

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: DOES THE ASSESSMENT MATCH THE NEED?**Mr. Nitin Shankar Pillai**

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Abstract

Communication as a subject finds its place in all educational programs offered across universities and constituent colleges. The avatar of communication may change and so does the nomenclature; known by different names such as business communication, technical communication, basics of communication or English & Communication is omnipresent with slight modifications in its content. The present papers attempts to investigate the reasons behind this popularity and its subsequent success. According to British Association of Graduate Recruiters "Candidates are normally academically proficient but lacking in soft skills such as communication as well as verbal and numerical reasoning." (AGR, 2007) which establishes the importance of communication courses. To add to this more than 40 years ago the German Engineering Association (VDI) recommended that 20% of courses of the engineering curricula should be soft skills and communications so that they can bring in their cultural understanding and team working modalities for better productivity which is only possible through communication courses (Ihsen, 2003). In the Indian context English and communication are used synonymously with the language trainer doubling up as a faculty of business communication also. However many of these trainers may fail to understand the nuances of working within the domain of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and its impact of teaching and learning. The present paper attempts to look at the problems associated with not teaching, but evaluation of ESP courses specially Business Communication. All educational programs are moving towards assessment and evaluation which makes it imperative that discussion regarding the same is undertaken with diligence (NCTE, 2013). The nature of language assessment and that of ESP courses varies leading to a divergence in the readings which ultimately effects the direction of the course and the learners. According to Micheal H Long "Every language course should be considered a course for specific purposes, varying only (and considerably, to be sure) in the precision with which learner needs can be specified." (2005). The End to End process of business communication seems incomplete as the need of the business communication is strong. However the assessment for the same is not thought of. As an ancillary subject, the course is offered in most educational programs, the need being established and accepted, although the other end of the continuum which is assessment is ignored. The present paper endeavors to sift through existing literature regarding business communication in the Indian context and attempts to investigate the assessment practices by aligning them with concepts of ESP assessment. Realizing the fact that all educational programs are moving towards some form of assessment and it does become the yardstick on which success is measured, it is mandatory to see if the assessment of business communication & English matches the need with which it is taught. The researchers address whether business communication is a complete process from ideation to harvesting or not.

Keywords: Communication, Business Communication, Indian Education, Evaluation, Business Communication, English for Specific Purpose (ESP)

INTRODUCTION

Communication as a subject finds its place in all educational programs offered across universities and constituent colleges. The avatar of communication may change and so does the nomenclature; known by different names such as business communication, technical communication, basics of communication or English & Communication, it is omnipresent with minor modifications in the content. The need for having a course on communication is based on some of the observations laid out by University Grants Commission through its model syllabi. It lays emphasis on the aim of content reformation being 'development of critical type of learning and to adjust to market needs and values'; the model syllabus also claims that "education is needed, both to give individuals more transferable, marketable skills

and to develop informed citizens, capable of participating actively in society.” (University Grants Commission, 2001). Both these aspects have a strong tendency to lean towards the practical purpose of education to earn a living. The key aspects are to present skills to the learners which they can exchange for a livelihood by catering to the market needs. One of the crucial skills that is both marketable and instrumental in achieving a good career is Communication Skills. Peter Drucker called communication one of the most important skills an individual should possess which was supported by research which is that as professionals move up the ranks of management they spend fifty percent more time speaking than in any other management activity (Rader & Wunsch 1980). More recently the British Association of Graduate Recruiters opined that “Candidates are normally academically proficient but lacking in soft skills such as communication as well as verbal and numerical reasoning.” (AGR, 2007) which establishes the importance of communication courses. To add to this more than 40 years ago the German Engineering Association (VDI) recommended that 20% of courses of the engineering curricula should be soft skills and communications so that they can bring in their cultural understanding and team working modalities for better productivity which is only possible through communication courses (Ihsen, 2003).

