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SOFT SKILLS: A CHALLENGE

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ABSTRACT

The paper is the outcome of some general conversation between both the researchers. We have been handling students from various backgrounds and have come across students who genuinely wanted to improve their soft skills. The current paper is the outcome of various sessions we had discussed. The results from this study show how the ability in communication is significantly regarded as one of the prime factors for a students' professional and personal growth. There is no doubt about the fact that the hard skills are an absolute essential for an individual to perform his/her job meticulously and professionally. A blend of both is what determines one's level of success as a professional. Soft Skills are what are termed as people skills or interpersonal skills

**KEY WORD:** Soft Skills, Talk, Fluency Building, Communication.

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I have grappled with the challenges faced by teachers of English. It is time to change the perspective and deal with students of English in a far more productive way. As an English trainer I have met a lot of different students, from school kids preparing for school tests to company executives anxious about presentations and negotiations to more mature pupils learning just for the sake of the essence of the language, in short, *just for fun*. In this article I would like to share some of the problems they have to battle with in order to be successful, fluent and satisfied language learners and some solutions that can help them break the barriers.

There are many reasons why students from India are less proficient in articulating in the English language. Firstly, many trainers/ teachers are reluctant to change their teaching methodologies resulting in a fruitless attempt to teach. Secondly, teachers eat away the major chunk of a student's time as consequence students are becoming passive. Thirdly, teachers are using very little audio-visual and other teaching aids. We need to understand that students in India have diverse backgrounds, experiences and needs, and most of them have learned English as a second language. Such students often speak their first language at home, while using English in schools and colleges or the offices. One major concern of many students is the absence of an environment to communicate. Here is where the role of a teacher steps in. I feel sorry at the dearth of practical skills in many teachers of English. Teachers of English should prepare to work with *all kinds of levels* of students and come out with solutions.

I strongly feel that a lot depends on personality. Some students, for instance, enjoy communicating and sharing their experiences. For them the main point is improving their fluency. Grammar is usually not their focus. These students tend to learn through speaking and my job is to correct their mistakes and as these mistakes are corrected again and again, they gradually start using the right structures and forms and, as a result, their accuracy can improve. For them grammar exercises and drills are nuisances. They sometimes lack the patience to do monotonous exercises about tenses and nouns. However, they still want to speak good English. **So what can they do?** My view is that a teacher should never force the student to do something that is not compatible with his/her personality. Learning in this manner can make the student suffer and they may give up learning English altogether. A student should do what is close to him/her. So for students who love communicating and chatting this is exactly what they should do: **TALK AND TALK A LOT.**

A student should be encouraged to go beyond his /her limit. Language is all about expressions and students must express everything they would in their first language. And while doing this they should try to use the vocabulary they have picked up from newspapers, journals and novels and from listening. This is how students can widen their vocabulary content. Even though the natural order is listening, speaking, reading and writing but for students with English as their second language or third should **focus on reading, listening, speaking, and writing.**

Another favourite question that I always have to answer is *how important is grammar is fluency building?* I would say that a one should not torture oneself with long exercises. Instead get a good listening material and listen to it twenty times. Stop it after every sentence. Repeat the sentences until you know them by heart. This way grammar structures will be stuck in your memory and you will use them naturally next time you speak. You could also learn written texts or conversations by heart. You may not be aware of the right grammar forms and rules but you will be able to use them correctly. And, at the same time, your fluency will improve dramatically. What else do you need?

There are some students who want to learn all the grammar rules first and to be hundred percent accurate before they engage in a simple conversation. They are more accuracy-oriented. *What can they do?* I suppose that in this case the responsibility of the teacher is more significant. Such students need more encouragement and positive feedback and most importantly there should be more effort made by the teacher to help them learn and ultimately speak. It is more suitable to put students in smaller groups and give them the opportunities to speak freely in a more relaxing and familiar environment. Such students should do a lot of grammar exercises to get more confidence as far as structures and forms are concerned. Multiple-choice tests, gap-fills are some popular drills that can be introduced. However, the teacher should never forget that the main goal of learning a language is communication. The goal is to make them aware that they should be understood as well as understand others. It is the mighty role of a teacher that he/she must not let the students worry too much. Establishing a respectful environment is the need of the hour. It is important that students should never be judged for the way they speak.

*A teacher must inspire* his/ her students to break free and understand their limitations and work on them for better results. They should make students aware of their specific problems with comprehension, speaking, writing and grammar. Teachers should show their students how to solve problems on their own. They should speak so everyone can understand. Students must be given time to summarize what you have said instead of just asking *did you understand?* (the student may say 'yes' even if he/she does not understand). They should motivate students by letting them know how improving their skills can help them to be successful not only in the academic world but professional as well.

Something common among Indian students is *translation*. Translation is an art. Even the best translators are not a guarantee you will understand a language's nuances. For example, books and poetry that are extremely popular in their original language can be criticized in other languages simply because of bad translations. Teachers should not encourage students to translate from their mother tongue into English. Students should be made aware that every language has a unique grammar system as well as thousands of

word meanings and varied connotations. Though it can be a herculean task for them, the only way for students to truly understand and communicate in English is to help them to do it themselves.

**Learning a language is a life-long mission.** Students must enjoy the daily successes and worry less about their long-term goals. If they persist on the path of learning English, they'll be rewarded with a whole new approach to expressing themselves. Job opportunities will be abundant and the most important thing is the transformation of students from under confident to being highly confident. There are no short cuts to success. Today, recruitments are mostly based on oral communication so there is a greater challenge on the part of students as the risk is higher of not getting placed as compared to those who can speak well in spite of having less technical knowledge. Today as spoken English learning has almost become a buzzword among budding and aspiring talents, *it has somewhat become a pillar of one's profession*. Many students from various professional backgrounds find themselves short of communicative skills. It is not enough to be able to do the work properly, but proactively make a positive difference to those around in order to take the organization a step forward. Working on one's soft skills is definitely a worthwhile exercise not just for being employed but also for one's personal progress in life.

There are certain drills that I encourage my students to follow. These methods can help students get rid of their hesitation in communicating and transform them into confident, fluent speakers.

- Surround and submerge yourself in English.
- You can make rules with your friends that you will only speak in English
- You can carry around an iPod and constantly listen to English conversations.
- Study from correct materials; one that you can trust (also under the guidance of the teacher).
- Do not study grammar too much but focus on speaking to help you understand grammar.
- Learn and study phrases- it would help you frame hundreds of sentences.
- Reading and listening is not enough. Practice speaking what you hear.
- Do not translate.
- Watch films in English or even cartoons and animations for that matter.
- Read voraciously- it could be novels, articles from newspapers, magazines or journals.
- Try keeping journal- writing helps the flow of vocabulary. Or write blogs
- Listening and recording voice- it helps to get rid of the MTIs ( Mother Tongue Influence)

Lastly, the most important thing is to *deal with the language on a daily basis*. Students should study a little as often as they can. Revise regularly as it is so easy to forget what you have just learnt. Never ever give up or have a long break. Do little if you cannot do more. Every little thing matters as

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