

Language proficiency for academic excellence

COMPETENCY

V Pradeep Kumar answers the question of how should one develop language and communication skills in a learning environment.

Beginning the first class of a postgraduate course, I asked the students to come on stage and introduce themselves. A few students were shy and even fumbled, which I felt could be due to stage fear. In subsequent classes, I found them to be quiet and not asking questions. They continued to fumble when I asked questions to make them comfortable. Further, the case studies and presentations, they made were unusually below par in both content and delivery. It was worse when I corrected their first test papers and found the standard of English, appallingly low. To my dismay, I discovered that the concerned students had not done their graduation in English, which was the medium of teaching in the PG course. Obviously, when learning languages in graduation and post-graduation differ, the difficulty to communicate can arise.

While language competency is an issue, that's not all. A survey by leading IT magazine CIO revealed that most students come up with technical skills but lack soft skills. A report by NASSCOM also opines that only about 25% of engineering graduates are readily employable due to lack of soft skills like communication and problem solving.

Importance of language skill

Language is fundamental to learning, without which we cannot understand what is taught nor communicate effectively.

In a college or university, there are various tasks and challenges like; understanding lectures, asking insightful questions, understanding books, research papers and journals, analyzing case studies and making presentations, and designing and executing research.

To get a desirable job, you must project your knowledge and technical skills. Further, language and communication skills are critical for accomplishing career success.

Communication skills are a combination of reading, listening, understanding, speaking, and writing skills. The ability to communicate your intellectual knowledge in spoken or written medium, in a language competently, determines your academic and career success.

Developing English competency

Depending on your strengths and weaknesses, develop a learning strategy to improve your language.



Identifying improvement areas

Consider your academic and career needs and identify areas of improvement;

- Basic grammar
- Basic vocabulary
- How to use idioms and phrases?
- How to pronounce correctly?
- Basic English speaking
- Academic English
- Business English

Working on available options

- Language courses: Consider an additional English [or as applicable language] course in your college/ university/ private institutions.
- Online courses from reputed institutes
- Group learning: Learning in a peer co-operative group is a method, which nurtures collective learning. Interacting and observing in a group, with a mindset of positive interdependence, can produce amazing results.
- Autonomous learning: A variety of student-focused computer aided programs and resources are now available, which helps to develop and implement a learning plan according to your needs and learning pace.
- Listen to English music, watch movies, television news and observe the pronunciation and sounds of the language. Importantly, understand the significance of tone and tenor in a given situation.
- Read books and listen to audio files in English.
- Practice: There's no better way than practicing, especially for spoken English. Use online resources like www.talkenglish.com to check your pronunciation and accent. Alternatively, speak to someone who is proficient like a tutor or a friend, to get feedback on corrections needed. Another useful method is to speak in English, at home and college. The American author and speaker John Rim says, "Take advan-

tage of every opportunity to practice your communication skills so that when important occasions arise, you will have the gift, the style, the sharpness, the clarity, and the emotions to affect other people. Do remember, tongue is the only instrument, which gets sharper with use."

■ **Evaluation and motivation:** Ideally, your tutor or an online system must evaluate your proficiency during the learning process and advice.

Identifying communication skills

Language competency by itself is inadequate, unless accompanied with communication skills, to achieve academic and career goals.

For example, consider the following academic situations and skills required;

- Understanding lectures and asking incisive questions to fill the gaps between known and unknown: Active listening skill, concentration, grasping power, questioning techniques, self-confidence, etc.
- Understanding books and journals: Concentration, critical thinking, etc.
- Analyzing case studies and making presentations, designing and executing research including questionnaires: Critical thinking and analysis, written and spoken English competency, etc.
- Understanding nature and scope of examination questions and answering appropriately: Ability to express concepts, theories and situations, concisely or at length, as appropriate to the question, in a well-timed manner.

Communicating competently

■ **Active listening:** Actively concentrate on classroom lectures, which help your understanding of the subject and avoid additional classes and tuitions. Maintain eye contact with the teacher and ask appropriate questions, to make your learning complete.

■ **Verbal and non-verbal skill:** To communicate effectively, you need to develop a positive body-language synchronising with your spoken words. In fact, much of our communication is non-verbal through facial gestures and body movement. Importantly, 55% of our communication is through body-language, 38% is through tone and tenor and only 7% is the actual spoken words.

■ **Writing skill:** As a teacher, I have had harrowing experience to decode the writing of students while correcting test and exam papers. Constructing meaningful sentences and using appropriate words without misspelling, is necessary to get satisfactory results in tests and exams.

■ **Presentation skill:** Making effective presentation requires the ability to prepare good presentations and deliver it effectively. The only way to develop your presentation skill is to practice; the more you practice, better you get in presentation. A well-structured presentation, eye contact with the audience, proper usage of tone, tenor and accent are some essential aspects of presentation skill.

Thus, proficiency in language is compulsory for academic excellence. Proficiency in additional Indian/Foreign languages can only add to your personality and enhance your employability.

Language and communication skills are interconnected and interdependent. Collegiate education being more focused on technical skills and knowledge, language and communication skills enable you to explore knowledge beyond formal education in your area of expertise and gain comprehensive expertise.

The art of communication is the language of leadership, which can help you realise your academic dreams and become a successful professional.

(The author is a management and career consultant.)