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Identifying English Language Problems of Novice Engineering Students

Inayatullah Kakepoto * Muhammad Saeed Akhter † Quratulain Talpur ‡

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Abstract: *English has a paramount role in this digital world of internet and mobile technology. Digital technology has facilitated language learning. This study focused on identifying English language problems of novice engineering students in this modern age of scientific advancement. Convenience sampling method was used since the principal researcher taught the subject of Functional English to participants. Eighty engineering students were surveyed. Research instruments were document analysis and classroom observation. Data were analyzed through an interpretative approach to drawing study outcomes. Results exhibited engineering students faced English language problems in the English language classroom context. Multiple English language problems surfaced, such as poor vocabulary, spelling errors, grammatical errors, writing problems, comprehension problems, and accepting teacher dictation. Additionally, psychological problems were shyness, low self-confidence, nervousness, fear of peer criticism and stage fright.*

Key Words: English Language, Problems, Novice, Engineering Students

Introduction

English is the language of people of the entire world these days. People use it as a medium of communication for personal and professional purposes. English gains main advantage that it is easily spoken and understood by people. It is the language of school, colleges and universities of Pakistan. It is the medium of teaching and learning in professional universities of Pakistan as well. Engineering, science, technology and business administration subjects are taught in this language. Teachers deliver lectures in the English language in classrooms. Occasionally, they use local language for easy understanding of lecture content. English holds a dominant position in the engineering profession. All engineering projects are prepared and presented in this language. This paper sheds attempts to identify English language problems of novice engineering students in real teaching and

* Department of English, Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering Science & Technology, Nawabshah, Sindh, Pakistan. Email: kinayat@quest.edu.pk *(Corresponding Author)*
† Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Punjab, Pakistan.
‡ Mehran University of Engineering &Technology, Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Campus Khairpur Mir's, Sindh, Pakistan.

learning settings. The global industrial scenario demands engineering graduates to be skilled and proficient in the English language. Engineers have multiple roles these days to augment the productivity of organizations. Hence, it was essential to comprehend the English language problems of engineering students timely.

Literature Survey

English is the lingua franca of the world. It is widely spoken by the world community on the globe of this earth. English is important for non-native speakers of English (Joshi, 2013) because it is the language of all professions. Engineering students need to possess English language proficiency to pursue academic and professional pursuits successfully. English is the medium of instruction in engineering universities of Pakistan. All classroom and laboratory instruction are delivered in this language. Teachers expect that engineering students should present classroom assignments and laboratory projects in this language. Engineering literature in books and research journals is available in the English language. Moreover, scientific project information is also available in this language. Engineering literature on the internet is also accessible in this language. Engineering students armed with deprived English language skills often fail in the academic and professional part of life. Engineering students with meagre English language skills perform poor in classrooms. They bring poor examination results, which is a matter of worry for parents. There is a growing number of private schools, colleges and universities in Pakistan. It is a sturdy impression in Pakistan that private schools, colleges and universities impart better education. The government of Pakistan is taking robust measures to boost public sector education as well. The federal government has devised the same curricula for public and private schools, including religious seminaries (madrasas). The government of Sindh has taken a gigantic initiative to appoint teachers purely on a merit basis. IBA Sukkur University a well-reputed institution of Sind, was tasked with conducting recruitment tests for teaching jobs. Qualifying candidates have been offered appointment orders without any political pressure and influence. Academicians, scholars and educationists appreciated this step of the Sindh government. Data reveals deserving and highly qualified graduates qualified teacher examinations. Presently, they are in the process of appointment, and they shall be posted in respective schools to overcome illiteracy.

Engineering universities receive students from vernacular academic backgrounds. They come from public and private sector schools and colleges. Students who come from private schools and colleges perform have better English language. Because private sector schools and colleges considerably focus on the English language. Students who come from cities, their English language is moderately better than students who possess rural background. Socio-economic status of students even contributes towards their English language proficiency of students. Students of rich family background avail facility of coaching centers to improve their English language. Students enjoying low-income family backgrounds totally depend upon school and college education. Teachers in universities, if pay proper attention to weak students they, can quickly develop the English language. They need teacher motivation and attention which is a significant factor. English language skills of the majority of students are deplorable but proper training can improve their English language skills, abilities, capabilities and proficiencies. Sivaraman et al., (2014) focused on engineering students' English language difficulties and found students had problems understanding engineering modules and classroom participation. Joe & Lee (2013) study focused on Korean students' second language lecture comprehension and outcomes exhibited difficulties in lecture comprehension. Kagwesage (2012) investigated university students' use of English as a medium of instruction in academics and found students faced numerous problems and challenges because of the English language. Navaz (2012) investigated students and lecturers lecture comprehension difficulties and found students' lecture comprehension problems and classroom communications were hindered due to language. Herri Susanto (2021) explored vocabulary learning