COMMUNICATION & INDIA

These opinions from varied corners across the years prove that communication is an indispensable subject which should be aimed at creating a workforce for the future. In the Indian context English and communication are used synonymously with the language trainer doubling up as a faculty of business communication also. The president of National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM) quotes in David Gradol’s English Next, India “As India aspires to grow 8–9% and integrates with the global economy, the service industry will grow, and the moment you talk about service industry, it is about people interacting with people, and in communication, language becomes important. And that’s not only true for people in the organised sector, it is as true for people who are in tourism, for people driving taxis, for people who are guides, for people in hotels. ... it could become a hindrance if we didn’t have more people able to communicate in English and understand English.” (Mittal, 2010). Gradol emphasizes these sentiments further by stressing that “India’s continued economic growth will depend on the availability of people who can communicate across language and cultural boundaries, both internationally and nationally” (2010). Even to this day, communication skills are ranked amongst the top skills to succeed in a career. It is stated that “good communication skills means in addition to having a good hold of a language, you have great listening and presentation skills” (Indian Express, 2018). Presently, many business feel that they need to spend time on training their employees in communication skills which has a direct impact on their business, these trainings do not come cheap and the additional expenditure incurred by the company seems like an unrealistic financial burden to bear. According to the corporates this expenditure and time can be channelized to other productive domains if the education system takes the responsibility for ensuring entrants to the workforce have good communication skills. The need for good communication skills is not matched by the supply of good communicators. The ITES (IT enabled services) sector has been complaining for years that as few as 15% of graduates from engineering colleges are employable. This prompted the ex-minister of Human Resource Development to say, “This is a recipe for disaster. You have a huge national pool of unskilled youngsters who have no avenues for gainful employment (IANS, 2009). These deliberations have prompted universities across India to include English and communication as a core course in all their academic offerings. “India is now embarking on a massive upskilling programme, expanding both higher and vocational education. Government reports have identified improving English competence as a key ingredient at all levels” (Gradol, 2010).

This need and acceptance of Communication & English as a decisive skill in gaining employment has been accepted and established by all stakeholders. The importance of communication skill as a core aspect of employability becomes alarmingly critical when the scale of education in India is taken into consideration. According to the Ministry of Human Resource Development’s Department of Higher Education there are 903 universities, 39050 colleges and 10011 Standalone institutes registered in India (AISHE, 2018). Out of these a survey was conducted under the All India Survey on Higher Education in 2018 wherein data was collected from 882 universities, 38061 colleges and 9090 stand-alone institutes. The sheer scale of colleges and universities in India is paramount and more important is the number of students graduating from these educational warehouses.

Year	Student Enrolment								
	Ph.D	M.Phil	PG	UG	PG Diploma	Diploma	Certificate	Integrated	Grand Total
2013-14	107890	31380	3822219	25500325	276502	2285576	187340	125002	32336234
2014-15	117301	33371	3853438	27172346	215372	2507694	170245	141870	34211637
2015-16	126451	42523	3917156	27420450	229559	2549160	144060	155422	34584781
2016-17	141037	43267	4007570	28348197	213051	2612209	166617	173957	35705905
2017-18	161412	34109	4114310	29016350	235263	2707934	177223	195777	36642378
CAGR	8.4	1.7	1.5	2.6	-3.2	3.4	-1.1	9.4	2.5

Table 1

(All India Survey of Higher Education, Ministry of Human Resources Higher Education, 2018)

CAGR: COMPOUND ANNUAL GROWTH

As can be seen from table one, the number of enrolments for the courses have increased in the last five years with the CAGR increasing by 2.5 in the said period. The number of enrolments in Post Graduate courses has increased at a rate of 1.5 and for Undergraduate courses by 2.6. Even if we were to consider these clusters for the purpose of this research it would be clear that number of students who are taking up education at higher level with the intention of joining the work force in the later years is exponentially high. These students, who are prospective representatives of the future work force, should be trained in the skills needed for them to be effective contributors with English & Communication being one of the essential tool as established before. The lack of doing this will lead to the rich “demographic dividend” becoming a “demographic disaster” (Nilekani, 2008).

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON BUSINESS ENGLISH

Theoretically the learning and teaching of communication skills falls within the purview of the English & Communication department in any university or college because of the understanding that we are primarily dealing with Business English, a subset of English for Specific Purpose (ESP). Communication and Business is an accepted domain of English for Specific Purposes (Dudley - Evans and St John 1998; Hutchinson and Waters 1987 ; St John 1996). If the principles of ESP are accurately mapped onto the teaching of Business Communication & English then it should consider three important aspects namely, English in the workplace (Marra, 2013) intercultural rhetoric (Connor and Rozycki, 2013) & lastly English as a lingua franca (Nickerson, 2013).

