

Incorporating G.I.E With Soft Skills For Stimulating Employability In Engineering Students Of AMU

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Abstract

Corporate sector has witnessed a drastic change in the last few decades around the world and India is no exception to it. Ever since the proliferation of globalization inter-state businesses have grown up like never before. Consequently, multinational companies are gradually taking over the local businesses which created a paradigm shift in the recruitment processes of companies to meet the demands of the job market. Earlier, people used to get recruited merely on the basis of their job specific skills called as Hard Skills. Today, employers seek two exclusive skills besides hard skills. (i) Soft skills such as communication skill, adaptability, decision making, time management, team work, leadership, etc., and (ii) Oral skills in English like intelligibility and fluency in spoken English, as it serves as lingua franca, i.e. a common language of communication among the people of different regional and linguistic backgrounds employees need. Thus, young job aspirants who can speak fluently and intelligibly in English and possess soft skills get an edge not only during the recruitment but also during the job.

In the above discussed context, this paper attempts to find out if the teaching General Indian English and soft skills help graduates and young job aspirants stimulate employability? To test the same an activity based study was conducted with a group of 40 undergraduate students of engineering faculty. The activities were conducted in 5 phases to observe if the training of some select soft skills like team work, decision making, communication skills, and workplace etiquette actually stimulates those skills in the students? The researcher observed positive changes in the attitude and the confidence of the students after they undergo soft skills, activities as well as spoken English lessons in General Indian English multiple times. Thus, this study suggests the integration of a paper on GIE and soft skills across all disciplines at undergraduate level.

Keywords: *General Indian English, intelligibility, soft skills, hard skills, employability etc.*

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a paradigm shift in the recruitment process across the world in the last few decades. Earlier people used to get recruited solely on the basis of their job specific skills also known as '**Hard Skills**'. However, there has always been a the employees who possess certain other skills beyond the technical ones, such as communication skills, leadership skill, time management skill, and adaptability skill etc, known as '**Soft Skills**'. Today, with multinational companies gradually taking over the local businesses, employers strongly prefer candidates **who can speak fluently and intelligibly in English** as this language serves as the **lingua franca**, i.e. a common language of communication among employees of different regional and linguistic backgrounds, and exhibit necessary **soft skills besides having hard skill**. Engineering graduates need to have a far broader range of skills and attributes added with the technical skills in order to meet the ever-changing technology and skills demanded at the corporate world. A large section of engineering graduates has a lack of awareness about employability skills which is necessary for employment. Moreover, most educational institutions follow a traditional approach in administering these non- domain and non- technical skills that are as important as hard skills for job placement.

But there has been a complaint from the Industry majors, recruiters, and employers about majority of young job aspirants that they are often unprofessional, lack necessary communicative skills specifically in English, have no-self awareness, lack personal responsibility, unable to adapt the changing work environment etc. They sometimes are found to be weak at their job specific skills too. Thus, there is a gap between the expectations of employers and the talent that young job-aspirants possess. This skill gap refers to **unemployability**.

Unemployability is a major concern for any country in the world and India is no exception to it. Although with a huge and ever growing demographic dividend, India has no abundance of educated youth population. Ministry of human resource and development in its recent report informs that the Indian population in higher education grew by 800,000 in the year 2018-19 taking the total number of such students to 37.8 million (Nanda, 2019). Besides, on an average approximately **1.5 million students receive their engineering degree every year** (Chakrabarty, 2019; What are bitter truths, 2018). This working age population however could not add to the economic growth potential of India. There have been frequent reports regarding the unemployability status of Indian graduates and youth. According to India Skills Report, 2020, only 46.21% of the total Indian graduates are employable (India skills Report, 2020). The data is more discouraging for the engineering graduates. Job assessment platform *Aspiring Minds* in its recent annual employability survey revealed that more than 80% engineers in India are not fit for jobs as they lack the necessary skills (National Employability Report Engineers, 2019).

