

Building Employability Skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) Classroom in India

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ABSTRACT

Language tasks related to employment are now a main part of the language teaching or training syllabus. Job search is only one part of this process. Newer to the mix is the focus on employability skills. These are the skills needed to keep a job and thrive in a workplace. Though the growing importance of employability skills in higher education cannot be denied, it is only recently that these skills been made explicit in module descriptions, particularly in India. The main aim of the paper is to identify the need of embedding these skills into every programmes and modules. This paper describes the primary employability skills and discusses how these skills can be taught in an ESL classroom. It also presents some activities that can be used by the instructor to hone the employability skills of the learners. The paper uses a descriptive methodology to illustrate how employability skills can be taught in classes. Its main implication is that the integration of employability skills in teaching and learning at higher education can assist students in developing these skills together with their areas of expertise for future employment purposes.

KEYWORDS: employability skills, higher education, practical learning, ESL

Introduction

With the growth of civilization and the development of countries, education has become the focus area. In this sector, importance is now being given to an education which is sustainable in nature. The English language has today become the language which leads to empowered minds and people. In a country like India, English is seen as a language associated with economic empowerment and development (Sankar and Kumar, 2016; Sivaranjani and Ajitha, 2016). This is true of other developing and underdeveloped countries as well. In such a scenario language tasks related to employment are now a main part of the language teaching or training syllabus. While we find applicants and students possessing a certain degree of expertise in their area of study, they lack the employability skills (Singh, 2019; India Today, 2019; Mangala and Manisha, 2018).

Employers in every sector emphasize the need for trained work force with certain fundamental skills. Insufficient supply of quality skills is one of the main impediments to further economic growth in India. A decade back the Indian economy has grown more than 8% including the year of the unprecedented financial crisis in 2009. In 2018-19, the growth has been at 7.5%. However, the skill shortage is still one of the major constraints in most industries in India. A report, 'Skilling India', has stated that only 2.3% of India's workforce received some formal skills training (World Bank, 2017). Organizations are using different modes of recruitment to attract

quality talent to their work force. For example, recruiting students directly from engineering colleges is one of the most popular methods (Harvey, 2000). The perceived notion is that the graduates from engineering colleges have good subject knowledge (Knight, 2002). Organizations need graduates who understand their role and have practical skills to carry out their work. These graduates are professionals responsive to technical, technological, cultural, social and economic changes and can work flexibly and intelligibly. Nair (2018) in her paper outlines the problems faced in India's job market and one problem is the employability skills of the students. In support of this, the Founder Chairman and MD of The Head Hunters and also the CEO and co-founder, Mettl, an assessment and skill-measurement company, have stated that educational institutes have produced graduates who lack the ability to work on-site and therefore, there exist a mismatch between what is required by the industry and the available resources (Nair, 2018). Consequently, a National Skill Development Coordination Board (NSDCB), coordinated by the Planning Commission was established by the Prime Minister of India in 2008, with the aim of skilling 700 million people by 2022. Individual states in India are also coming up with programs and policies to curb this problem. However, the success of these efforts has to gain a conscientious effort and active involvement from all parties concerned (Wheebox and PeopleStrong, 2014). Thus, efforts to ensure partnership between the source of skills, such as colleges and student, and the target industries or corporate are seen as necessary. It is imperative to understand the employment expectations so that informed plans for future can be prepared.

Thus, the paper discusses the difference in perspective of employers, prospective employees and teachers regarding employability skills and shows the needs for change to meet the demands of the employers. The paper explores the way in which employability skills can be taught in an ESL classroom and also explores the possibilities of assessing such courses. The paper suggests some activities that may be used in ESL classes to build employability skills.

Literature Review

Employability Skills are transferable skills which makes a populace employable. They are needed for success at the work place and are lifelong skills (Deloitte, 2014; CAFÉ, Durham College, 2019). The 'Employability Skills for the Future' (ACCI/BCA, 2002) report has identified eight employability skills: communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organizing, self-management, learning and technology (Down, Catherine, 2003). Among these foundational skills are those which are related to communication, personal and interpersonal relationships, problem solving, and management of organizational processes (Lankard, 1990). Some UK based companies like Nokia, Siemens, BP, Accenture, Semta, and Cogent list top 10 employability skills as communication and interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, self-motivation, ability to work under pressure, organizational skills, team work, ability to learn, numeracy, valuing diversity and negotiation skills. These skills have also been listed by Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Network (STEMNET). The employability skills are somehow related to the language competence. This is due to the fact that the non-technical skills and competencies have always been an important part of effective and successful participation in the workplace. Employability Skills are already an inherent part of all components of training packages and units of competency. Their inclusion, or embedding as it is sometimes referred to, highlights what these particular skills are in the context of

