Teachers’ Perceptions of English Language and Communication Skills of Commerce Undergraduates

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Abstract

Using interview as the research tool, this small qualitative study investigated the English teachers’ perceptions of the language and communication skills of commerce undergraduates studying in different constituent colleges of the University of Delhi (DU). An interview schedule comprising 16 open-ended questions was designed and six teachers were purposively selected for two focus group interviews. Results indicate that teachers perceived their students to be lacking in basic English language as well as communication skills and suggested major modifications in the prescribed English for the Business Communication paper. Some significant findings include teachers’ emphasis on conducting needs-analysis of stakeholders, revising the curriculum regularly, introducing interactive learning materials and adopting innovative methods of teaching and evaluation.

Keywords: qualitative study, communication skills, focus group interview, needs-analysis

Introduction

With the growing popularity of English as the lingua franca of international business (Charles, 2007), there is an increasing demand for effective English communication skills among graduating students. Today it is widely accepted that well-developed soft skills and communicative competence are imperative in procuring good business employment and achieving long-term career success (Tuleja & Greenhalgh, 2008; Elmuti et al., 2005). According to Navarro (2008, p. 169)
in the contemporary dynamic world of business; communication, interpersonal skills, leadership, negotiation and team-building arguably are as significant as sound understanding and application of analytical management tools. Although traditionally institutions of Higher Education were expected to impart academic knowledge to students; their role in the educational enterprise has undergone a significant change as they are now expected to develop students’ skills for employability too. Morreale et.al (2000) highlight the multifarious role of communication in contemporary society such as in developing the whole person; in improving the educational environment; in bridging cultural differences and in advancing careers and the business enterprise. Thus, they emphasize that the communication discipline “should be viewed as central on college campuses” (p. 2).

Several colleges and universities all over the world have responded to this demand for curricular reform although teachers have been struggling to find effective ways of teaching communication and soft skills (Pittenger et al., 2004). Moreover, as Agarwal & Chintranshi point out, “instructors realize that it is difficult to get students to take business communication classes seriously” (2009, p. 297). Research on perceptions of the teaching faculty reveals the enormous challenges they face while teaching communication-based courses. According to Ruiz-Garrido (2007, p. 54), despite having identified the gap in the English competence of the graduates entering the workplace in Spain, the most difficult task for teachers was to motivate university level students to enhance their English proficiency. Wardrope (2002) specifically investigated “what topics should business communication faculty teach, and how should they prioritize topics within their courses” (p. 62) based on the feedback received from several department chairs in business schools. Chen & Wu’s study (2013) explored university-level business English teachers’ pedagogical strategies in Taiwan. Major findings of their study included teachers’ assessment that students needed to improve their English competence in order to study Business English well for which changes recommended included task-based instruction, case-studies and simulations to enhance students’ analytical and creative skills.

While some studies in India have been conducted on the effectiveness of communication courses for postgraduate students of management or in-service business professionals (Francis, 2013; Agarwal & Chintranshi, 2009; Sultana, 2006) hardly any research has been undertaken to
ascertain what kind of English/Business Communication courses should be offered to students of commerce at the undergraduate level. The researcher’s own experience of having taught English language and communication papers to commerce undergraduates at a premier college in DU sparked in her the desire to carry out a mixed-method study in order to investigate the actual and perceived language and communication needs of commerce undergraduates (Kaushik, 2018). Data were collected from three categories of stakeholders: students, teachers and employers and the present paper presents the qualitative section on teachers’ perceptions from that study.

**Research Questions**

The study aimed at investigating the following questions:

1. How important do teachers consider proficiency in English language and communicative competence in commerce undergraduates to be?
2. What is the perception of the teachers about the language and communication skills of their students?
3. Does the prescribed English for the Business communication paper meet students’ requirements?
4. What are teachers’ recommendations for developing linguistic and communicative competence of the students?