The above mentioned reports regarding the skill-gap among the Indian graduates has become one of the most critical concerns of stakeholders and the policymakers in the field of education and research. Educational institutions have been struggling to produce graduates who can meet the industry demands (Song & Tang, 2016). Some of the major factors behind students being unemployable are theory based syllabi, lack of internship programs, wrong career choices, Therefore, to make sure that the students who pass out from colleges and universities are skilled enough to match the skills requirement of the work place in the current scenario they need to be trained with soft skills along with the speaking skills in English during their graduation.

English as a Lingua Franca: Speechintelligibility and Fluency

English, besides being one of the most spoken languages of the world, serves as the world's lingua franca as it is widely used as a common language or means of communication around the globe among the people of different linguistic, regional and ethnic backgrounds. It has been taught as a second language extensively in most of the non-English speaking countries like India to make sure that all students are well acquainted with this important language for two primary reasons, the first one being as discussed above, it serves as lingua franca, and being orally proficient in English has become one of the prime requirements of the corporate world. Students have often been told to attain speech fluency and intelligibility in English. But what do these two terms really mean? While speech intelligibility refers to the speech clarity. It is the technical term for the understandability of speech sounds and words. Coppens-Hofman et al. (2016) defines speech intelligibility as “*how clearly a person speaks so that his or her speech is comprehensible to a listener.*” (p.175). On the other hand, fluency refers to speaking in coherently without breakdown of communication. In English Language Teaching (ELT), as Hedge (1993) says, the term fluency has acquired two different meanings. While the definition given by linguists like Lennon (1990) and Chambers (1997) says that Fluency is ease, eloquence, ‘smoothness’ and native-likeness of speech or writing; on the other hand, according to Brumfit (1984) “*Fluency is natural language use whether or not it results in a native speaker like language comprehension or production.*” (p.56) He highlighted the distinction between accuracy and fluency, where he saw fluency activities as those in which learners are concerned primarily with meaning, and activities which focus on accuracy as those in which learners are concerned primarily with form.

Regional influence on spoken English in India

Various forms of spoken English such as American English, British English, Australian English, Indian English, Ugandan English have been originated as a by product of its global outreach which in turn has created one of the obvious issues among its speakers, i.e. mutual unintelligibility. Gimson (1962) once stated “*it is undoubtedly admitted that a good number of foreign learners will need urgently a practical purpose for learning English and will perceive no important use in getting the performance of a native speaker and for them information conveying is the main thing*” (316). Harmer (2001) too stressed that intelligibility should be considered as the prime goal of pronunciation teaching. Since each variety has an influence of its culture and regional languages, English sounds different in different regions.

In India, Bengali English sounds different to Kashmiri English which again differs a lot with Tamil English and so on. These regional varieties of spoken English are different from one another in some sounds or the other primarily due to the influence of people's mother tongue or native regional languages. Thus, when people learn English as a second language, they have very strongly formal linguistic habits and these linguistic habits are bound to interfere with their learning English. For instance;

- Most of the Telugu speakers of English insert a vowel at the end of a word. Thus, *pen* /pen/ is realized as /pennu/, *light* /lait/ is realized as /laitu/.
- Malayalam speakers of English replace /t/ with /d/, and /p/ with /b/. Besides, they insert a shwa /ə/ or /i/ in consonant clusters, thus pronouncing *temple* /templ/ a /dembəl/ and *simple* /simpl/ as /simbəl/.
- Assamese speakers of English pronounce /s/ in place of /ʃ/. They also insert /i/ beginning of a word starting with a /s/ sound. Therefore, *special* /spe ʃl/ is realized as

/ɪspesiəl/ and *station* /steɪʃən/ as /ɪstesən/. They also insert of a shwa / ə / or /i/ in consonant clusters, thus pronouncing *cream* /kri:m/ as /kirim/ and *glass* /gla:s/ as /gilas/.