particular job roles. The World Economic Forum in its 2018 report refers this as ‘Human Skills’ which include customer service workers, sales and marketing professionals, training and development, people and culture, and organizational Development (WEF, 2018). At present, employability skills have been given focus particularly in the development of the personal and interpersonal skills. These skills are explicated as follows.

Communication is possibly the most prevalent of all the employability skills. Speaking, listening, reading and/or writing are central to all work practices and there are very few examples of units of competency which do not contain at least some aspects of communication (Cleary et al, 2006:14). Communication takes many forms to contribute to successful work outcomes, and may include: a) Creating documents – everything from maintenance documentation to in-depth research on the competition; b) Reading and interpreting documentation – this can include staying up to date with the latest policies and procedure manuals, or interpreting complex tender documentation; c) Oral communication – such as how to convey your message, or more complex skills like empathizing or persuading that may be required for interactions with staff or customers; d) Information Communication Technology – the central role that technology plays in workplace communication; e) Language – this includes competency in English, or other relevant languages, as well as an ability to communicate effectively in environments where there are those who speak English as a second language; and f) Numeracy – the ability to work with numbers and understand mathematical concepts is a skill area, much like language, which underpins an individual’s ability to communicate.

Teamwork recognizes the importance of relationships with others in the workplace. There are very few tasks and roles which occur in isolation, but even these require at least some degree of relationship with customers and/or supervisors or an understanding of how the work being done contributes to an overall goal or target. Some of the teamwork skills learners may need to develop include: a) supporting team members – this typically needs to be done by supervisors as well as team members. Supervisors may need to monitor worker progress and provide assistance where necessary, and team members may need to see where there are bottlenecks in the work and help each other out; b) contributing to positive team dynamics is a responsibility for all team members, and includes dealing appropriately with conflict; c) understanding one’s relationship and accountability to other team members; d) working with people who vary in their age, gender, race, religion or political persuasion; e) working autonomously in the interest of shared team goals and objectives (Cleary et al., 2006:16).

Problem solving includes processes to identify problems, for example, risk management and quality assurance. Some of the ways in which problem solving is used in the workplace are: a) In contingency situations – when staff are required to identify and resolve non-standard situations which may arise; b) using troubleshooting equipment – including standard checks and maintenance as well as addressing breakdowns that may occur in the course of use; c) providing customer service – working with customers to resolve problems and provide options for complaints resolution; d) for planning, strategy and resource allocation, which contribute to the avoidance or resolution of contingency situations; d) for continuous improvement processes – an important means to ensure that key lessons are learned and integrated following workplace

problems and e) research, which is a problem solving process in and of itself, and can also contribute to effective resolution of problems. (Cleary et al., 2006: 18)

Planning and organizing reflects an individual's ability to manage the tasks and timelines which define their work roles. This has also been identified as one of the employability skill areas which benefit the most from on-the-job experience. Planning and organizing can apply to: a) time management – an individual's ability to meet time based requirements and deadlines; b) project management skills – an ability to manage multiple tasks and resources simultaneously; c) planning, strategy and resource allocation – participating in and leading processes which contribute to the establishment of key directions for the organization ; d) achieving goals and targets – an ability to complete the tasks assigned; e) research – collecting, analyzing and organizing information to inform subsequent work processes and f) scheduling – tasks, rosters or delivery (Cleary et al., 2006: 22).

Self-management refers to an individual's ability to manage themselves in relation to the outcomes expected of their work role. Individuals must increasingly take responsibility for their own performance. The ways in which they do this can include: a) assessing and evaluating their own performance to identify areas for improvement; b) identifying and seeking out appropriate development opportunities, both internal and external to the organization; c) eliciting feedback, as appropriate from peers, subordinates and superiors; d) knowing the organization, the work role, and its limits of authority and e) working safely (Cleary et al., 2006: 24)

Methodology

The study is based on a critical analysis of the course content used at the higher education level. The secondary sources have been used to describe the employability skills. Data from reports and articles have been used to support the discussion in this paper. Discussions with employers and employees were used to figure out the skills. There was an informal discussion with English language teachers. Discussions with teachers raise another issue and that is of assessment. In most colleges and institutes in India, the focus is on written work and classes have more than a 100 students. The major problem here is one of assessment because such a course needs various modes of assessment; the written form will be insufficient.