However the teaching of Business English & Communication depended primarily on the results of research being carried out in the western countries which was bankrupt when it came to “native” varieties of English. All through the 1990s, which has been documented as the golden period of ESP research and deliberation, focus was on English as a lingua franca while Asian scholarship was completely absent other than a few scattered attempts by Yamada Haru, Vijay Bhatia and Shanta Nair - Venuopal ’ s (2000) to research on Business English in the Asian Context. The lack of such research shows the incomplete nature of this end-to-end process. In the absence of research, specific for the country and the kind of jobs it offers, the training cannot be considered as complete. ESP begins with Need identification also termed as need analysis for all stakeholders involved. In the case of India, the need from the employers has already been established, on the other hand the need of the students is not taken into consideration. The reading material, the curriculum and subsequently the syllabus of Business English will have a flavour of American or British English to it because it is derived out of the research body being carried out in the west. The

native varieties are being neglected or not being explored with the same vigour which leads to lack of indigenous utility for business English. Tom McArthur(2003) explains this lack when he wrote “English is the lingua franca that Asians now share with one another and the rest of the world. One should also add however that it is now manifested as an Asian language in its own right. It has been thoroughly indigenized.” On further analysis it was also found that the study of American English lags behind that of other inner circle Englishes as mentioned by Braj Kachru, 1986.(Nickerson, 2010). The European teaching of business English fared better than the American teaching because most of the trainers in the European context were either trained as applied linguists and/or ESP teachers which resulted in English spreading from the Inner Circle to the Outer circles. (Nickerson, 2010) but was limited to only UK models. In spite of the spreading of Business English from the inner circles (norm providing) to outer circles (norm-developing) an analysis of the text-books being exported saw little or no relevance between the contents and to authentic workplace written and spoken English. (Nelson 2000, 2006).

As the Asian economy grew the need for Business English catering to indigenous needs also grew. Japan and China were the first ones to answer to this need by collaborating and creating localized version of Business English & Communication philosophy which was closer to their needs. The synonymous use of terms Business English and Business Communication came from Japan in the early 1970s. Haneda Saburo, Ozaki Shigeru, and Nakamura Mikito researched and wrote extensively on Business English in Japan while serving as the executive directors of the Japan Business English Association. The Japan Business Communication Association (JBICA) (formerly the Japan Business English Association), of which Business English is a substantive concern, has developed and maintained close ties with the American Association for Business Communication (ABC) which has collaborated in developing materials, training and implementation of Business English courses in Japan. The “you-consideration” so widely used in Business Communication was given by Ozaki in 1975, the communicative approach to business communication was elaborated by Kameda (2005), Norisada 2007, Tanaka (2006, 2008, 2009, 2011), Fujio (2004) and Sunaoshi (2005). A need for heightened awareness amongst interlocutors or communicators, which has become the bedrock of International Business English, was discussed and proposed by the Japanese researchers working in the area of Business English (Kameda, 2005). These researches have added value to the learning and teaching of Business Communication and English in Japan making its work force adept at matching the need with the supply. China, too made leaps in its research of Business English however the reach has been limited. China instituted Research Centre for Professional Communication in English (RCPCE) of the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong where professionals and educators could collaborate in the need of Business English and how it can be taught. China exemplifies an institutionalized development of Business English, with the creation of new and very competitive degree programs tailored to the needs of business. (Bargiela – Chiappini & Zhang, 2013). As growing economies understand the need for creating skilled workforce they assemble the stakeholders and ensure that deliberations are initiated. Research is conducted with inputs from the employers and academicians laying the foundation for curriculum and syllabus development along with indigenously prepared reading material with an aim to cater to the needs of the students. In the Indian context such a collation can only be thought of. These deliberations culminating in an Indian variety of Business English being taught through the various avatars of Business Communication is still a distant dream rather than being a reality. This leads to a lack between the demand and supply. The economy, with a compound annual growth rate of 2.5, needs skilled communicators but the research is unable to supply due to its shortcomings.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION & ASSESSMENT

