Ability Grouping: The Utilitarian Approach for Teaching English to Engineering Students

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Abstract— **Teaching English to Engineers is a domain of English for Specific Purpose which has gained momentum over the last few years. The need to acquire proficient communication skills along with technical skills has become requisite for acquiring a good job profile. Today, when India is generating the best Engineering graduates, there remain some flaws in the communication skills at the professional forte that leads to hampering of the professional lives of many. All the engineering students undergo the "Communication Skills" course but not everyone is able to attain the proficiency required in the market to excel. The failure to make students proficient lies in the teaching methodology. Various authors have pointed out the problems and proposed remedies for the same. The paper proposes a reliable solution for most of the problems identified till date. The implementation of "Ability Grouping" (AG) can help do away with majority of the problems faced by teachers and Engineering students in English language classrooms. The paper discusses the idea of "Ability Grouping" and how it can be implemented in the English classrooms for engineering students.**

Keywords— **Ability Grouping, English for specific purpose, English for engineering students, teaching of English for technical communication**

1. INTRODUCTION

The current paper discusses an approach of "Ability Grouping" (AG) in teaching English for Specific purpose (ESP) to engineering students. The heterogeneity in the linguistics background of the students leads to the need for "Ability Grouping" (AG) in ESP classrooms. "Ability Grouping" or AG is the process of imparting instructions and teaching based on the language proficiency of the learner.

Every learner is different and can be divided into groups based on the language proficiency. The paper discusses the need and validity for Ability Grouping and how it can be implemented in the classrooms.

"Communication Skills" (CS) or "Communication Skills for Professionals" (CSP) is a subject taught in professional programs for enhancing the communication skills of the students. The aim of the subject has primarily been to enhance the language and communication skills of the professional students with emphasis on English for Specific Purpose (ESP). The various titles given for this course, namely "Technical Communication for Professionals", "Technical Communication", "Professional Communication", justifies the aims and objectives of the course. There are two major reasons for the induction of this course in professional courses, especially for engineering students. First, the students tend to acquire the technical skills but lack the necessary communication and soft skills. This may affect their job profile or even may hamper better chances of higher education. Second, many students in India pursue their education in vernacular-medium. The sudden shift, from Vernacular in schools to English in colleges as a medium of instruction, tends to adversely effect the academic achievements of many. Owing to the needs of the students and requirement of the industry, the course was designed and inducted into the program.

2. NEED FOR "ABILITY GROUPING"

Reference [3] has pointed to major problems encountered while teaching

English Language at Engineering and Technology institutes in India. Heterogeneity among students, lack of teaching aids, inappropriate approach for teaching-learning process, lack of clear-cut aims for English Language Teaching, dearth of competent and trained teachers, undefined curriculum, faulty evaluation system and less contact hours for teaching are the prime hindrances that make teaching ineffective. The aim to induce proficiency in English Language Teaching is not achieved due to the problems discussed in [3]. The inability to acquire the aims set forth for the subject makes the need of "Ability Grouping" or AG viable. AG can be done by conducting a placement test of the students for a semester. The groups can be divided into Beginners, Intermediates and Proficient language-users. Based on the language abilities of the students, the groups are formed. The activities and lesson plans should then be designed based on the needs of the students belonging to different groups.

The concept of AG has been derived from the Lev Vygotsky's concept of "Zone of Proximal Development" or ZPD. Reference [1] defined the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers".

For a language classroom, the actual development level is different for every learner and is based on the language proficiency. To achieve the potential level, the learner can take guidance from the teacher or peers with better language proficiency. This kind of teaching environment can only be attained with the inclusion of AG in the classroom. The peers with higher language proficiency can help the learners with basic language proficiency. AG not only allows the learners to find appropriate source of help but also enables the teachers to plan the activities according to the learner's level. A simple language activity of summarizing a paragraph can be designed according to the AG. Learner belonging to proficient language group should be given paragraphs from newspapers and journals whereas learner from beginner level can have paragraphs which constitute of simple sentences and phrases.