- Bangali speakers replace / ʌ / by / ə / and pronounce *Club* /kl ʌb/ as /kl əb/ and *company* /kʌmpəni/ as /kəmpani/. They also replace /f/ with /p/ or /ph/ and /v/ with /b/ or /bh/. Thus, pronounce *office* /əfɪs/ as /apis/ or /aphis/, *fifty* /fɪftɪ/ as /phɪptɪ/, *fever* /fɪvə/ as /phɪbhɑ:t/, and *civil* /sɪvɪl/ as /fɪbɪl/
- Kashmiri speakers of English find it difficult to pronounce words with consonant clusters as they do not have many. Thus, they insert /i/ or / ə / in consonant clusters. Thus, pronouncing *skill* /skɪl/ as /sɪkɪl/, *school* /sku:l/ as /səku:l/. They also use /ph/ in place of /f/ and pronounce *food* /fu:d/ as /p^hu:d and *feel* /fi:l/ as /p^hi:l/

General Indian English for Speech Intelligibility

To make sure that Indian speakers across different regions sound mutually intelligible, there is a need to choose an accent of spoken English that would be followed while teaching *spoken English* to the vast and varied population of Indian students. The frequently discussed models of speech pronunciation for Indian ESL learners are Received Pronunciation (R.P.) and General Indian English (GIE). R.P is the present-day version of the accent that has been used as the standard in phoneticians' description of the pronunciation of British English for centuries (Roach, 2004). Traditionally, most of the Indian ESL teachers have been following British Received Pronunciation (B.R.P. or R.P.) as the model of speech pronunciation. However, it has been observed that neither most of the teachers nor the students' vocal organs are habituated to its use in a country like India where multiple regional languages are used as native languages. Rather, as Indian ESL researchers suggest, General Indian English should be made a goal (Husain, 2014) as it serves as the common neutral accent from both communicative and pedagogic points of view to the vast linguistically diverse population of India (Pandey, 1994). General Indian English or GIE is a Variety of Indian English which is devoid of regional peculiarities and inclined more towards acceptability rather than accuracy.

J.B. Harrison and R.K Bansal, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad attempted to present a detailed description of the phonology of Indian English on the basis of information gathered from speakers belonging to different parts of the country and came with this model (Bansal and Harrison 1972, Bansal 1976, 1976-77, 1978). Therefore, Indian ESL

researchers believe that this model of speech pronunciation will benefit Indian students across different regions in achieving comfortable intelligibility in speech.

Soft skills and Employability skills: Significance in the job market

Soft skills and Employability skills have often been defined as synonymous to each other. While soft skills are defined as the combination of intra personal and interpersonal/social skills, traits or personal attributes like effective communication, time management, team work, resilience, adaptability, professionalism etc. that help one in one's personal, professional, and social life. The similar definition can also be found for employability skills, such as the skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance a worker's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if he/she so wishes or has been laid off and enter more easily into the labour market at different periods of the life cycle (International Labour Organization). However, a section of literature presents these two terms in a slight contrast, and states that employability skills can also be technical/hard/job specific skill because such skill also helps one gain employment.

Today, a bulk of literature can be found acknowledging the criticality of soft skills and

employability skills in the corporate world and several major studies have found that these skills to be equally and in some cases more important than hard skills. To mention a few, the research conducted with Fortune 500 CEOs by the Stanford Research Institute International and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation found that soft skills provide 85% of our career success, while hard skills provide the other 15% (Klaus, 2007). Similarly, researches in Boston University, University of Michigan's Ross School of Business stress that workers with soft skills training are 12% more productive than those without them (Vasanthkumari, 2019). Acknowledging its high impact factor in the workplace, researchers around the globe emphasize that students must be trained with soft skills along with their job specific or technical skills as they believe these skills are the major competency in nearly all types of professions which complement hard skills and help people in their career advancement (Schulz, 2008; Dixon et.al, 2010; Majid et al., 2012; Cimatti, 2016).

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To analyze the efficacy of soft skills training in stimulating employability among the engineering students of AMU
2. To analyze the efficacy of General Indian English in developing intelligibility in spoken English of the engineering students of AMU.

Hypotheses

H01- Soft skills training contribute towards enhancing the employability

H02- G.I.E helps Indian students achieve speech intelligibility and fluency in English.

