
Acquisition of Oral Communication Skills in Rural Based Higher Institutions: A Case Study of Tamil Nadu, India.

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ABSTRACT :

Oral Communication Skill has become inevitable in deciding the employability in recent days. Graduates are not as confident in speaking as they are in writing. Acquiring effective Communication (Oral) Skill is a nightmare among rural based graduates unlike urban based graduates. This paper in the light of personal experiences analyses the challenges faced in teaching and learning of Oral Communication Skills (OCS). It also attempts to throw light on how socio-cultural environment influences the acquisition of OCS. This paper finally proposes a few alternatives, including curriculum redesigning to ward off the challenges to acquire OCS.

Keywords: Language Teaching, Oral Communication Skills, Urban and Rural Engineering Students

INTRODUCTION

Today Communication skill is an exclusive discipline in the curriculum of any academic exercise. Robert T. Craig, in his essay "Communication Theory as a Field (1999)," points out that there was no theory as Communication theory in the field of English. But the emergence of globalization has opened an avenue in the field of English with a special focus on communication skills, especially in the developing countries. English language has been used in India for official as well as academic purposes. In the light of the development globally, today, English is not merely a lingua franca but has acquired a new power base. Oral communication skill is inevitably an important factor in deciding a career graph of young graduates. Multinational companies are ready to compromise on grades for effective communication skills. But the acquisition of Oral Communication skill is more a nightmare for the students of rural areas when compared to urban based students. Acquiring this skill is affected by more than one factor viz. socio economic cultural background, students' society, family, peers, and teachers.

EXISTING SCENARIO

Students are taught a set of syllabus designed by the respective universities or institutions which varies from state to state.. English language class focuses more on written work consisting of report writing, memo writing, letter writing, essay and paragraph, leaving little space for oral communication activities. The existing curricula of UG Engineering Programmes and PG Programmes have the combination of academic writing and technical writing in year 1 and year 3. Irrespective of syllabus and the university, there has been no thrust of teaching Oral Communication skill. Teachers are under pressure of completing the

syllabus within the stipulated time and students are under the pressure of passing the exam with good grades relegate oral communication skills to background. However, in recent years there has been more focus on Oral Communication skill for the final year students as a part of preparing them for campus recruitment. But in most cases it is ‘too late’ to learn as they are already in final year.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted with 15 key questions in final year B.Tech students and in I year MCA in a private Engineering College located in a rural village, Tamil Nadu, India. 81 students from B.Tech Engineering and 94 MCA students were included in the survey.

The questions are designed to find out:

- (i) The time spent on engaging with English in a day
- (ii) If there is any impact of socio economic cultural background on acquisition of Oral Communication Skills
- (iii) The students’ preferred job sector and their communicative ability to get into their preferred job.

THE RATIONALE

The rationale of surveying a Bachelor’s Degree course (B. Tech Information Technology) and a Master Degree course (Master of Computer Applications) is to find out the language proficiency level. Master degree students are expected to have higher level of proficiency compared to bachelor degree courses due to the fact that Master degree students do already have a degree course by which their language proficiency is supposed to be higher or better than undergraduates.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following charts exhibit findings on 7 key factors that determine students’ English speaking ability. The data is given in numbers not in percentage:

1. The duration students speak English in a day:

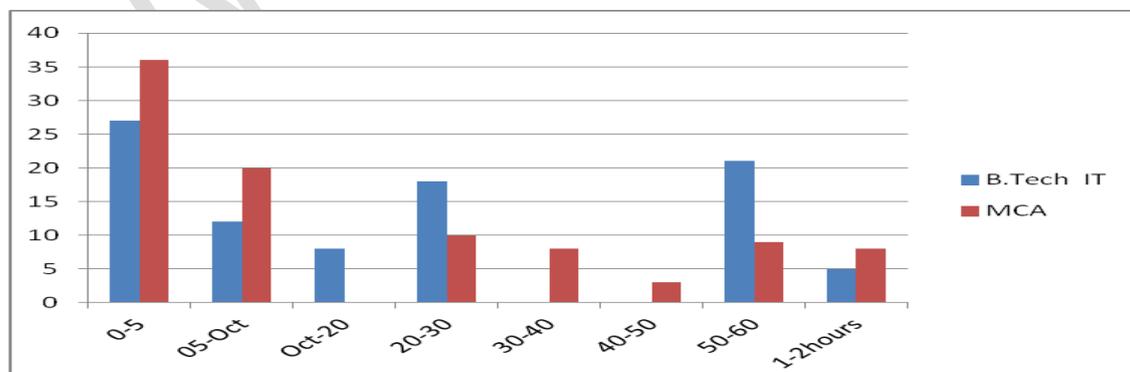


Fig 1:

