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Abstract

Communication Skills is of paramount importance in achieving personal as well as professional goals. Especially for engineering students learning, understanding and practice of Communication Skills appears to be imperative to excel in their respective academic, research and professional endeavors. For the teachers involved in teaching this subject there is ample opportunity to impact the process of learning through digital tools. Certainly, IT enabled tools may enable the learning process more interactive, live and conducive for the learners. Since, these tools will serve as learner centered tools to make classroom activities more interesting. At this backdrop, the present paper is an attempt to explore and study sharpening communication skills of engineering students via multifaceted digital tools.

Keywords: Technology, English, Communication Skills, Learners, Social Networking sites, Digital Tools

Introduction

Indeed, technology is proved to be a great boon for contemporary Language teachers. A teacher has to be updated and should be aware about know-how of technology in teaching. These tools of technology may enable the teachers to pass on the instructions, organization of activities and analyzing and evaluating performance of the learners. Thus, these factors transform a stereotype learning process into a vibrant and learning by fun process. In a research conducted by NASCOM it is very striking to note that more than 80% Engineering graduates have average Communication Skills and contrary to this majority of the recruiters look for sound interaction, communication, problem solving and presentation skills. Thus, lack or less knowledge of Communication Skills may put engineering students in jeopardy because most of the Engineering students have dream to embark their career journey with high salary packages in MNC's. This dream could not be converted in reality until, unless the Engineering students start working to horn their Communication Skills. For teachers of English who are working in engineering colleges it is really a daunting task to bring radical changes in terms of communication skills of learners in a quick succession of time but if a teacher is very innovative and techno-savvy then with the help IT enabled tools he/she can make his/her learning more interesting.

Literature Review

Marshall and Cullen (2003) discussed the creation of a digital video resource delivered via the WWW and CD-ROM for the teaching of interpersonal communication skills to distance students involved in a Masters of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) programme. Kinzie (2005) remarked that teachers can use a range of teaching tools such as discussion boards, forums, email, raps, web quests, video and digital photography, e movies, and even mobile phones as tools for delivery of class program. Interactive Education (2006) highlighted that the use of well-designed ICT environments can help pupils grasp abstract concepts such as imagery, literary relations, and morphology. Marc J. Riemer (2007) stated that communication skills are essential components in the education of engineering students to facilitate not just students’
education but also to prepare them for their future careers. Language and communication skills are recognized as important elements in the education of the modern engineer.

Jeanne M. Baugh et al. (2009) explored various techniques that are being used in some institutions of higher Education to insure that communications skills are incorporated into all CIS (Computer and Information System) courses. Pınar Kasapoğlu- Akyol (2010) revealed that educational technology tools helps ESL students to improve their both language and communication skills. They use the technology tools both outside and inside of the classroom to practice English and learn more about writing, reading, speaking and listening skills. Using educational technology tools will help both to the students and to the teachers to be more successful, efficient and practical people in their lives. With 21st century, computers, the Internet and all of hardware and software equipments in our daily lives and they are helping us to save time and connect to the world without leaving our houses or classrooms. Madhavaiah G. et al (2013) examined the use of innovative techniques for teaching English to learners and found novel methods such audio video aids, mimicry, group discussions, dialogue construction, enactment of drama would pave way for learning the language and boost the confidence of the learners.

Chirag Patel (2013) reviewed that the growth of the internet has facilitated the growth of the English Communication and that this has occurred at a time when computers are no longer the exclusive domains of the dedicated few but rather available to many. Multimedia teachings enrich teaching content and make the best of class time and break the “teacher centered” teaching pattern and fundamentally improve class efficiency. Due to large classes it is difficult for the students to have speaking communication. The utilization of multimedia sound lab materializes the individualized and co-operative teaching. Maryam Bahadorfar (2014) found that modern technological tools are much more interesting and provide fun and enjoyable learning, motivating the students, and help them to enhance their language learning in a fruitful way, moreover, these tools help students learn at their own pace and promote autonomy in them. Nawaz and Munian (2015) stated that a prerogative of language teaching is that we can convert any source — an audio file, a video clip, a brochure, a pamphlet, a newspaper and others into material base for class activity.