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Interview was chosen as the research tool for accessing English teachers’ perceptions about the communication needs of commerce undergraduates since group interviews, compared to individual interviews, “can help a researcher better in gaining insights into varied opinions simultaneously; can aid in the development of a theme-based discussion and are also timesaving” (Morgan, 2001 as cited in Symon, 2012, p. 66). Since for teachers the context was largely the same (they were all teaching in constituent colleges of DU, teaching the same paper and teaching and evaluating in similar ways) albeit with variations in student profiles and teaching-learning environments, a semi-structured focus group interview could facilitate collection of information from teachers on their beliefs, perceptions and experiences in an effective manner. Two focus group interviews comprising six teachers, five female and one male, were conducted for which teachers were selected purposively from nine
constituent colleges of DU keeping the following parameters in mind: The teacher should have taught students of commerce for a considerable period; she/he must exhibit an understanding of the language needs of students and must be well versed with the prescribed course to meaningfully discuss topics such as curriculum, syllabus, pedagogy, etc. Thus, all the teachers finally interviewed had a teaching experience of more than 15 years. All of them had a background in English literature, with four of them having completed their PhD in disciplines such as Literature, Linguistics and ELT. All the respondents were involved in curriculum designing and syllabus revision activities and demonstrated a deep understanding of the issues raised.

An interview schedule was prepared in advance comprising 16 open-ended questions (see Appendix) based on the research objectives. Both the group interviews were conducted in person and lasted for approximately one hour each. Although the same questions were covered in both the group interviews, the semi-structured exploratory format gave the researcher the freedom to alter the sequence of questions, modify and ask follow-up questions that arose from the context thus giving more room for spontaneity. However, conducting a group interview was quite challenging too. Among three speakers, it was important to let all three get an opportunity to express their views without any one of them dominating the conversation. Moreover, in situations where the respondents disagreed with one another on a particular issue, the researcher had to ensure that her comments did not appear to be biased in favour of or against any respondent.

The researcher was willingly granted the permission to record the interactions and the recordings were personally transcribed by the researcher word for word. After having organized the transcribed data, the researcher analysed the data and referred to her notes to get an overall picture of interviewees’ perspectives. She then carried out a thematic content analysis and some significant findings are discussed below.

Findings:

Importance of English Language Proficiency and Communicative Competence in Students

Teachers unanimously stressed the importance of English language for college students highlighting that competence in English is required for various academic activities such as comprehending lectures, making
presentations, writing assignments, etc. Most of them felt that this was true for undergraduates across disciplines as voiced by one teacher that “the basic requirements for a language or communication class for commerce students are no different from that for others ...Students need to be told no matter how well you do in your core papers, unless you have good language skills you don’t really get far in life.” Moreover, many respondents noted that English language proficiency alone does not make one an effective communicator. The term ‘communication’ is a broader one comprising a vast range of skills such as body language, paralanguage features, etiquette as well as soft skills such as leadership traits, team spirit, conflict resolution, critical thinking, etc. Students, according to the interviewees, clearly needed to hone all of the above.

Teachers emphasized that effective interactive skills are required in every situation. As one respondent elaborated, “English is needed in the social context be it inside the classroom or outside...in college or elsewhere... talking, inquiring, apologizing, congratulating, seeking permission ... you know... there are many examples of situations where you need to communicate with people around you. Social interaction can be made or marred due to communication...” Moreover, teachers collectively underscored that English serves as a link language in the contemporary multicultural scenario so “until and unless you have good communication skills you not only compromise on the choice of organizations available to you...even your career growth remains limited.” On being probed about which LSRW skill is most important for academic and professional purposes, teachers seem to be divided. While some emphasized the importance of spoken skills, others highlighted the significance of writing skills. Effective listening skills at the workplace were also underscored since “only good listeners can be good leaders.” A few teachers discussed the importance of reading skills and emphasized that reading and writing are complementary in nature and one can only be effectively developed in conjunction with the other. Attention was also drawn to the importance of other aspects such as correct pronunciation and proper accent while speaking and correct punctuation while writing.

Teachers’ Perceptions About the Language and Communication Skills of Students

Quite a few teachers noted that DU has an eclectic combination of students coming from English, Hindi and regional medium backgrounds. Thus,
the classroom becomes a heterogeneous space with students having mixed language abilities. Many teachers emphasized how despite several years of schooling, their students lacked even the basic LSRW skills although the students coming from English medium schools fared slightly better than the ones coming from Hindi/vernacular medium schools. One teacher remarked, “Taking care of students with varying levels of linguistic competence in a class size of 50-60 is a huge challenge and that too when one is racing to finish the syllabus.” All the respondents unanimously agreed that the majority of their students displayed severe problems related to language and communication. One teacher explained, “The problem with most of the students is that either they don’t speak or if they do, they can’t express themselves or sustain a conversation.” Drawing attention further to the fact that fluency did not guarantee effective communication, one teacher said, “as far as informal spoken English of my students is concerned there isn’t much problem. However, presentation is a different matter. The moment it is somewhat formal, they find themselves floundering.” Teachers felt that this was true of most of the undergraduates and not necessarily commerce students alone.