The findings of the first question (Fig 1) show the duration that students spend speaking English in a day. The purpose of the question is to know the habit of speaking English. In B.Tech (IT), 27 students spend zero to five minutes speaking English in a day; 12 students speak at least 20 minutes whereas 8 speak 10-20 minutes, and only 18 students speak 20 to 30 minutes and 21 students speak 50- 60 minutes. It is only 5 students speak 1-2 hours in a day. Whereas in MCA 36 students speak 0-5 minutes, 20 students speak 5-10 minutes, 10 students speak 20-30 minutes. As low as 8, 3, and 9 students speak 30-40 minutes, 40-50 minutes and 50- 60 minutes respectively. It is only 8 students speak English 1- 2 hours in a day. The duration students speak English is too less in picking the habit and to inculcate the required skills to speak the language fluently.

2. Qualification of parents:

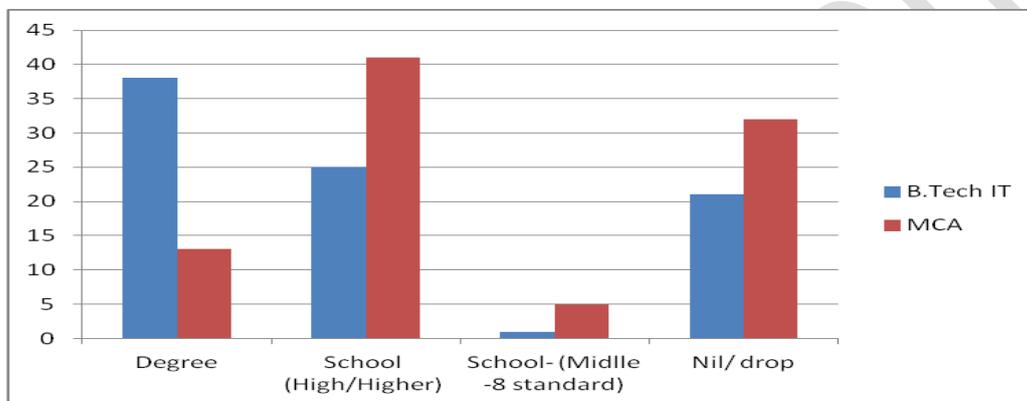
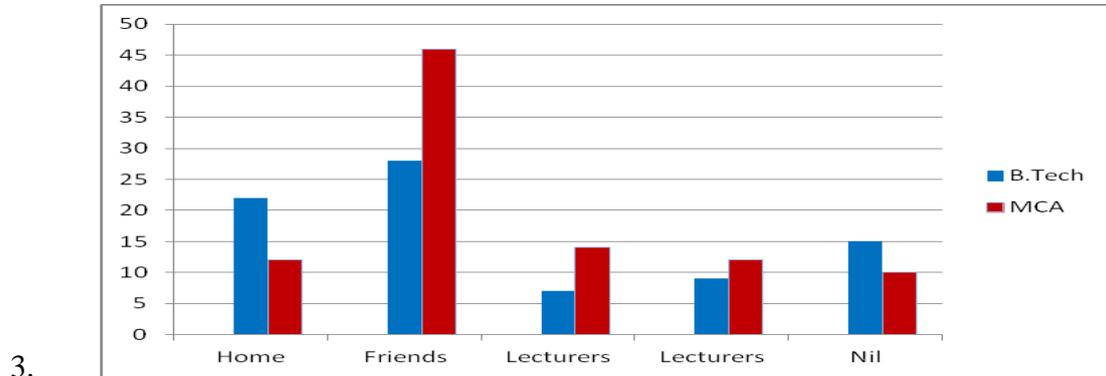


Fig 2:

The response to the 2nd question (Fig 2) is to understand their parents' educational background. The educational background is an important motivating factor in cultivating the habit of speaking English. In B.Tech (IT), 38 students' parents completed at least a basic degree. 25 students' parents completed school (10th and 12th – high and higher secondary school). 1 student's parent has completed 8th standard and 21 students' parents are either drop out from elementary school or had not attended school at all. While in MCA, 13 of the parents have completed their degree and 42 have completed their school level and 5 have finished 8th standard and 40 have no literacy or lower than standard 8.