Research Methodology and Objectives

The study is based on secondary data, secondary data is collected from various websites, journals, news papers and reference books. Literature review has shown prior research work done in this area. This paper makes an attempt to study teaching communication to engineering students through digital tools.

Limitations of the study

This research paper is conceptual in nature and based on discussions made with the teachers who are teaching communication skills as a subject (Theory and Practical) with the help of IT enabled digital tools in their respective engineering colleges located at the Malwa region in the state of Madhya Pradesh, India and it also covers learning experience shared by their learners. In the state of Madhya Pradesh, in the syllabus of B.E. first year, the technical University RGPV Bhopal has prescribed Communication Skills as a subject which involves theory sessions and practical sessions in form of Communication Skills lab.

Teaching Communication Skills to Engineering Students

It is a fact that engineering education requires professional exposure and quality teaching. Engineering students have to develop strong hold on Communication Skills as towards the completion of their degree programme they are supposed to appear in campus drive within the campus or off-campus. Engineering professionals who are proficient in communication skills have a considerable edge over those who have not. Lack of communication skills will certainly make an engineering professional short of resources. The global organizations require professionals who should not only be good at technical skills but also at soft skills as well to cater to these requirements the technical universities of many status including Madhya Pradesh are having its focus on inclusive development of communication skills of their engineering students. The syllabus of Communication Skills mostly slated in first year or second year. The thrust areas which are covered in the syllabus are mostly related to devel-
opment of LSRW. Out of which the major focus is on speaking and writing skills.

The common contents are like importance of communication, presentation skills, body language, public speech, oral and written communication, report and letter writing, debate and group discussion, interview and telephonic conversation and so on. The content is aimed to upgrade communication skills of the learners and make them aware about various varieties of writing skills. Though the syllabus is quite self sufficient yet learners may find it hard to grasp it, especially Hindi Medium students. The broad problematic areas are lack of practice and exposure to English language, poor expressions, limited hours of practice, much more emphasis on theory rather than practicals, traditional teaching methodology, insufficient language teaching facilities, limited resources and etc. on the top of all it is also found that the course of Communication skills is only up to first year level hence students do not find it somewhat relevant to their degree programme.

On the contrary to this it is mostly required third year and fourth year as students are expected to have a pleasing personality and a sound communication background. So as a subject it is often given a step- motherly treatment by the management and other departments and takes it for granted as a non technical subject. Communication Skills as a subject is very useful for the Engineering students as with the knowledge and mastery over this subject, they can hope to do well in other Engineering subjects. It is also a well known fact that classes of communication skills in Engineering colleges are more popular, interesting and less stressful. In order to make Communication Skills classes more meaningful, relevant and activity oriented, a teacher of Communication Skills can apply easily accessible digital tools. These tools may attract the learners to attend the classes with more sincerity and enthusiasm.

**Teaching through Digital Tools**

Technology is ever changing and ever growing. Introduction of technology is not new thing in the domain of ELT allied areas. In Communication Skills too some of the IT enabled tools are being used for a quite period of time but along with the rapid advancement in the technology a teacher should be innovative in judicial use of these tools though the results obtained from using these tools are very promising and encouraging ones. The selection of any digital tool largely depends upon nature and objectives of the topic and background and level of the learners. These tools can be applied on any specific need based activity or with combination of multimedia.

**Mobile Phones**

Mobiles are very fast, powerful, easy and effective mode of communication. Mehta (2012) rightly remarked that mobile devices are very small, smart, portable and comfortable to use. A majority of students and teachers has access to mobile phones. Mobile learning can improve learning by putting students in a real context and transform the process of learning more appealing, motivating, interesting. With proper guidance students can access online English learning resources via cell phones, and they can also take online tests. Students should be provided adequate information to store educational materials such as listening materials or books in their mobile phones.