All educational programs are moving towards assessment and evaluation which makes it imperative that discussion regarding the same is undertaken with diligence (NCTE, 2013). Assessment and evaluation are integral to teaching and represents the other end of the learning continuum. Through assessment learners are given feedback about their performance with the aim of improvement with every subsequent assessment encounter. Assessment either in the form of alternative practices or traditional testing is the culmination of an educational program. Assessment is used for various purposes within the educational context and also outside it. In many forms it serves a gate-keeping function (Shohamy, 2001) where those who clear an exam are allowed to enter the workforce or immigrate to another country. If done judiciously assessment can also double as a teaching aid by displaying the gaps in teaching (diagnostic testing) and can also help place students according to their language competence in an organization

(proficiency tests). (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). In India, where there is an absence of any standardized language test taken nationally, the scores or grade awarded in the colleges & universities must be considered as a measure of a candidate's language proficiency. Recruiters will assign value to the candidate's communicative competence based on what scores they have received on their degrees resulting in a substantial responsibility on the part of the test designer and administrative stake holders in creating valid & reliable language tests. The nature of language assessment and that of ESP courses varies leading to a divergence in the readings which ultimately effects the direction of the course and the learners. According to Micheal H Long "Every language course should be considered a course for specific purposes, varying only (and considerably, to be sure) in the precision with which learner needs can be specified." (2005).

Within the domain of Business Communication and Business English assessment fulfils three key functions. Firstly it gives learners an opportunity to show what they have learned and what they can do with the language they have learned by being given the same instructions and the same input under the same conditions. Secondly it provides a "second opinion" about the students' progress which may also corroborate what the teacher/trainer has already evaluated. Thirdly, it provides standardization by which teachers and other stake-holders judge performance and progress, allowing for comparisons of students with each other and against performance criteria generated either within the ESP program or externally. (Douglas, 2013). Though business English assessment follows the same principles as other common language assessment practices there are some nuances that need to be taken care of while designing and implementing language assessment for business communication. These nuances range from change in language use within a specific context to change in specific purpose and finally to the interaction of the two against background knowledge. From the above mentioned three nuances, the most important and influential aspect is the relation between language ability and background knowledge. Language and the background knowledge cannot be distinguished so easily, consequently resulting in confusion about what is going wrong- is it the language or the background knowledge of the specified field Chapelle 1998 ; Douglas 2000, 2005 ; Fulcher 2000). Another disagreement found in the discussion and practice of assessment and language assessment is whether the construct of specific purpose language ability actually exists and how it can be assessed. Davies claims that 'LSP testing cannot be about testing for subject specific knowledge. It must be about testing for the ability/abilities to manipulate language functions appropriately in a wide variety of ways.' (2001) which makes it no different from testing or assessment of general language. However as business communication is largely influenced by inter-cultural norms it is not possible to remove background knowledge fully from a discussion on the assessment practices. Additionally a question is also raised about the authenticity of Business English assessment. Davies (2008) points out that Business English assessment only attempts to stimulate authenticity, but only as a part of the real experience. Assessment practices should be able to duplicate the real life business situations where candidates will be able to perform language, unfortunately according to the researchers ... tests simply cannot be authentic: what they can (all they can) do is to simulate authenticity" (2008). A response to this was given in the works that promoted a look into the "continuum of specificity" ranging from less authentic and specific tests to those that are more so. (Bachman, 1991; Douglas, 2000). These discussions and deliberations are part of the western academic circle which fails to find safe shores in the Asian and Indian context. In the absence of strong emphasis on assessment practices in Indian educational system for Business English the purpose of teaching business communication and English is defeated leaving it as an ancillary subject with no purpose.

CONCLUSION

Typically an end to end process is a chain of process steps (or sub processes) that starts as the result of a customer trigger and proceeds through until a successful outcome for the customer is achieved. (Davis, 2010). In case of business communication the demand is triggered by the 'customer' (recruiter) who is waiting for a workforce, which has communicative competence. The demand is established so is the supply in the form of ever increasing number of students aiming to go for higher education as mentioned in Table 1. It clearly establishes the need for Business English, Communication in English and other subjects of similar nature. This part of the end-to-end process is well managed however the other part of the process is deficient. Research in the Indian context is missing which leads to over dependence on materials and methodology imported from western shores. This leads to inadequate delivery

and learning as the demand and human resource is indigenous but the training is exogenous. Furthermore the assessment practice is still traditional methods rather than migrating to a more adaptive and formative mode for better teaching. These factors result in this extensively advantageous end-to-end process being reduced to an incomplete, flawed and fragmented one.

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