Findings and Discussion of the Study

The researcher got inputs from language teachers across the country regarding employability skills and the necessity to teach these skills and how to assess students for these skills. These inputs were informally collected during meetings and discussions. Majority of the teachers were of the opinion that these skills need to be imparted to graduates so that we get a skilled workforce but surprisingly 50% of them equated employability skills with good communication skills. Of the eight skills laid down by ACCI/BCA, the teachers rated them in decreasing order of importance in the following manner: a) communication; b) learning; c) teamwork; d) planning and organizing; e) problem solving; f) initiative and enterprise; g) self-management and h) technology (Callan, 2003: 10-12).

This is not surprising since the syllabus for the subject of employability skills stipulated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Government of India, gives paramount importance to English Language course and communication skills by allocating 25 hours out of 110 hours in a course (<http://files.hostgator.co.in/hostgator178796/file/syllabusemployabilityskills.pdf>).

Similarly other courses on employability skills give the utmost importance to communication skills and skills like planning and organizing, initiative and enterprise are treated as secondary with just few hours being devoted to them. At most colleges and universities, a course on employability skills is treated as being similar to 'functional English'. In such courses, the maximum focus is given on writing and reading in which reading is limited to literary readings such as extracts from plays, prose or poetry. Some institutes of higher education have now given focus to Information Technology (IT) skills in their syllabus and to entrepreneurial skills. However, skills such as planning, self-management, and problem solving are yet to find a place in the curriculum.

On the other hand, the views of students are slightly different. They do not negate the importance of communication skills and English language since quite a number of students need help with these skills. The emphasized on the fact that other skills should also be dealt in the classroom and language usage can be practiced while learning or teaching the skill set involved. Students from technical institutes who have joined the work force opine that the teaching of LSRW skills in an English language class can be integrated with different activities which may lead to developing or inculcating employability skills among the students. According to the students, the order of importance for each skill should be as follows: a) self-management; b) technology; c) planning and organizing; d) problem solving; e) communication; f) learning; g) teamwork and h) initiative and enterprise.

Gaps in the Indian Context

As far as India is concerned, the teaching of English as a Second language is given of paramount importance. With changing times, institutes and universities have made their syllabuses contemporary but the focus lies on communication skills and functional English. The maximum level that institutes have gone to is to integrate media literacy with the functional English programme but there is no focus on what employers label as employability skills. Blom and Saeki (2011) policy research working paper '*Employability and Skill set of Newly Graduated Engineers in India*' shows the demand from the employers which entail a set of 26 skills under three different factors: core employability skills, professional skills and communication skills. The following table outlines this:

Table 1: Skills grouped into Three Factors

Factor 1 (Core Employability Skills)	Factor 2 (Professional Skills)	Factor 3 (Communication Skills)
Integrity	Identify, formulate, solve	Written communication

	technical problems	
Self-discipline	Design a system or process to meet desired needs	Design and conduct experiments, analyse and interpret data
Reliability	Use appropriate tools or technologies	reading
Self-motivated	Apply knowledge of mathematics, science and engineering	Communication in English
Entrepreneurship skills	Customer service skills	Verbal communication
Teamwork	Knowledge of contemporary issues	Technical skills
Understands and takes directions for work, assignments	creativity	Basic Computers
Willingness to learn	Advanced computers	
Flexibility		
Empathy		

(Source: Blom and Saeki, 2011: 12)

The authors have conducted a survey with employers in which employers have given the highest rating to core employability skills followed by communication skills and professional skills. The authors are of the opinion that the employers think they can train new recruits in engineering skills through in-house training but prefer the graduates to enter the professional world with good command over English and possess excellent communication skills. (Blom and Saeki, 2011: 14-15)

The question then rises is how far do the graduates meet these demands. Blom and Saeki have focused on the engineering graduates. The findings reveal that 64% of employers are somewhat satisfied with the quality of engineering graduates' skills. The other figures show that the dissatisfaction level is corroborated by other studies on skills of the Indian engineering graduates. For instance, the NASSCOM and McKinsey report (2005) finds that 75% of engineering graduates are not employable by multinational companies (as cited in Blom and Saeki, 2011:19). The paper also shows the skill gaps in all the three factors, the least being in communication skills. English is a skill in demand and institutions are meeting that demand perfectly. However, other skills need to be highlighted and this gap can be filled in ESL classes in which language activities can be integrated towards skill development.