In both classes, the occupation of the parents varies from fishermen to agriculture, delivery boy to farmers. Most of the parents are involved in agriculture and it is only 20- 30 parents of students in both classes work for private or government.

2. **Students English speaking environment: a) at home b) with friends c) to lecturers (inside class) d) to lecturers (outside class).**



3.

Fig 3

Response to question three (Fig 3) shows the pattern in which students interact in English with the members of the family, their friends, and faculty members inside and outside classrooms. In B.Tech IT, 22 students speak English at home, 28 speak with friends, and only 7 students speak English with their lecturers in the class and as low as 9 students interact in English with their lectures outside classroom and 15 students do not interact in English at all. Whereas in MCA, 12 students interact in English at home, 46 students with friends, 14 and 12 students with lectures inside and outside classroom respectively. 10 students do not talk in English at all. The number of students who interact in English is discouraging. Interacting in English is very vital in acquiring oral communication skill.

4. **Various modes students engage with English: Read /Watch/ Chat**

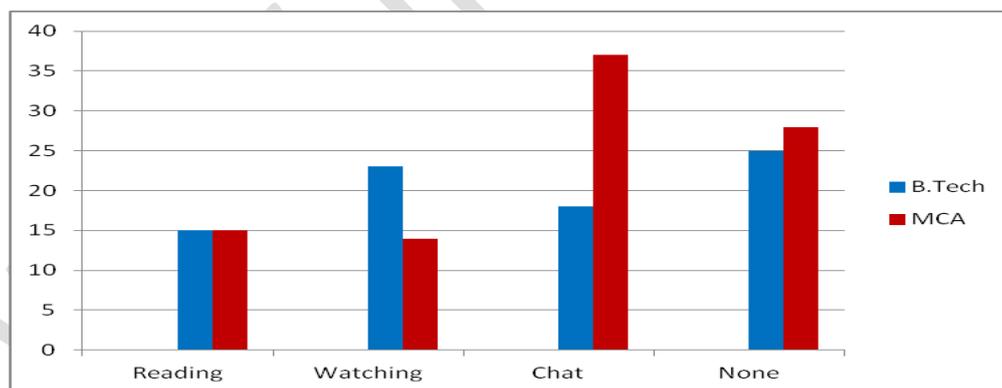


Fig 4

Findings of Fig.4 show that students' engagement in English activities such as reading, talking, and watching etc. 15 students read News Papers and 23 watch English movies/series, 18 students chat with friends in English and 25 do not engage in any activity at all. In MCA, similar to B.Tech, 15 students read English newspapers or magazines, 14 students watch movies or TV series, and 37 students involve in talking. 28 students do not involve themselves in any of the above mentioned activity. It is shocking to see a high number of students 25 and 28 in B. Tech and MCA respectively, who don't read, watch or

chat. Activities like watching English movies and TV series, Reading Newspaper enhances the students’ knowledge on vocabulary, style, pronunciation. Repeated use of certain words retains them in students’ memory.

5. Medium of instruction in College:

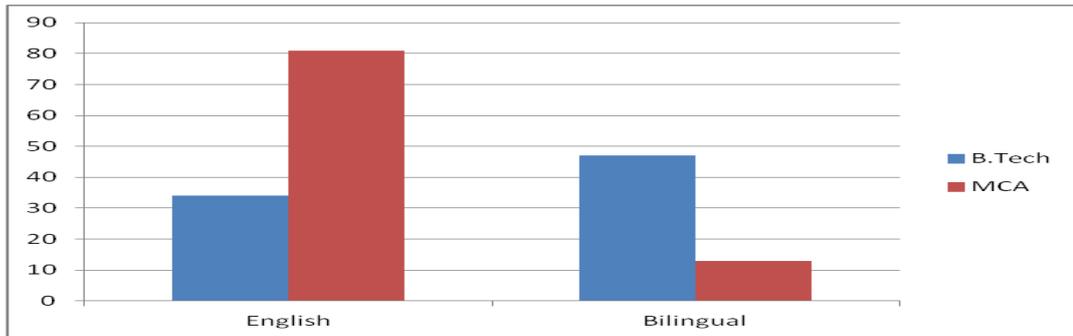


Fig 5

The analysis of the 5th question (Fig 5) is to find out the medium of instruction in college. The medium of instruction in all the degree courses, especially professional courses in private colleges is exclusively English. However, the survey depicts a different picture. 34 students have responded that 34 faculty members teach English and 47 students have responded that their faculty members use bilingual in classrooms. Whereas the scenario is encouraging in MCA; 81 students responded that their faculty members use English as a medium of instruction and 13 students responded that the faculty members use bilingual instruction.

