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Extent of English Language Acquisition in Polytechnic Students: A Study

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Abstract

Polytechnic colleges provide skilled supervisors and hence the learners are supposed to acquire both academic knowledge and skill and English language skills. The language skills include Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). A study was conducted to find out if the learners have acquired the required English language skills for a successful career. This paper is based on the study conducted in three polytechnics in South Kerala involving the stake-holders of this field. The study investigates the extent of English language acquisition among students enrolled in polytechnic institutions. Recognizing the pivotal role that proficiency in English plays in the globalized world, this research sought to gauge the competence levels and communicative skills of polytechnic students in the English language. The study employed a mixed-method approach, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, and was conducted across various polytechnic institutions. A stratified sample of students was selected and subjected to a battery of assessments, including standardized language tests, surveys, and interviews. Additionally, academic performance records were examined as ancillary data. The findings revealed a spectrum of proficiency levels, with a noteworthy percentage of students demonstrating only rudimentary command over English. Several variables were found to significantly contribute to this, including the medium of instruction in previous education, socio-economic background, and exposure to the language outside of academia. The study highlights the need for comprehensive language support programmes tailored to the specific needs of polytechnic students, to enhance their English language skills and better equip them for professional opportunities in the global market. It also calls for further research to comprehensively understand the barriers to effective English language acquisition.

Keywords: Technical education, Vocational training, Technicians, English for Academic Purposes, BICS, CALP, Academic English, Communication barriers

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Introduction

Polytechnic stream in Kerala offers technical diploma courses which intends to mould quality technicians from its seventy-eight institutions. The students who come out after completing their diploma course form a category between the graduates in the technical field and the working group. So, they need sound theoretical and practical knowledge as well as the communication skills to occupy predominant positions in companies and firms. They have the opportunity to be placed in national and international firms and companies soon after their diploma course, a factor which is rare in other streams of education. Many of the students after their diploma course can make use of the special privilege available to them by directly joining the third semester of B. Tech, thus pursuing their higher studies. Even though, all circumstances favour the polytechnic stream, the students are mediocre or poor in their academic English proficiency as observed by the teachers and the stakeholders in the placement field. So, the students miss out many an opportunity for excelling in higher studies and in their job prospects. The few lucky ones who got placed in some national or multinational companies grope around in the darkness while working, without adequate academic English proficiency.

Role of Polytechnics in Technical Education

The importance of polytechnics is that the diploma holders of the polytechnic stream will form a group between the degree holders and the skilled workers in workplaces. So, learning in polytechnics is a balanced one: learning theories and acquiring practical knowledge. Diploma holders should be able to communicate with their subordinates and their seniors in supervisory posts in workplaces. So, communication of academic aspects and basic communication skills are very important for these learners. So polytechnic diploma holders should have the required skills, expertise and professionalism of the technical manpower along with the basic and academic communication skills.

Role of Academic English in Polytechnics

English for academic purposes or EAP is “concerned with those communication skills in English which are required for study purposes in formal education system” (ETIC, 1). Lack of academic English proficiency and subject-based knowledge are detrimental to the academic improvement in colleges. They find it hard to cope with the technical terms and language in English. So, they lack understanding of the content taught. Desperately they go for rote learning, which proves to be inadequate for their needs. So, after completing the diploma course, they are in the same incipient stage of subject specific language acquisition.

English, as the medium of communication in polytechnic colleges, is often limited to the subject textbooks in English and the English language classes. English language classes figure only during the first two semesters. The English syllabus prepared by the State Institute is based on language learning through literature and has prose, poems, grammar exercises and a very few topics for communicative skill development. The functionality of these items in the

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language improvement of the students is limited. In the special context of technical learning the students have to acquire more than the basic language for interaction in everyday communication.

This is the more specific English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The core subjects on the other hand are often transacted in the mother tongue. The students finally end up with learning by rote. The subject evaluation process on the other hand, is writing exams having certain text-based questions. The scope and the varied use of academic language is thus avoided in the learning and evaluation process, all at the expense of quality and excellence in output.

Here, a special mention needs to be made on the specific role of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins 198) in a technical diploma programme. The daily conversation part or BICS is not sufficient for a student to support the demand of his subject. Only a special approach based on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) will equip a diploma student to meet his special needs in his higher studies and profession. The language needs of a technical diploma student are specific and intensive, and covers a wide range extending from the basic needs of cognition in the class to verbalizing of abstract thoughts and ideas. BICS is inept in such situations. A diploma student with a bit of interpersonal skills can do well, if his academic English proficiency level is high. So academic English requires much attention and is the need of the time.

The Study

This study is based on the assumption that technical diploma students are not achieving the required academic English proficiency and this affects their results. The expected outcome of the polytechnics can be summed up in three aspects: content learning, technical skills and communication skills. The academic language which holds together the first and the second aspect is the key to successful completion of technical diploma courses.

It cannot be further explained that the subject content knowledge of diploma holders cannot be separated from their academic language. Academic language is the subject knowledge. So, successful diploma holders from the polytechnic stream should have the following skills. They

- 1) should be experts in the technical skills in their respective trade.
- 2) should acquire the academic language skills or the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).
- 3) should be good in Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), presentation skills and the basic life skills like team work.

Opinion of Learners, Teachers and Employers

This researcher conducted an analysis related to the acquisition and use of academic language of the polytechnic students. Two polytechnics each from Kollam district and one from

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Thiruvananthapuram district in Kerala were chosen for this purpose. The responses to this tool is analysed qualitatively. Ten teachers and twenty learners from various departments were included in this study. An opinionnaire was used for this purpose. Responses from three employers were also analysed in this regard. A printed form indicating the following statements inviting their responses were given and their responses were collected and analysed. The opinion of the stake holders on the following statements was elicited. They were given four responses: strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree.