Similar findings are made by Chithra R. (2013) in her paper 'Employability Skills – A Study on the Perception of Engineering Students and their Prospective Employers'. The writer gives a tabular representation of the order of importance that employers and students give to various skills:

Table 2: Top 10 Employability Skills Employers vs Students

	Employers			Students	
Skills	Mean	SD	Skills	Mean	SD
Reliability	4.87	0.88	Basic computer skills	4.78	0.69
Integrity	4.45	0.93	Technical skills	4.75	0.66
Teamwork	4.41	0.88	Use of modern tools	4.73	0.66
Willingness to learn	4.4	0.95	Advanced computer skills	4.71	0.64
Entrepreneurship	4.35	0.86	System design	4.65	0.59
Self-discipline	4.26	0.79	Communication	4.4	0.71
Communication	4.26	0.93	Responsibility	4.2	0.62
Self-motivated	4.22	0.68	Verbal communication	4.11	0.69
Flexibility	4.15	0.9	Application of knowledge	4.1	0.68
Understand/take direction	4.14	0.96	Creativity	4.1	0.77

(Source: Chithra. R., p.531)

In her findings, it was found that the employers gave due importance to behavioural skills whereas students gave importance to technical skills. Top ranked skills like reliability, integrity, teamwork were not in the top ranks of students' rating. This difference in the perception points out the need for creating awareness among the students about engineering employability skills. It is a sad state of affairs not to find employability skills as a part of either the curriculum or the assessment process. The paper tries to make a case for implementing the teaching of these skills in ESL classes and going in for assessment patterns rather than written examinations.

Curriculum Revision

In India, we find that most schools and colleges lack internet facilities and what is promoted is only rote learning for exams. A look at the gaps in India and a look at the demand from the employer, it has become essential to revise the curriculum. Institutes and universities which have

come up with the 'Functional English' course in the 1990s as a stepping stone towards training graduates to gain useful language skills in the classroom yet need to modify their courses. The classrooms are hi-tech but the content is decades old; the curriculum is set and marks are allotted for examination; students are caught in this vicious cycle (Mangala and Manisha, 2018). Stress is needed on other activities which will help hone the employability skills as demanded by the employers. Institutes and universities need to carefully revise their curriculum if they want their graduates to successfully join the work force and gain meaningful employment.

Implementing Employability Skills in Institutes of Higher Education via ESL Classes

This section discusses on how employability skills can be integrated within an ESL class and how learners can become proficient not only in communicating in English but also in using other skills related to 'employability'. Generally in engineering colleges, students take up additional courses in management or managerial skills or entrepreneurship which help them hone their employability skills. The only problem with such elective courses is that they increase the credit hours of the students and may also fail to provide complete knowledge of employability skills. The option available to this stand alone subject model is the embedded model where employability skills are the outcome of learning of a particular course and this is where the ESL classroom has an important role to play.

Activities to promote Employability Skills in ESL classrooms

The following section looks at the teaching strategies that can be used in ESL classroom to foster employability skills. The section gives the strategy/ activity that teachers can use in their classrooms to foster 'employability skills'. Since large classroom is a problem in a country like India, teachers find it difficult to plan and conduct activities in the class and generally an ESL class turns into a lecture room where the teachers speak and the learners hear. To make the ESL class interactive and a class which caters to essential needs teachers need to plan and design their activities. One method of managing such a class is to divide the students into groups of 5-6. This may look daunting to begin with but after initial 2-3 classes, students automatically divide themselves into groups and carry out the activity planned by the teacher who then just facilitates the students in need. Some of the activities to support the delivery and/or assessment of employability skills are as described in this section. As far as communication skills are concerned, teachers can use the following for teaching and assessing students - preparing and presenting written and verbal reports, role plays, simulations, demonstrations, working in groups and communicating with and responding to internal/external clients and customers.

For teamwork, the following strategies can be used - Team or group projects, role plays, group discussion, workplace teams, committees, syndicates, communities of practice and interactive activities.