6. Medium of instruction in the previous course: (School - B.Tech IT) & (U G -MCA)

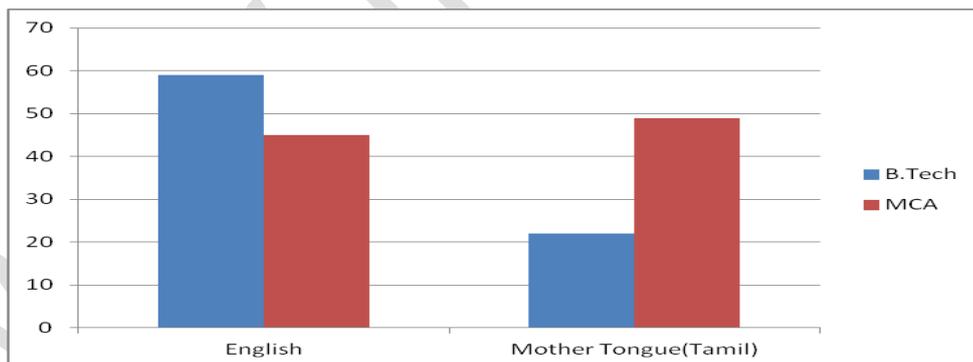


Fig 6:

The finding of Fig.6 shows the medium of study in previous course; 59 students had mother-tongue (Tamil) as the medium of instruction in schools whereas 22 students studied in English medium schools. While, in MCA, 45 students were taught in the medium of mother tongue (Tamil) and 49 students studied in English medium in their undergraduate course.

7. Students' job preference after graduation:

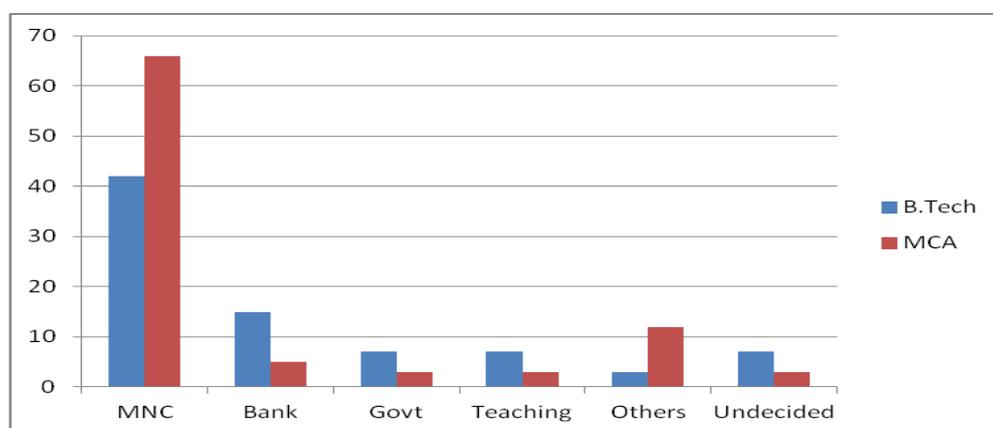


Fig 7

The aim of question 7 (Fig.7) is to find out the match between students' aspired job sector and their communicative level. 42 students prefer to work in IT based MNCs while 15 students prefer private banks. The number of students who wish to work in government and as teachers are 7 respectively. 3 students prefer to work in film and fashion technology, However, there are 3 students who unsure of their job preference. Whereas in MCA, as high as 66 students want to work in MNCs, 5 students prefer to work in Banking sector and 3 students prefer Teaching. And 12 students prefer other jobs such as working abroad while 3 students are undecided. Both in B.Tech and in MCA, it is obvious that a remarkable number of students' preference is to work in MNCs whose expectation of students' communication skills is par excellence. It is important to note that MNCs essential eligibility is good communication skills. MNCs are changing the way recruitment is done. The process seems to eliminate candidates with the first round of group discussion. Students who have poor communication skills face difficulties in group discussion. Fear, Shyness, lack of appropriate words, adequate vocabulary, pronunciation and incorrect use of grammar are the hurdles in getting through the first round and the interview.