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problems of students and drawn the result that students had vocabulary learning problem. Dheifallah Altamimi et al., (2019) investigated spelling problems and their causes among Saudi undergraduate students and found different causes of spelling errors, i.e., university syllabus and learning attitude of students. Khitam Mohammed Alghazo et al., (2020) searched grammatical errors among students and found grammatical errors were in the shape of verb tense, wrong word, noun ending and sentence structure. Alfaqiri (2018) conducted a study to explore writing difficulties of Saudi second language learners and found students experienced grammar problems. Nonkukhetkhong (2013) studied grammatical errors of first year students and found verbs, nouns, articles, prepositions, adjectives, adverbs and sentence structure errors. Ghabool et al., (2012) study revealed Malaysian students writing problems were grammar and punctuation. Doung Dara (2019) studied English reading comprehension problems of students and found lack of language knowledge and motivation as English reading problems. Qarqez, Mohammed et al., (2017) studied students reading comprehension difficulties and explored they faced problems of ambiguous words and unfamiliar vocabulary. Raihan and Nezami (2012) investigated comprehension strategies and reading problems of Arab EFL learners and found they faced spelling and pronunciation problems. Hartney (2011) investigated English reading difficulties and found students lacked proper reading skills and could not read the text properly. Ibtisam et al., (2021) studied English reading comprehension challenges and found grammar and vocabulary as barriers. Nezami (2012) surveyed English comprehension reading skills difficulties of Saudi students and found reading problems among them. Iqbal et al., (2015) investigated factors of poor English reading comprehension of Pakistani students and poor vocabulary and poor interest surfaced as problems. Samina Sarwat et al., (2021) studied factors affecting the English writing skills of students and found they were unable to write grammatically, had poor command on tenses, grammar, and poor vocabulary. Ibrahim Alfaki (2015) studied university students' English writing problems and found students had various writing problems such as language problems, spelling, punctuation and capitalization problems. Naeem Afzal (2019) studied Vocabulary-Learning Problems of students and found students had vocabulary problems for instance, knowing new word meaning, pronouncing new words and use of new words properly.

English in Engineering Profession

Engineering profession demands the English language and communication skills of engineering students. Industrialists value the effective English language skills of engineering graduates. Engineering graduates who possess suitable English language proficiency seek good jobs even in this era of unemployment. The language of advertisements in the English language because English newspapers have wide circulation in Pakistan. Engineering organizations sometimes indicate in advertisements that engineers with strong English and communication skills are encouraged to apply for the job vacancies. Engineers have to prepare Curriculum Vitae in the English language. They fill the job application form that is also in the English language. It is a trend these days that all major organizations provide a link on the company website to download job application form, fill it and submit it as online as well. As per the nature of the company or organization engineering graduates have to appear in written or oral examinations. Some organizations first conduct written tests and then oral interviews. Interviews need effective English and communication skills of engineers. Since the medium of conducting interviews in the English language so, it is considered the first step towards success. It has been witnessed that some organizations engage engineering graduates in presentations and detailed group discussions to know practical skills, knowledge and in-depth motivation of candidates to perform the job. An effective interview always plays a decisive role in acquiring a job. Once this process is complete, engineers enter in the professional phase of job life. Engineers at the workplace have to communicate with diverse people as part of the job. It needs effective English language and communication

skills to perform office works efficiently. Engineers have to prepare industry proposals and projects and provide presentations to upper management of the organization. Effective presentations boost organizational business by launching new industry projects as per the demand of the market. If engineers are part of multinational companies, they have to interact with international counterparts to sell and buy industry products. Almost industries conduct business internationally due to the increasing influence of industrialization in the global industry. Thus, effective English and communication skills of engineers' value for employers. Engineers with effective English language communication skills earn better profits for organizations. Hence, employers offer them attractive salary packages and quick job promotions. Written, oral presentation and selling skills are required skills for engineers (Craig, 2008). Poor language skills affect note-taking, summarizing, and paraphrasing (Tahaineh, 2010). Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2022) studied communication skills place in engineering curriculum and found employers' concerns right that engineering graduates are not ready for industry jobs. In another study, Kakepoto et al., (2022) studied communication skills importance for engineers and found poor communication skills training are provided to engineering students.