**Language lab/Communication Skills Lab**

The Language Laboratory/Communication Skills Lab may play a crucial role in the language learning process. Undoubtedly, a digital language lab is value addition. In a well equipped lab, a wide range of language development materials is available for engineering students to practice their latent skills. Mehta and Mehta (2008) found that the language laboratory also offers computer-assisted instructions which provide students a life time opportunity to work with word processing programs, the internet communications network, and language skill development programs. In addition to being a component of regular course work, the language Laboratory is designed to help students to develop their skills at their own pace and in areas of personal interest. Software driven labs are also available to hone latent skills of the learners. These softwares are developed to cater to the growing communication/language requirements of the learners to meet the stiff challenges of the globalized world. Nowadays, there are also laboratories with computers with a connection to the Internet. There is a lot of software available on the market that can be used in the multimedia language laboratory, for example: Renet, Aristoclass, Hiclass, Globarina, Console OCL-908W, BBC Language Learning Software, Auralog: Tell Me More etc.

**Email**

Mehta and Mehta (2010) remarked that E mail is a form of interactive discussion that allows time and
place independence. E-mail also provides a one-to-one or one-to-many communication. Recent developments in telephone and satellite technology make it possible for instructors and learners separated by vast distances to come together in a live, and lively, exchange of information and knowledge. Warschauer, Shetzer, and Meloni (2000) regarded it as the mother of all Internet applications”. Engineering students can be provided class-room assignments related to writing skills as writing paragraph, brief notes and offering feedback. LeLoup (1997) suggested that “foreign teachers and students can integrate e-mail based activities into their curriculum”.

**Video conferencing (VC)**

With high-speed Internet, data transmission and softwares, the quality of Video Conferencing is improving at a very fast rate. VC enables participants to interact with each other using a Web cam. For organizing a successful VC, various tools are available as Skype, ooVoo, iChat and FaceTime or Flash Meeting. An innovative and technology driven English teacher can explore better possibilities for his/her learners to interact with native English speakers and help them in understanding cultural of others. Webinars are also gaining popularity amidst the learners; through this unique facility they can have a wide platform to explore their communication skills.

**Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)**

CALL uses the computer to teach language. The language course materials are already fed into the computer and are displayed according to the features available in the system. Dalton (2005) opined that computer/internet driven Language games and activities do not only provide a framework for reviewing existing language but also be used to explore and acquire new language. CALL may be fruitful in enhancing performance of the learners.

**Podcasting**

Podcasting is a powerful means of publishing audio programs through the Internet. Podcasts are audio and video programs that can be “subscribed” online. Podcasting is beneficial in the integration of audio files that can be played inside and outside of the classroom. For the engineering students, it offers an easy access to “authentic” listening sources. Its use at the nascent stage yet there are already a number of podcasts devoted to English/Communication learning as ESLPod, English Teacher John Show Podcast, English Feed. Communication Skills teachers can develop listening comprehension exercises based on Pod Casting.

**Audio Books**

Audio books are popularly known as talking text books. They are considered as a great resource for engineering students as to build their hold on listening, especially listening to the language spoken at different speeds, comprehension skills and to improve pronunciations. They enrich learning new vocabulary and use of specific grammar skills when speaking, reading and writing.

They allow learners to read slowly as to participate in class activities.

**Satellite Channels and Internet**

Satellite Channels and Internet can be incorporated in communication skills classes. Judicious use of satellite channels and internet can make learning process more live and interesting. For smooth viewing/working of these modern technology driven language learning tools, a separate hall/room or lab can be provided/installed. Satellite channels of UGC/IGNOU and other premiere institutes and universities may be useful for engineering students for live interaction with panel of experts. Similarly, internet is a treasure house for learning, practicing and improving communication skills. Online courses/programmes/softwares/coursewares are available in large quantity just a click away from the learners. A learner can easily enroll himself/herself for such courses which can be easily accessible on 24X7 bases from any corner of the globe. Moreover, in India, Ministry of HRD under its National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL) offers E-learning through free online courseware courses/programmes in Engineering, Science and humanities streams along with video/audio courses. iTunes University has over 175,000 free educational audio and video files available on internet and includes lectures, podcasts, lessons, videos, and audio books that can be downloaded at no cost.

**IPods**

The iPod offers engineering students contextual support along with iPod screen. IPods along with Pod Casting could be very fruitful in improving listening skills of the learners. IPod has turned out to be a very user friendly device amongst students of all ages and at all the levels. Students can use iPod to access digital media such as music, videos, and photos which may be related to communication skills.