Research Questions

1. Does the soft skills' training stimulate employability among the undergraduate students?
2. Is General Indian English effective in developing intelligibility in spoken English?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the present study an attempt was made to study the effect of soft skills training and the G.I.E on developing employability and intelligibility in spoken English respectively among the undergraduate engineering students of Aligarh Muslim University. The research was designed keeping in mind the objective of the study thus making this study both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

Subjects and Tools

35 undergraduate students of faculty of engineering faculty of Aligarh Muslim University were the subjects of this study. They were made to undergo 4 different soft skills training activities three times.

Procedure

Students were made to undergo a set of 4 soft skills' activities targeting some of the soft skills desirable across different job types, thrice, making total 12 sessions of activities. The training ran for 6 days. These activities were divided in two different studies with two activities in each study. Study-1 focused on assessing if General Indian English helps one achieve intelligibility in oral English. Whereas, Study-2 focused on assessing if soft skills activities helps one stimulate employability. The performance of the participants in their third round of activities was compared with their performance in the first round.

All the participants as well as the research scholar were wearing masks and they had sanitized

their hands before the activities started. Students were made to sit in the activity hall maintaining social distancing when they were not performing the activities. The overview of the activities is discussed below:

Study-1

Assessing if General Indian English help one achieve intelligibility in oral English
Activity-1

Listen, Write and Repeat

Skills Targeted:

Listening skills, writing skills, speaking Skills in English

Activity-2

Just a Minute

Steps

1. An audio of a conversation between two People speaking in British Accent (Received Pronunciation) was played.
2. Students listened to the audio carefully and noted down the conversation as fast as they could.
3. The students read the whole conversation they had noted and were asked to narrate the conversation by themselves in their own words without reading.
4. Another audio of a conversation between two people was played, but this time they were speaking in General Indian English
5. Students repeated the whole activity, i.e. listening to the conversation, writing it and then narrating it in their own words.

Skills Targeted:

Speaking in coherence and fluency in English

Steps

1. Students were asked to speak for one minute on a random topic like ‘*My favourite food*’, ‘*Social Media*’ which they were not informed of in advance.
2. They were not allowed to stop in between and or to take long pauses while they are speaking. For instance;
“Social media has become quite popular in the recent years because it has some user-friendly features. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and more are giving people a chance to connect with each other across distances.....”
4. Now students were asked to recall and write major points they spoke about the topic. For instance, *“it has user-friendly “features, gives people a chance to connect....”*
5. Students were made to speak again for one minute on the same topic in which they were asked repeat the points they had written along with some new ideas. They were asked to write new points they have mentioned in their second speech.
7. The whole process was repeated the third time as the activity continued.
8. The teacher compared their first speech with their third one and tried to find out if they were more fluent in their third speech or not.

Study-2

Assessing if soft skills activities help one stimulate employability
Activity-1

Attending a Meeting

Skills Targeted:

Communication skill in English and Teamwork

Steps:

1. The teacher taught briefly the ethics of attending a meeting.
2. Students were asked to attend a meeting
3. One student hosted the meeting, the other one acted as a team leader while rest of them acted as team members.
4. The team members were asked to provide their opinions on any of the general topics of meetings. For example “how to increase sales of their products?”
5. The students came up with their suggestions after discussing the issue among themselves.
6. The teacher asked the students to write the minutes of the meeting and present them one by one.

Activity-2

Complete the short poem

Skills Targeted:

Team Work, Listening Skill, Recalling

Steps:

1. Students were divided into two teams.
2. The teacher stood at a good distance from the students.
3. The teacher called the teams one by one and narrated a poem in a low voice so that the other team could not listen to it. For example:

*Once there was a talking fan
Electrical his chatter*

*I couldn't quite hear what he said
And I hope it doesn't matter
Because one day somebody
oiled His little whirling motor
And all the mystery was spoiled
He ran as still as water*

4. The teams rushed back to their place and noted the part of the poem they remembered.
5. The teams came back to the researcher to listen to the poem in alternating turns.
6. The teacher will keep on repeating the poem until any one of the teams complete the poem.
7. The teachers encouraged the teams to complete the poem as early as possible.
8. The same activity was repeated but with a different poem that time. The researcher observed the students individually so as to notice the individual improvement in them.