As far as reading and writing skills of students were concerned, many teachers felt that compared to students from other disciplines such as Economics or History, their B.Com (H) pupils were quite poor in these core competencies. Most of the commerce students, the respondents reported, were not fond of reading at all and hardly read anything except newspapers. It was also observed that students exhibited reluctance in undertaking writing assignments. Students lacked clarity of thought and organization as illustrated by another teacher who mentioned that although a majority of his students had above average language competence yet they could not write a simple complaint letter because, as he put it, “the thought process is missing. For instance, in a complaint letter, if you only mention what is wrong but do not mention the redressal or the fact that you will follow it up…it is futile…unless you have a complete framework built into communication, it will remain incomplete despite good use of English.”

Another interviewee was rather critical of the impact of mobile phone texting lingo on written communication since, according to her, students felt that “written communication is something that works the way SMSs work” and pointed out students’ use of ‘&’ for ‘and’, ‘becoz’ for ‘because’,
'4' instead of ‘for’ and ‘b/w’ for ‘between’. Quite a few teachers were concerned about students’ inability to think independently as “they are always looking for the right answers and searching for books which will have those answers formulated for them. All right,...uh..., you know, they seem quite unaware of...the idea that you can have an argument...can be creative...that you can actually collaborate on an answer.” Teachers were in agreement that it was pertinent to develop students’ analytical, critical and creative faculties in order to strengthen their communicative competence. Students’ inability to make appropriate use of body language and paralinguistic features during interactions was also discussed.

(In)Effectiveness of the Prescribed English for Business Communication Paper

Teachers strongly critiqued the apparent utilitarian approach to Higher Education and stated that the objective of any paper/course should not be to merely train students to meet the market demands. The focus should be on the holistic development of students for which, all of them felt, exposure to literature was essential. As one teacher stated, “We need to think do we need to give them more of commerce or do we need to give them a sense of life...literature is life represented in different hues. You can also teach them a lot of language skills through discussions on contemporary issues which are so relevant.” Teachers were also critical of the brief and ambiguous manner in which the learning objectives of the prescribed paper had been stated with reading and writing skills prioritized and listening and speaking skills not even mentioned. One teacher pointed out this anomaly stating that “if you don’t have the speaking component, where is communication happening?”

Some teachers perceived the basic flaw of the prescribed paper to be its overt focus on the business world and its activities which the students were not a part of. As one teacher observed, ‘Many things that we teach now are pre-service such as writing business letters, which students will inevitably write once they enter the workplace but now that authentic context is missing and may be the students are not able to cogitate well enough...” Almost all of them were against the idea of exposing students to more business register than what they were getting exposed to through different papers in their course such as Law, Accounts, etc. This was succinctly captured by one respondent when she exclaimed, “What is the point in teaching them jargon when they do not have the
basic English competence?” While discussing the relevance of the books, teachers shared that some of the recommended books had been written by foreign authors whose target learners in business schools, unlike Indian students, have a basic level of language competence. As far as books by Indian authors were concerned, interviewees were critical of some which were, according to them, largely theoretical and “such poor samples in terms of language use—‘beg to differ,’ ‘will be highly obliged,’ ‘thanking you’ etc.” Another teacher added that he accessed actual samples of corporate communication in order to familiarize his students with real communication at the workplace. As he explained, “I’ve been requesting my friends in the industry to share some of the correspondence where they blank out the names and dates...I’ve found that there is a world of difference between the letters or memos we usually find in books and the written communication in the actual world.” Many respondents advocated using authentic materials such as newspaper reports, magazine articles, movie clips, etc. since, according to them, “books become fossilized quickly” and commercial activities keep happening all around us which may fruitfully be used to engage students. It was also pointed out that since English teachers neither have a first-hand experience of the corporate world nor any training in business communication, they may be encouraged to have some industry exposure.