**Blogs/ Twitter/ Whatsapp/Facebook/Google+/Instagram/YouTube/Flickr/Skype-Social Networking Sites**

As per NSBA (2007) survey, 96% of the students...
with online access using social networking technologies, and on average they spent 9 hours per week chatting, blogging, and visiting online communities. An Internet-based weblog, also known as a blog, is essentially a homepage managed by a writer. Pinkman (2005) found that blogging can be communicative and interactive when participants assume multiple roles in the writing process, as writers who write and post, as readers or reviewers who respond to other writers’ posts, and as writer-readers who, returning to their own posts, react to criticism of their own posts. Readers in turn can comment on what they read, although blogs can be placed in secured environments as well.

The 140-character microblog, Twitter offers a wide range of learning stuff to engineering students. It may be very useful in improving note taking/making skills, precise writing, chatting/ brisk communication and group discussion. Twitter may also enable the learners to clarify their doubts. One can choose the best words to communicate with others. It brings clarity and conciseness in ones communication. It enables the user to read a variety of short messages on a myriad of subjects. Thus, one can learn new words, phrase, and jargon. LearnEnglish_BC, BBCle, Cambridge Words, English247 are namely a few very useful Twitter accounts to improve learners’ communication. Similarly, WhatsApp can be used to share educational and learning resources and a teacher can create a broad based discussion on many subjects. Students can have discussion and thus they have a plethora of opportunities to expand their ideas and can improve their basic skills in the language learning process.

Facebook offers an opportunity for its users to share information and model their social networks online. Facebook has popular features like as: personal profiles, status updates, networks (geographic regions, schools, and companies), groups, applications and fan pages. FB is regarded as the most popular platform for online social networking. In 2007, the British Council conducted market research into how the Internet has affected the preferred learning styles of young people wanting to learn English around the world and found that if teachers are to remain relevant and effective, then they need to use ‘learning technologies’ to help students reach the world outside the classroom. Through facebook, engineering students can improve their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. They can post their speech in form of audio and video as well, write their views in form of a poem/story/paragraph/comment/essay/remark, can listen to audios of native speakers and read various information. Godwin-Jones (2008) viewed that tools and platforms such as FB enhance communication and human interaction can potentially be harnessed for language learning. LinkedIn is a very popular social networking site for professionals and helps in connecting with other professionals. Through LinkedIn one can improve business communication and upload one’s profile. It enables engineering students to exchange messages, read the response of others and reply accordingly. Google+ helps the learners to remain in constant contact with family and friends and they can be put into different categories as well. Instagram may be very beneficial for the learners to follow two types for language learning process: native speakers, and other learners. Through it one has a unique option to upload video content.

YouTube is commonly known as video-sharing website. The students can upload, share and view videos via this multifaceted site. It involves viewing and listening of videos, reading the comments posted in English, It contains numerous interactive and very effective communication skills based videos/presentation that can be played online and downloaded freely in short span of time. Flicker may be very useful in developing imagination, visualization and explanation. It helps building contact with people by sharing photographs and short videos. The students can put photographs clicked by them, can find friends’ photographs, leave a comment for them, or can find groups on subjects of their area of interest. Different groups are available based upon different categories such as countries, hobbies and animals.

Skype is a software generated application that helps users to make voice calls over the Internet. Skype may be used to teach English online. Wu (2005) opined that Skype is a relatively newly emerging technology and the potential application of it to improve language and literature. Video conferencing and sharing of files with the students are also possible. For development of students’ vocabulary, its features like sharing photographs with students to define a word, chat tool, online games and so on and so forth. Skype facilitates the learners in their daily conversation skills and listening skills.

Quick Link Pen/ Quicktionary/ Digital library
Quick Link Pen enables the engineering students to store printed text and Internet links. It offers them
a great help in transferring the data to computers and helps to search the meaning of the word from an inbuilt dictionary. Quicktionary which looks like a pen facilitates the learners to scan the word and understands its definition and provides translation on LCD screen. Digital libraries have their services through internet. They can work as a treasure house for the learners as they have a huge collection of digital objects that can include text, visual material, audio material, video material stored as electronic media formats as well.

**Enounce and Sound-Editor**

IT driven Enounce and Sound-Editor tools also appear to quite user friendly for the engineering students as to with the help of these tools they can adjust their speech rate of listening materials and monitor visual depictions of mouth and tongue movement for better and effective pronunciation.