4. RESULTS

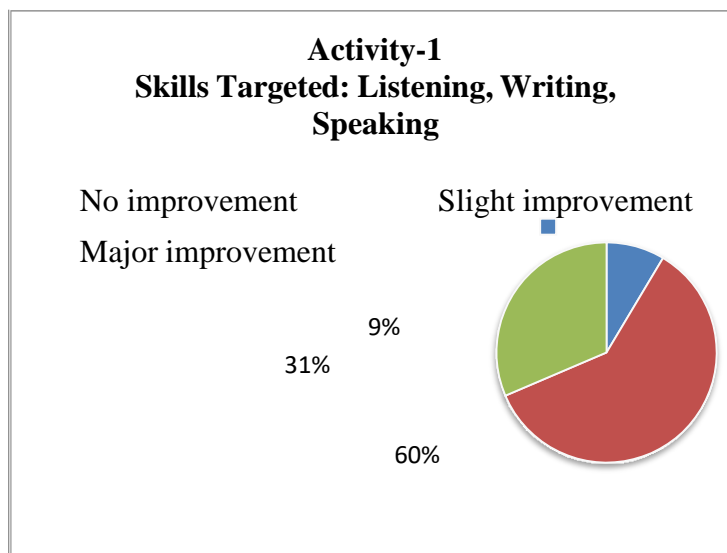
All the activities were conducted thrice to observe if soft skills activities can contribute towards improving the body language, work etiquettes, confidence, speech intelligibility, team working skill, decision making skill, and the overall employability of the students. The same activities were conducted in all the three sessions, however their topics (like in case of activity-1 of the study-1, replacing the topic *social media* with *my favourite mode of transport* when conducted the second time). The assessment was made through marks obtained by the students in each activity. The researchers compared the performance of the

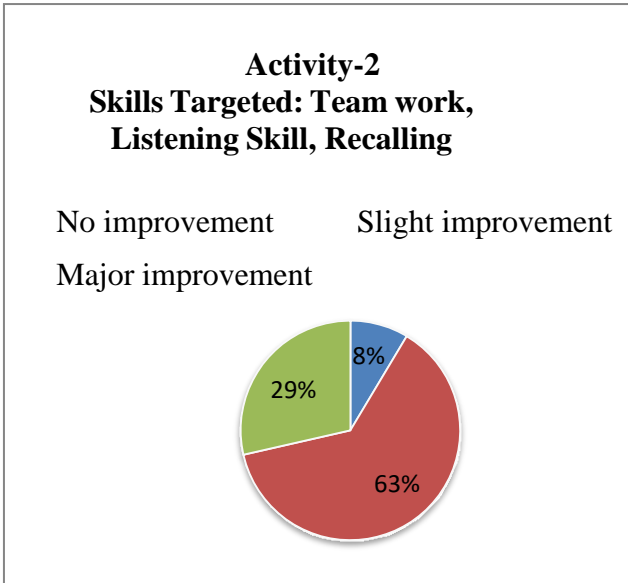
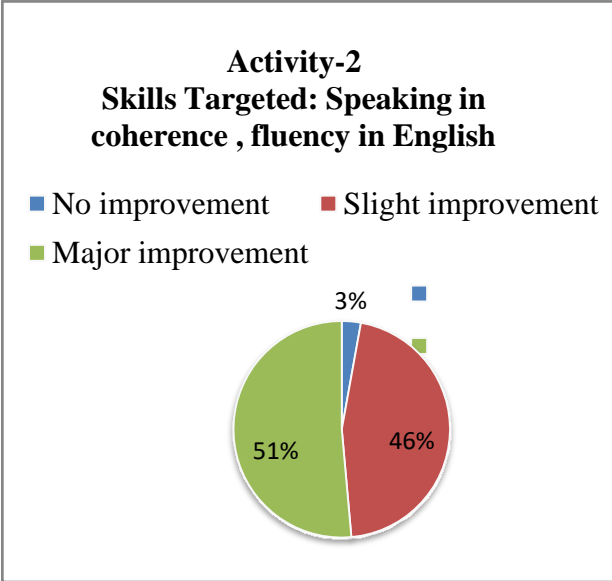
students the first round of activities with the third round. All the students were categorized into three categories after they had been provided marks in each activity, viz. (i) students having no improvement in their performance, (ii) students having slight improvement, and (iii) students having major improvement.