FACTORS AFFECTING ACQUISITION OF ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

There are many factors that affect acquisition of oral communication skills. In this study socio, economic background, mother tongue medium of study, peer pressure, and student teacher ratio are some of the factors discussed.

Factor 1: Socio Economic Cultural Background:

“Sociocultural theory holds that specifically human forms of mental activity arise in the interactions we enter into with other members of our culture and with the specific experiences we have with the artefacts produced by our ancestors and by our contemporaries. Rather than dichotomising the mental and the social, the theory insists on a seamless and dialectic relationship between these two domains. In other words, not only does our mental activity determine the nature of our social world, but this world of human relationships and artefacts also determines to a large extent how we regulate our mental processes.” (Lantolf 79)

Rural based students have little opportunity to converse in English outside classroom. With a exception, rural based families do not provide English speaking environment. The family members are less educated. Students' circle is determined by a triangle factor: family, friends and teachers. Most of their time in a day is spent in any one or more than one of these. They do not get a chance to get used to speaking English.

The economic status of the family is another major factor which determines English speaking environment. In the above study, many students come from low income families and So, affordability becomes a factor in providing anything that is necessary to create English speaking environment at home.

Factor 2: Classroom

Peer pressure:

In classroom, though speaking English is mandatory, students prefer to engage in their mother tongue. Mother tongue helps them in easy understanding and feeling connected. There may be a handful of students who are willing to converse in English are often discouraged or teased by their peers. Peer pressure is increasingly a subject of concern in terms of acquiring Oral communication skills. When a student is discouraged by his or her peer, he or she is psychologically disturbed and withdraws from participation by refusing to respond or refusing to converse in English.

Teacher - Student Ratio:

A classroom with an average of sixty to seventy is probably an impossible platform to practise speaking skills. The teacher has to, introduce the topic, explain, demonstrate and expect students to do on their own followed by corrections. This process cannot possibly happen in one hour, even more with individual and group activities which would take time again to explain, demonstrate and provide feedback.

Medium of Instruction:

There is more than one reason for mother tongue instruction: a) teachers themselves are poorly equipped with English language, b), students are largely from mother tongue-medium of instruction. Little could be done for the former. And for the latter, students had mother tongue teaching have very poor vocabulary and have hard time in understanding any concept. Some students do not have enough vocabulary even to describe day to day happenings or to name commonly used items. And for their sake mother tongue medium is conveniently used in order to make students understand the concept better which again will produce poorly equipped graduates.

Alternative Methods:

Making students realize the need to learn oral communication is a starting point. The onus is on the teachers in terms of motivating and mentoring students. They have to transform their role from teacher to facilitator. Their role is tremendous in terms of moulding their students. Besides conventional teaching, teachers have to look for innovative methods to teach English.

Redesigning the curriculum is very important once in few years. Curriculum has to be designed on the market needs. As learning has moved away from knowledge acquisition to

recruitment / employment based, it is important to prepare students accordingly. Equal importance should be given to activities that encourage oral communication skills. Activities focusing on oral communication skills should be included. Games, quizzes, conversational practice on different day to day situations will help tremendously to be familiar with common words and usages. Assignments, effective use of communication lab, introduction of oral presentation skills are some of the mechanisms teachers may look into. Most importantly, teachers have to teach students to think in English. Idea does not have any language. Any idea conceived in mind is decoded by the language one speaks or one comfortable with. It is critical to teach them to think in English. In most cases, students lose the meaning when translating an idea to English from their mother tongue.

CONCLUSION

From the above study, it is clear that rural based students face difficulties in terms of oral communication skills. Students' life (society) is determined by family, friends and teachers. The environment in which a student lives is a great deciding factor in learning. In the case of rural based students, the environment is learner unfriendly in terms of acquiring English language. They have little opportunity to engage in English. Rural based students lack the luxury of 'growing with' English. Family, friends, neighborhood, and faculty in the college do not provide sufficient environment in speaking English.

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