Study Objective

The study intends to identify English language problems of engineering students. These engineering students had joined engineering university as novice engineering students and had varied previous academic background.

Methodology

The participants of this study were first semester, first year engineering students department of computer and software engineering. Eighty (80) engineering students were assessed due to lack of time credit hours of the course. The principal researcher taught four engineering departments subject of Functional English in the same semester. However, students of chemical engineering and food engineering technology were not included because variables would have gone out of control of researchers. Moreover, the class of chemical engineering & food engineering technology was overcrowded because both the departments were combined in this semester due to shortage of faculty. Research instruments used for this study were document analysis and classroom observation. Data were analyzed through an interpretative approach, and it helped stemming meanings by specific exploration (Arnett, 2007). Interpretative approach relies upon inductive reasoning and is a response to inadequacies of research methods (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). An interpretative approach researchers make an effort to understand research investigation in terms of language, communication and context of study (Klein & Myers, 1999).

Results and Discussion

Part I: Documents Analysis

Results and discussion are made as:

Poor Vocabulary

It was observed that majority of students possessed poor vocabulary. In case a new word was used in the class students became confused and the teacher explained the meaning of that word. Students had vernacular educational backgrounds and the majority of them came from government schools and colleges. The school and college education of government institutions is not good. Hence, students suffer when they join universities. In government schools there is no specialized teacher who is only assigned the subject of English. This factor impacted English language proficiency of students. Students rural background also impacted their English language proficiency because there is no environment of debates and discussions. Moreover, small cities lack library facility where students can read English newspapers and look for the meaning of new English words to increase English language vocabulary. English language newspapers considerably improve English language vocabulary. This is a digital world and students can check the meaning of new words in mobiles. Students were found curious how to augment

English vocabulary since the medium of teaching and learning at university is entirely English. It was observed that the majority of students come from poor families and they cannot bear the expenditures of buying English newspapers daily. Students were suggested to buy English newspapers weekly and find out new words and memorize them to increase vocabulary. It was observed that the English language vocabulary of many students was very limited, so they avoided to interact with teachers. It was also found that to faceplate student learning teachers used language switch. Because, objective of the lecture was to deliver content of lecture to students. Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2022) study explored poor vocabulary as communication barrier of engineering students. Herri Susanto (2021) explored vocabulary learning problems of students and drawn the result that students had vocabulary learning problem.

Spelling Mistakes

It was observed that when engineering students were given writing draft of a paragraph or precis passage, they made many spelling mistakes. Then were reluctant to share the draft even with the teacher and shared that they have made spelling mistakes in the draft. Moreover, when the teacher gave them to catch the draft through dictation, they also because confused and were found unable to write the sentences and wrote spellings of words incorrect. It surfaced that such students shall get that draft from peers or shall check spellings of words on mobile or electronic dictionary installed on laptops. Spelling errors occurred due to previous poor education background of students and poor methodology of teaching the subject of English in schools. Generally, in government schools and colleges, teacher teaches on board and students just copy the material whatever is written on the board. In other case, they just listen the lecture and do not interact with teacher to ask any question due to the fear that teacher may not become angry or may not provide answer and in both the cases he shall be at a loss. In case teacher ignore the question, they consider it as insult. It generates a sense of frustration and deprivation among them that leads towards demotivation for learning. Al-Bereiki & Al-Mekhlafi (2015) state the most common error was spelling for Arab learners of English. Raihan and Nezami (2012) examined comprehension strategies and reading problems of Arab learners and found spelling problems among them. Perveen and Akram (2014) define spelling as the method for writing words in their correct and acceptable form.

Grammatical errors

It was found that students made grammatical mistakes in drafts written by them. Grammar in schools and colleges is taught in a very complicated way that does not raise the motivation of students. A rote learning method is employed in schools and colleges for learning grammar. In certain instances, grammar is taught to complete English syllabus of the subject. Hence, it does not reflect English language learning of students and help them in academics. It was observed in functional English class that students disliked grammar teaching. It surfaced that their previous experiences of learning grammar were not good. Students demanded that something new to be taught to them in the subject of Functional English that can help them in academic and professional context. Grammar in schools and colleges is taught through deductive methods in which students are only passive listeners in class, and they have to memorize grammar rules without using a practical approach. Students' experiences with grammar were that it is a boring part of language and was taught in a monotonous way which suppressed their interest for learning grammar. On the other hand, grammar mistakes worried students since it affected their academic performance. They were interested to learn grammar in the subject of Functional English but in a new and novel way. Khitam Mohammed Alghazo et al., (2020) searched grammatical errors among students and found grammatical errors in terms of verb tense, wrong word, noun ending and sentence structure. Students need to be correct in writing to form a good piece of writing with correct grammar (Effendi et al., 2017). Nonnative speakers make many grammatical errors in the use of incorrect tense, incorrect tense form, and use of articles (Nonkukhetkhong, 2013).