Similarly, students need to be encouraged to think of solving problems. For this purpose, teachers may use case studies; simulations; investigative projects and research; using various problem solving tools and techniques; problem solving in teams and networks and decision-making activities. As far as initiative and enterprise is concerned, brainstorming activities, designing solutions, creative practices and simulation activities can be used in class.

For focusing students on planning and organizing, teachers need to teach them research and data collection, developing action plans, planning and organizing events, time management activities, goal setting activities and scheduling tasks and collecting and analyzing information. Self-Management has gained an equally important place in today's job world. Students need to be made aware of ways of managing their own selves. Some of the things that can be done are development of portfolios, work plans, using log books to record time management skills and monitor own performance and career planning exercises. Use of reflective journals log books, diaries, mentoring and coaching activities and self-evaluation tools also help in the process of self-learning. Similarly, the students need to be technologically equipped and should know the use of Internet, Intranets, ICT skills to complete activities and also be aware of relevant software, technology and equipment used in the industry.

There are a couple of exercises that may be used to polish the skills mentioned above: For instance: a) You run an ice-cream parlor and feel that your ice-cream is the best. You want to increase your sale. What will you do?; b) You run a coffee shop and your busiest time is in the morning and then in the evening. Another branded coffee-shop is coming up near you. What will you do to retain your customers?; c) Students in your campus require food late in the night (after completing their curricular and co-curricular activities). Design a plan to start night canteen on your campus; d) You have been informed that the PM is coming to your campus in two days' time. What items will your prioritize for his visit? e) Writing blogs; f) creating portfolios; g) making presentations; and h) scheduling meetings.

Assessing Employability Skills

Assessing employability skills is crucial and needs to be addressed in class. A written test with questions on drafting notices or drawing up an agenda, preparing a resume with the cover letter examines only written communication. Oral communication skills and other employability skills go untested. The assessment a teacher selects should clearly describe content that aligns with the skills being taught and should utilize methods that allow students/employees to apply skills in appropriate contexts. The assessment also should support the purpose and intended use of the assessment. Training and/or assessment can occur on the job or in a classroom environment. This location will, in part, determine the assessment and learning approaches. The ultimate goal of assessing employability skills is to determine how well an individual is prepared for work. Assessment results, therefore, should hold predictive value for employers, meaning that an individual's score can accurately predict career readiness.

Workplace based approaches can be particularly useful because of the 'authentic' context in which the employability skills can be demonstrated and applied. In the context of a specific workplace, learners have opportunities to work with a wide variety of tasks, resources, behaviors and personnel unique to the organization.

Classroom based approaches do not have access to the same opportunities as workplace based approaches. Practical case studies, simulations and activities with industry can help to address

the lack of authentic workplace context. Activities can be set in classrooms and exercises should be made as relevant as possible to the work place. Working closely with industry contacts to design activities or even to assist in instruction can be useful ways of ensuring a high degree of relevance to activities.

Flexible or distance learning approaches that combine on-and-off-the-job-activities need to be carefully designed to ensure that activities are made as relevant to learners as possible. Industry experts can be invited to join in online forums and can assist in designing activities specific to industry. Where possible, learners also need to be given opportunities to interact with each other, either online, via telephone, and where possible face to face. Because of the nature of flexible learning, it is also important to ensure that learners are encouraged to take advantage of relationships they have with colleagues, mentors and bosses at their own workplace (Cleary et al.: 52).

Limitations of the Study

The study primarily fulfilled its aim which was to link ESL classroom to developing employability skills. However, further studies need to be done on assessment and also to see whether the desired results have been achieved. More data can be collected to be analyzed within a larger population.

Conclusion

In today's world, it is imperative that institutes and universities give the right amount of focus to all the skills included under the broad category 'employability skills'. The ESL classroom is one place where all these skills can be inculcated into graduates who are ready to enter the work force. Authorities, teachers and employers need to modify the syllabus keeping in mind the need of the students – an important stakeholder. Apart from modifying the syllabus, teachers need to build an array of activities which can be used in classrooms and design the assessment accordingly. A successful implementation of such courses in ESL classrooms fulfils the dual task of improving the communication skills of students who need training and also of imparting skills needed to join the workforce. This paper implicates the need for revising the syllabus in Indian Universities and integrating it with employability skills to bridge the gap competencies between industrials' expectations and the preparation at the university.

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