of teachers. When a teacher is involved in the learning process, the human element is predominant, but when learning is online/through internet, or through language labs, there is minimal/ negligible involvement of human element. The former calls for a classroom for developing Technical Writing skills, ideally with electronic interactive boards in place of blackboard and chalk-pieces, which ensures less stress and increased impact and efficacy. Establishment of the language labs needs an environment that is sound-proof, air-conditioned, with power back-up etc. While the language should be practiced through interactive skills, its basics should be learned in the classroom. Many learners in India do not have access to sophisticated methodologies because it has monetary implications not affordable by schools or educational institutions. Maximum students from poor or middle income families learn in the vernacular medium, in government schools which may not have these facilities.

Teaching is for children as training is usually for adults. Most of the unemployed candidates are adults and they are not taught, but trained, in the sense that they are convinced how it will benefit them as they are self-directed. These learners have turned to learning when they felt a need for learning and are self-actualized to learn.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, English for technical writing in a country where English is a foreign language is something that needs to be taught/trained from the early period of their schooling. Restructuring of courses and integrating engineering and humanities will greatly help in improving the communication skills of students. English should be taught in such a way that it trains students for life and not just for careers in industry. Inter-disciplinary approach might prove useful in learning English as a means to communicate effectively. It is important to understand the underlying dynamics of the language. Serious reforms must be brought into the way language teaching is approached in many universities. The right kind of resources that would complement and enhance language learning endeavours should be made available. Every major institution dedicated to scholastic education should realize that language is the root of all communication across the world. It is necessary to identify major areas that need to be tackled academically, in terms of designing the right kind of courses. Because of the industry needs, language courses are heavily sought after, in all countries. Extensive teacher training is also a major requirement. Competent individuals who are willing to push the boundaries of theory and who can effectively focus on the practical use of language should be encouraged to take up teaching. In spite of globalization, there are large parts of India that still believe in the traditional system of learning. Attempts at bringing in change in the mind set of people and policy makers is still not totally successful. It is important for students to be exposed to new ways of thinking and learning. The perception that everything that is taught should have immediate functionality might not always work. Whether human element with a class-room type of environment or non-human element with dependence more on systems, equipment & related environment is more apt for learning, is still debated inconclusively. But a systematic approach to learning English is indispensable for the learners of technical writing in a country where English is a second or third language.

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