Writing Problem

It was found that students faced writing problem when they were given small pieces of writing. Writing was very difficult for students in class and the majority of students was stuck with it. They were found less motivated to deal with exercises of writing in class and the majority of students could not complete writing tasks in the class. Students wished that all the time teacher should talk in the class and no writing tasks should be provided to them. It was observed that in previous part of school and college education students were not given writing tasks hence; they face difficulty in the university. They experienced several difficulties for example absence of thought-provoking ideas and vocabulary to make appropriate sentences. Students experienced numerous difficulties in writing because of poor practice of writing in English (Abas & Aziz, 2016; Hasan & Marzuki, 2017). Grammar is a major problem of students in English writing (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Hasan & Marzuki, 2017; Meslissorgou & Frantzi, 2015). Students experience various obstacles in writing such as generating ideas (Ceylan, 2019; Nugraheni & Basya, 2018).

Text Comprehension Problem

Reading is one of the important components of English language. It was found that students were poor in the part of reading and drawing appropriate gist from passages. Precis and comprehension are major part of Functional English. It was observed that reading skill of students was poor. They were unable to answer questions after reading passage in the part of comprehension. On the other hand, they were unable to make precis of the passage suggesting a suitable heading to it. Doung Dara (2019)

studied English reading comprehension problems of students and found lack of language knowledge and motivation as English reading problems. Qarqez, Mohammed et al., (2017) studied reading comprehension difficulties of students and found numerous problems, i.e., ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited time to process text. Hartney (2011) investigated reading difficulties in English and found majority of students lacked proper reading skills and they could not read text properly. Ibtisam et al., (2021) studied challenges concerning English reading comprehension and found grammar and new words were comprehension barriers. Nezami (2012) conducted a study to identify the difficulties of Saudi students in English comprehension reading skills and found reading problems of learners. Mubashir Iqbal et al., (2015) investigated factors responsible for weak English reading comprehension of students in Pakistan and found poor command of vocabulary and poor interest as comprehension problems.

Accepting Dictation

It was found that students faced difficulty when the teacher wanted to give them dictation verbally. It surfaced that majority of students remained passive because of poor capacity of taking dictation from teacher due to language problems such as vocabulary and pronunciation. Students desired that each and every word teacher should write on board. On the other hand, while giving dictation teacher wanted to improve writing skills and structure of sentences, generating ideas themselves that students be independent learners. Dictation enabled students to make and break sentences in orders to make new sentences. It also developed the skill of writing and thinking and perceiving capability of engineering students. Studies report teachers' written tasks orally (Chen et al., 2016; Lee et al.,2015) to improve writing ability and capability of students. Writing is an effortful task for language learners (Javadi-Safa, 2018) and it widens their mental capability to produce better drats in the form of writing.

Part II: Classroom Observation

Results and discussion are made as:

Shyness

It was analyzed that majority of students were shy participating in class activities. Shyness was major reason behind it and it affected their personality. Shyness has remained students' problem in speaking. Because of shyness many students preferred to be silent entire semester. Shy students

had poor confidence and they tend to feel intimidating speaking in front of peers. Poor English language is one of the reasons of students' shyness. Shy students remained in the grip of fear that if they made any mistake in speaking their classmates shall laugh at them. Moreover, they shall be criticized outside of the class as well. The reason behind the shyness of these students was that they were first year students and the university environment was new for them. Moreover, may be their previous academic background was not robust hence; they feel inferiority complex. They had come from varying educational backgrounds and during school and college education they spoke regional languages. Unfortunately, rote learning is part of our education system and they were not provided opportunities to explore their talent. Psychological factor is one of them too. Since it is a new environment for them hence, they articulate themselves and study how their peers perform and act. Uroosa Safeer et al., (2021) explored shyness effect on the academic achievement of students and found it left a negative impact on students' academic performance. Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2022) study explored communication barriers of engineering students and among other barriers shyness was one of them.