**Digital Game Based learning (DGBL)**

Digital games may be very effective learning tool. It motivates the learners to learn and improve their problem-solving skills. Tablet-based educational games enhance classroom interaction and drive students to take active part in classroom activities. These games may emerge as very beneficial for the users as they feature strong narratives via a range of rich-media types like as text, audio, video and animation.

**Model Classroom Activities**

Following are suggested classroom activities to bring IT driven digital technology in Communication Skills Classroom as:

**Activity- I: A teacher can use Facebook for sharpening writing skills of the learners. On line statement on any topic can be given as English as International Language and the learners can be instructed to express their views and expand the topic. Feedback can be provided individual bases or may in group or in general manner. Errors/mistakes can be pointed out and same can be rectified through chat-room.**

**Activity-II: Mobile/Smart Phones can also be used by an innovative communication skills teacher. One can instruct the learners to shoot a small clip through their respective mobile/smart phones on any topic/story/incident/event/person/place of 5/10 minutes. Some topics may suggest by the instructor as My Favourite Tourist Place/Spot, Garden of your house/city/town/street, My college/School Canteen/Hostel/Sports ground etc. Later on after giving this assignment, a teacher can ask them to present their respective clip through LCD/Smart Class Room and narrate such information. This activity can be organized in groups/peers/individually.**

**Activity-III: The teacher can advise the learners to go through YouTube videos based on memorable speech addressed by great personalities and the learners may be asked to listen them carefully and pay special attention on pronunciations of the native speakers and later on the learners will be asked to deliver their speech based on the similar topics. Video recording of such speech can be done as to improve their speaking skills.**

**Conclusion and Suggestions**

Communication skill is imperative for becoming a successful professional in 21st century. Undoubtedly, communication skills classes can be made more live, interactive and interesting by adopting and implementing IT enabled digital tools. Using appropriate and need based technology would definitely helpful for the learners and teachers to accomplish their set objective(s). By installing a techno-savvy digital classroom, all the above discussed tools can be managed, adopted and applied in the Communication Skills classes for augmenting IT enabled activities amidst the engineering students. With these user friendly gadgets/tools they can connect with the rest of the world and improve their communication and can practice in more meaningful manner. Sometimes, traditional classroom appears to be redundant in facilitating adequate exposure and suitable platform to the learners. With these tools, one can inspire students’ positive thinking and communication skills in social milieu.

In such circumstances, IT oriented devices should be used by students and teachers in order to break the monotony and developing language teaching and learning activities in a salubrious environment. But there is always a line of caution in over/under use of technology based devices. A teacher should become familiar with to be applied tools and undergo an in-depth training programme on application of these tools. IT enabled tools should only be applied when these are really required for better understanding and effective teaching-learning process. While using these tools, there is always unknown fear of network security and viruses so due cyber security and an-
ti-virus measures should be ensured well in advance. Easy and user friendly accessibility of the learning materials and information should be given top most priority. Still, barring a few technical hiccups, IT enabled digital tools can be used effectively in Communication skills classroom with ample knowledge on the part of teachers and judicious use by the learners. With the continuous growth of technology, it is hoped that in future too, the use of IT enabled teaching of communication skills will be further developed and gained popularity. The research works carried out on the use of IT enabled tools in the arena of Communication Skills/English language indicated that the students those who are more familiar and use technology in their learning have a higher level of comprehension, learning efficiency, keen interest in their work, have greater confidence in their abilities and develop higher levels of self-esteem than to those students who do not.

**Implication of the Study**

The results/discussions of present research study can be implied to make teaching-learning process of communication skills proactive, innovative, objective oriented, learner centred, interesting and interactive especially in the gamut of engineering colleges where learners are required to hone their skills for better career prospects.

**Future Scope for Research Study**

It is quite early to conclude that IT enabled digital tools are the only way to make communication skills classes live, interesting and effective. Hence, more empirical research can be undertaken to evaluate and analysis the impact of IT enabled digital tools on teaching of Communication Skills to the students of Applied Science/Management/Arts/Non-professional programmes across the globe.

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**Figure 1: Model Proposed For Effective Application of IT Enabled Digital Tools. Source: Developed by the Authors on the basis of Literature Review**

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