All the teachers unanimously recommended that the lecture mode of teaching be replaced with interactive methods of teaching and learning and the centralized end-term written examination be replaced by other methods of testing since “the written exam primarily tests students’ rote-learning ability.” Another teacher added, “Given a choice, I would prefer to evaluate my students on the things I have taught them...for instance...the process of writing...converting the first draft into the final draft.” Therefore, teachers felt that abiding by the common parameters of evaluation served as a severe limitation as that encouraged the product approach to learning.

Recommendations

Teachers made several significant recommendations and some important ones were as follows. It was suggested that there ought to be clarity of course objectives (which the teachers found missing in the context of English for Business Communication paper) while designing a course: is it an English Language Proficiency course or a Business Communication
course or a blend of both? Moreover, a detailed needs analysis of students must be conducted in order to find their actual and perceived needs for an appropriate curriculum to be designed. Teachers ratified that the English/Communication papers being offered to commerce undergraduates ought to be reviewed on a regular basis since neither the needs of the stakeholders nor the modes of communication remain static. Considering students’ varying levels of English competence, attitudes and learning preferences, teachers made a strong case for a flexible, learner-centric paper with an in-built flexibility which would allow teachers to pitch the topics/activities according to the specific needs of their students. Moreover, interviewees were of the opinion that any English/Communication course designed for students across disciplines should not be directed towards employment alone. Instead, it should provide holistic education in order to prepare students to face real-life challenges. For this, teachers unanimously advocated integration of the literature component. According to them, literary works present fundamental human concerns and reading of literature would help students develop their analytical and critical skills besides exposing them to different linguistic forms and conventions used in writing.

It was also recommended that adequate steps may be taken by authorities to ensure that the ancillary status tacitly accorded to language/communication papers be removed so that students consider them as seriously as they consider their core subject papers. Teachers felt the need for incorporating interesting and interactive learning materials along with innovative methods of assessment such as the portfolio method. They particularly emphasized a balanced evaluation of all the language and communication skills. It was also endorsed that the English for Business Communication paper be practice-oriented and reflective of real business world communication practices for which the use of authentic materials be encouraged. Finally, it was underscored that since most teachers come from an English literature background, they must be oriented to ELT and its interactive methodology. This was aptly explained by a teacher who stated that, “No textbook is ever an answer to the teaching in the classroom. To me it seems like a band-aid for a major disease...it doesn’t work! Unless you train your teachers...it is all in vain.”

The findings of the present study could prove to be useful for curriculum designers in designing need-based language and communication papers
as well as for educators involved in teaching such papers. The above recommendations by teachers regarding materials, teaching methodology and assessment techniques may go a long way in not only enhancing students’ language proficiency and communication skills but also in positively contributing towards their overall personality development.

References


**Appendix: Interview Schedule for Teachers**

1. Comment on the significance of English language for college graduates particularly keeping their workplace needs in mind, including the competencies that are valued and needed the most.

2. In what ways is teaching English to students of Commerce different from teaching students from other disciplines?

3. What are the typical English language related problems that the commerce undergraduates face?

4. Could you spell out the learning objectives and outcomes of the existing English for Business Communication course? To what extent does the current Business Communication paper help students develop their communication skills?

5. Which among the LSRW skills are being actively pursued in the Business English class?

6. How are the workplace English language needs of Commerce students different from their immediate academic needs? Are professional language skills given enough space in the existing paper?

7. Which book(s) do you refer to while teaching business communication?

8. To what extent do the textbooks listed in the reading list meet students’ needs in terms of adequacy, relevance and authenticity?

9. Do you use any supplementary teaching materials? If yes, could you explain the basis on which you select these materials?

10. Do you think that the dominant mode of teaching in most DU colleges is the lecture mode? How do you transact the teaching materials for the Business Communication paper in your class? Please elaborate on the strategies.

11. Are you happy with the way students are evaluated on this paper? If not, what forms of assessment and evaluation will you recommend?

12. What is students’ attitude towards the Business Communication paper as it exists today? If it is not positive, what specific changes would you like to introduce to make students opt for it?
13. Commerce students also study an optional English paper comprising an anthology of literary pieces. How do students respond to that paper?

14. Do you perceive the need for English language materials designed specifically to meet the needs of our commerce students? If yes, please specify what kind of materials you think will be useful?

15. Do you think that English teachers teaching the Business Communication paper at Delhi University need to be trained in ELT/Business Communication as most of them have a literature background?

16. Any other comments or suggestions pertaining to developing effective language skills of college students, particularly B.Com (Honours) students?

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