2.1 Ability Grouping: an aide for the teacher:

The gap or the ZPD is a connection between the psychological perspective of the learner and the pedagogical perspective on instructions. AG allows the teacher to identify the base or the beginning level of the learner. The teacher can then encourage the learners to reach their potential level by implementing different teaching methodologies. The teacher should also encourage peer-learning along with different methodologies. The teacher can understand individual differences, thereby incorporating necessary inputs in the lectures and activities. As mentioned earlier, AG has a strong relationship with ZPD, it must be put to notice that understanding the psychological needs of the students allows the teacher to deliver effective lectures. The levels in ZPD are guided by social and psychological inputs of the learner. With the learners being at similar level, allows the teacher to design activities that are challenging to all the learners of a particular group. This, as a result, helps the learners to get rid of any inhibitions and develop confidence.

2.2 Ability Grouping: an aide for the learner:

With the implementation of AG, the teacher can design individualistic goals along with the general teaching goals. It may be difficult for the teacher, but, definitely is an advantage for the learner. Each student has a different capacity to learn which can be explored by AG. It also provides students with a friendly environment to learn. Students get to learn with the peers with similar language proficiency, thereby, allowing all to be active participants of the activities allotted.

No student gets a task that is too simple or too difficult in a classroom with AG.

3. IMPLEMENTATION OF ABILITY GROUPING

The question arises as to how to implement AG into a classroom. What are the criteria that must be assessed to divide the students based on their language proficiency? Ability Grouping can be implemented in an engineering classroom by following two simple steps:

1) Conduct a Language Proficiency Test (LPT): Every student must be subjected to a Language Proficiency Test to place them with the group of students of similar caliber. The LPT must be administered at the beginning of the semester. The students can be made to switch from lower to higher level by conducting different in-session tests. However LPT should be conducted only at the beginning of the semester only. The test should be of different from the standardized semester exam and should aim to assess most of the language domains, namely Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading.

2) Three-levels of the activity: Another aspect to be followed for the implementation of the AG is to have activities designed in three levels. Each activity should be designed in such a manner that it can cater to the needs of the students from the three language proficiency groups. Similarly, the class tests should be different for the three groups. The designing of each activity should be for three different groups. If this aspect is overlooked, there are chances of failure of Ability Grouping.

4. VALIDITY OF "ABILITY GROUPING"

Reference [3] has put forth the various problems faced while teaching English language to Engineers. The paper aims to provide a solution, Ability Grouping, for majority of the problems posited in [3].

a) Undefined Curriculum: The curriculum requires concrete aims and objectives. The curriculum has to be learner–centered [3] which allows the learner to be an active participant in the process of learning. Ability Grouping provides a platform to generate a learner- centered curriculum. Each activity and teaching methodology is based on the capability of the students. It also makes the curriculum flexible and lets the learner have a considerable contribution in the learning process. The curriculum becomes learner-centered with the induction of Ability Grouping as the learners have a considerable say in the decision-making. The students have to be active participants of their group for effective results. The learner can indulge into peer evaluation as the Ability Grouping has students belonging to same language proficiency level. The levels are not of high variability thereby also encouraging peer learning and evaluation.

b) Inappropriate approach to Teaching-Learning process: Teachers with expertise in English Literature tend to end up as English-Language Teachers. They lack the expertise and methodologies to be employed to make the classroom teaching effective. An effective teaching- learning process allows the learner to learn language in the natural way [3]. With more emphasis on the learning of correct grammar and ignorance to the learning from real-life situations tend to make the learning process a cumbersome task for the learner.