Low Self-Confidence

It was observed that the majority of students were victim of low self-confidence. Hence, they were found unwilling and reluctant to participate in classroom oral activities. It surfaced that due to low self-confidence they do not dare to present ideas in front of peers. It seemed that they had come well prepared for participation but low self-confidence did not allow them to share information and knowledge. They were swimming in a psychological fear that if they came on stage, they shall not be able to communicate ideas properly therefore, it is better to be away from any oral activity. It was noticed that every student desired that first their class fellows speak, then they shall be able to present ideas. They wanted to check response of teacher and students and this was considered their introvert behavior. Unfortunately, many students think that their English language is poor so, they cannot speak correct English. If they do not speak correct English then it is natural, they shall be criticized from teacher and students. This psychosocial fear was dominant on their minds and hampered their all abilities and capabilities. Literature review evidences that students face low self confidence when they are assigned any oral activity in class. Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2013) surveyed oral communication apprehension of engineers and found they experienced poor confidence. Another study was conducted by Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2013) on engineering students and found low self-confidence among engineering students. Quiana Blanco et al., (2020) examined students' self-confidence and found academic institutions should frame policies that promote students' self-confidence. Fatima Azmi et al., (2022) studied self esteem among university students and found students felt low self-esteem. Jerald Moneva et al., (2020) examined students' level of self-confidence and task performance and determined students with low self-confidence were poor performers. Omidullah Akbari et al., (2020) explored students' self-confidence and its impacts on learning. Results revealed students' self-confidence effected student class participation. Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2022) investigated communication barriers of engineering students and explored students had low confidence for classroom oral performance.

Nervousness

It was observed that most of engineering students were nervous for participating in the classroom. They were found unwilling to come on stage, and when the teacher called them, they got stuck and preferred not to leave the desk. Students who already performed presentations encouraged them not to worry and come on stage but it was never an easy task for them. The peer encouragement did never satisfy to many students and they remained reluctant not to appear before classmates. Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2013) study on communication apprehension found nervousness among engineering students. Prima Vitasari et al., (2011) searched anxiety and academic performance relationship and found a significant link between

anxiety and poor academic performance. Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2022) explored communication barriers of engineering students and found engineering students felt depression. Another study of Kakepoto et al., (2012) found engineers nervousness that affected their oral presentation performance. Kakepoto et al., (2012), another study on oral presentation barriers of engineering students concluded that engineering students had nervousness for oral presentation.

Fear of Peer Criticism

Fear of peer criticism was a dominant factor among students. Engineering students were very careful about peer criticism. They were informed that making mistakes is natural but this argument never satisfied them. Fear of peer criticism generated a sense of depression among many students' personality and till the completion of the course they did not come out of it. They preferred to remain passive in the class and preferred to occupy back benches. Students were afraid of making mistakes as they were felt that negative evaluation will develop a poor impression about them not only in the class but also whole batch. This psychological disturbance existed in their minds whereas; nothing classroom environment was healthy for sharing ideas. This psychological disturbance made them unassertive and develop inferiority complex among them. A study of Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2022) on communication barriers of engineering students revealed that students were fearful of criticism and peer pressure.

Stage Fright

It was observed that the majority of students had stage fright, and they had different conceptions in mind. They thought they shall lose confidence reaching at stage when they will be in front of them. They were fearful that their classmates shall create a ridiculing environment for them. Thus, they were reluctant to express ideas on stage. Interestingly, on presentation day half population of students preferred to be away from the class because of stage fear and they did not feel confident to express themselves in the presence of classmates. Teacher wanted to provide many opportunities for expressing themselves in class as subject requirement he had to cover the complete course contents. Inayatullah Kakepoto et al., (2022) study found stage fear as communication barrier of engineering students. Regina Studer et al., (2011) studied stage fright and found one-third of students experienced stage fright. R. Grieve et al., (2021) studied student fears of oral presentations and found students had fear of public speaking. Solomon Ali et al., (2021) surveyed students fear of speaking and found speaking in English before the audience was a dreadful experience for students.

Conclusion

The use of English language is widespread in engineers' career globally. English language is the medium of communication between various organizations. Thus, engineering students should possess effective English language skills to introduce various industry projects. Language deficiencies mar the career of an engineer and employers never like such engineers. English with poor communication and language skills always remain low profile in industry. Employers never offer them major positions because they are unable to interact with diverse business community. English is very important for engineering students in this modern age. Hence, they should hone English language skills before they enter in modern industry. Engineers with effective English language skills not only get better job promotion but avail higher scholarships from foreign countries to improve their qualifications, knowledge and skills. Moreover, it is the responsibility of engineering universities of Pakistan to prepare engineering students for the global work environment of engineering organizations that requires hard and soft skills of engineering graduates.

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