This study is purely observation based. The results were written after observing students' performance both in groups and a individually. The following pie charts show the degree of improvement in students after the activities:

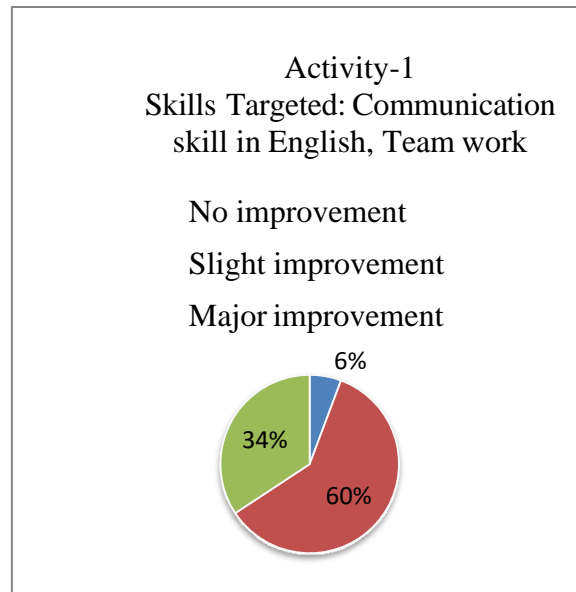
Study-1

Assessing if General Indian English help one achieve intelligibility in oralEnglish





Study-2
Assessing if soft skills activities helpone stimulate employability



The researcher evaluated each student's performance individually as well as in group. Marks were provided to the students on the basis of their performance in each round of activity. After the completion of activities the researcher compared their marks in all the three round and found that there was a considerable improvement in most of the students' communication skills in English, team work, work place etiquettes and other skills they were trained with, as their performance in the third round of activities was better than their performance in the first round of activities. Besides, they were also found to have better speech intelligibility in English when followed General Indian English as a model of speech pronunciation. Thus, on the basis of the results obtained the researcher accepted both the hypotheses.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The available literature on soft skills emphasize that mere academic abilities alone will not be adequate for the students to make themselves employable. It is a bitter truth that most of the academic institutions are still following theory based syllabi in which there has not been any practical exercise or internships for the students. Consequently students and young graduates remain ignorant of the actual work they might do in their professional career and remain unemployable, and possibly unemployed. Thus, what students need is *skill oriented education* which is possible with a blend of soft skills and oral skills in English along with the theoretic knowledge. The related literature advocates the efficiency of soft skills training in enhancing one's soft skills and ultimately the employability. In this context, the researches carried out by Mythili (2013) and Rangnekar (2014) have proved that there has been a positive change in attitude and behavior of the subjects after they had undergone the training of soft skills which ultimately enhanced their overall performance. The researchers also suggested that soft skills should be the part of the curriculums across all educational institutions.

This is possible when students are exposed to several soft skills such as communication skills, social skill, presentation skill, interpersonal skills, business management, leadership skills, development skills, and computer skills, to perform well in this multidisciplinary environment.

This research paper attempted to test two prime skills significant across different job types, i.e., intelligibility in oral English and soft skills. Enhanced performance of the students after they had undergone the soft skills training through multiple activities has confirmed that the

soft skills' training is actually helpful in gaining employability skills. Moreover, if General Indian English is followed as a model of speech pronunciation for teaching English as a second language to the vast Indian student population, they will definitely achieve speech intelligibility. Therefore, the researcher suggests that the teaching of General Indian English and soft skills must be included in the curriculum across all disciplines specifically in technical field like engineering. Institutions can either include a paper of soft skills and GIE in their syllabi across all disciplines of graduation or a short course of about 3 month course that integrates the teaching of general Indian English with soft skills can be run separately.

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