- 1) The polytechnic students are able to communicate the basic aspects in English.
- 2) They can understand and use the words related to their subject.
- 3) They can use the phrases and sentence structures related to the subject.
- 4) They can understand and use the correct pronunciation of words related to their subject.
- 5) They can very well go for self-study using the materials and textbooks provided.
If not put a tick against the reasons provided with this. Language, lack of interest in the trade selected, having no such previous experience, others. . . .
- 6) They can very well write down their ideas clearly related to their subject without errors.
- 7) They can very well communicate their academic ideas in speaking
- 8) The polytechnic diploma holder can very well communicate their ideas in their workplace.

Responses to statements about need for academic language (Table No.1)

QUESTION NO.	OPINION OF	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1	LEARNERS	3	7	6	4
	TEACHERS	1	3	5	1
	EMPLOYERS	0	2	1	0
2	Ls	2	9	8	1
	Ts	1	2	7	0
	Es	0	2	1	
3	Ls	1	6	10	3
	Ts	0	2	7	1
	Es	0	1	2	0
4	Ls	1	7	11	1
	Ts	0	3	6	1
	Es	0	1	2	0
5	Ls	2	6	12	0
	Ts	0	3	7	0
	Es	0	3	0	0

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6	Ls	1	4	13	2
	Ts	0	2	7	1
	Es	0	1	2	0
7	Ls	1	3	15	1
	Ts	0	2	6	2
	Es	0	1	2	0
8	Ls	0	4	13	3
	Ts	0	2	6	2
	Es	0	0	3	0

Question number 1

The responses to the first question show that half of the learners do not have basic communication skills. In the opinion of teachers this percentage goes to sixty percent. In the opinion of the employers this percentage is thirty-three.

Question number 2

The responses for this question show that forty-five percent of learners do not understand the words related to their subject. Teachers responded to this statement that seventy-percent of learners don't understand the vocabulary related to their subject. The employers replied that thirty three percent don't know the words related to their academic subject.

Question number 3

Learners responded that sixty five percent of learners cannot use phrases and sentence related to their subject. The response of teachers show that this percentage reaches eighty. The employers said that this percentage is sixty-six.

Question number 4

The learners expressed their views that sixty percent of learners don't understand and use words with the correct pronunciation. Teachers pointed out that this percentage is seventy. The employers responded that this is sixty six percent.

Question number 5

Learners accepted the fact that sixty percent of them cannot go for self-learning using their text books while it was seventy percent as per the opinion of the teachers. The employers expressed the view that one hundred percent of learners can go for self-learning.

Question number 6

Seventy-five percent of the learners responded to this question said that they cannot write down their opinion without errors. This was eight percent as per the opinion of the teachers. The employers expressed their view that about sixty six percent of diploma holders cannot express their views without errors.

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Question number 7

Eighty percent of learners responded that they cannot communicate in speaking. The teachers also responded that this percentage was eighty percent. For the employers this percentage was sixty-six.

Question number 8

Eighty percent of learners responded that they cannot communicate effectively in workplace in English. This percentage was eighty percentage for teachers. Employers responded that the diploma holders cannot effectively communicate in the workplace.

Analysis of Opinions

Apart from the first and second questions the percentage of responses favouring inadequate academic language proficiency was above sixty percent. The teachers responded to all the questions that sixty percentage of learners have inadequate academic language proficiency. Similar to the responses of the employers, other than questions one and two there was inadequate academic language issues reaching beyond sixty percentage of the learners. The responses show that the learners are in a better position to communicate in their basic interpersonal communication. This doesn't mean that they are good at BICS. The employers found that they could manage their interpersonal communication in English, but there are also about thirty-three percentage of learners lack BICS also. Forty-five percentage of learners could understand and use academic vocabulary which is from their personal experience.

The employers found that they somehow manage to improve the use of academic vocabulary. It may mean that the employees have given importance to learning vocabulary related to their workplace needs. In all other aspects, there is a unanimous above sixty percentage related to inadequate usage of academic language as responded by the learners, teachers and employers.

There was a rise in percentage in communication by writing and speaking without errors in comparison to questions 3,4 and 5. They have their limitations on the use of subject related phrases and sentences as seen from the opinionnaire. It is also an interesting fact that above sixty percentage of responses showed that the learners are not good in self-study. Language and communication barriers can be one of the major reasons for this as per the data received. Writing was a strong area for learners as they get enough opportunity to write in English in exams, assignments etc. But the question of writing without errors is difficult for the learners. Speaking related to their academic knowledge is difficult for more than seventy percentage of the learners and highest inadequacy in communication was marked in the workplace communication. Inadequacy is seen higher in speaking in comparison to writing. It was also seen that productive communication skills like speaking and writing lacks more in comparison to receptive skills like understanding of words and phrases.

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Conclusion

Christiane Dalton-Puffer mentions that language and content cannot be separated at all. Incompetency in academic language use is a reality. There can be slight differences in the percentage of learners who are not competent in academic language proficiency, but it is seen that a majority of learners find it hard to cope with their academic learning due to issues in language. The problems that arise due to this extends from classroom learning to job prospects. As this is a burning issue steps should be taken to solve this issue. The extent of the issue has to be identified and the causes and possible solutions also has to be identified.

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