Ability Grouping provides an environment to the learner wherein they tend to interact with the learners of similar language proficiency. The learner is not mocked at, by the proficient speakers, for making errors as they are not the immediate peers who are in touch with the learner. The learner feels at ease by learning in an environment which is learner-friendly. Not only the quotient of peer-pressure eases out, but also the pressure of achieving success in the activity reduces. Ability Grouping supports the administration of activities according to the higher level of the ZPD of the learner. This leads to

variation in activities guided solely by the group's ability.

c) Large class size: Indian classrooms have always been affected by the huge class-size. A regular Engineering classroom has to have an intake of 60 students. This makes the teaching task very difficult especially with the contact hours being barely 8 hours. The idea of individual-attention is definitely not attainable with a huge class size and hence comes in the concept of Ability Grouping. AG allows the teachers to provide attention to small groups based on the group's needs. AG expands the contact of teacher with small groups beyond the language-lab. Without AG, it is only in the language lab wherein the teacher gets to interact with a small group, but the interaction is restricted to very few hours [3]. The groups formed enjoy the privilege of customized attention of the teacher as well as the peers. The peers can be included in the process of teaching. This leads to a two-way process wherein the students get to learn while teaching. The teacher is able to handle the class load with the help of students only because of Ability Grouping.

d) Heterogeneous group of students: Another universal problem for every classroom is the heterogeneity of the group of learners. Heterogeneity is the prime reason because which the need for Ability Grouping arises. Students, at proficient level, as they come from English-medium schools, tend to feel lost at times due to the underrated level of teaching. Whereas if the teacher tends to teach at proficient level the students from Vernacular-medium schools are at a loss. There seems to be no intermediate path to be followed in English Language teaching. Opting for an intermediate option, again, makes the lesson too boring for students with high language proficiency and too difficult for the students with basic proficiency in language. Thereby resorting to the process of AG helps in catering to the heterogeneous nature of the group of students. By applying the process of AG, the classroom gets organized into homogeneous groups. This contributes into better learning environment and achievement of the teaching- learning goals.

5. A FINAL WORD

Ability Grouping has a prime feature of making every participant an active member in the process of learning. The students in the beginners' group get appropriate attention from the teacher. The students in the intermediate and proficient groups are able to help their peers and also get an experience to handle activities which are complex for their learning potential. This process enables all to learn with real-life experiences and tends to do away with boring and monotonous lectures. The AG has the characteristic of designing every activity at three levels. The degree of complexity of an activity increases with the proficiency. All the learners are subjected to the activities according to their caliber thus making learning an intriguing challenge and not a tedious task.

Some may, however, not favor the idea of AG as it may lead to discrimination within the classroom. The students belonging to proficient group may look down upon the students belonging to the group of students with less proficiency. However, this is where the role of teacher comes into play. A teacher has to make sure that the students abide by the rules set in the classroom. Moreover, any act of demeaning a student based on the language proficiency should be dealt strictly. The concept of AG has been designed to inculcate respect and understanding towards people with different language skills. It aims to make the learner a teacher. Instead of ridiculing the peer, one should learn how to help them. AG also enables the learner to overcome fear of communication by coming in contact with the learners with similar language proficiency.

AG also contributes to the process of language teaching especially with the dearth of trained language teachers. Reference [3] pointed out the absence of trained teachers, especially those from English Literature

background. This creates problems for the students as well as the teachers. By applying AG into language classrooms, the teachers will get an opportunity to understand the heterogeneity of the group of students and also direct them towards the language needs according to the student's proficiency.

Ability Grouping has been projected as a utilitarian approach owing to its remedial nature for various problems faced by teachers in teaching English to engineering students. The need for acquiring proficient communication skills along with technical skills is the need of the hour for all engineering students. Without competent communication skills, procuring a good job becomes an arduous task for any engineering student. The curriculum for "Communication Skills for professionals" was designed with an aim to develop competent language skills. However the result is far from being achieved owing to the problems discussed above and in [3]. A change needs to be brought about in the current system. However the change should be such that it does not over burden the teachers or the students. Thus the paper proposes the implementation of Ability Grouping, which not only combats the problems faced but also makes the teaching-learning process interesting for the teachers as well students.

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