

**PROMOTING UNDERGRADUATE ENGINEERING STUDENTS'
SPEAKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH THROUGH CONVERSATIONS
AND CONTENT-BASED GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

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ABSTRACT

The art of conversing and discussing in groups can be attained through constant practice. The present study brings out the results achieved for enhancing the spoken English of Engineering students through conversations and content-based discussions with the help of YouTube videos on various subjects. Effective conversation and discussion skills in English are mandatory for the development of a profession. According to John Adair, Communication skills are essential in leading, managing and working with others. Today's professional graduates (Engineering students) need to advance their capabilities and enrich their ideas in the world of practical communication. Active listening and thoughtful reading skills may facilitate sound knowledge for fruitful communicative competence in English. Poor communicative abilities in English may be off-putting aspects of most of the 21st century's engineering graduates in India which hinder them from achieving desired accomplishments. To succeed both in academics as well as in employability skills, the students should participate in Group Discussions and Conversations regularly and discuss the subjects they learn besides, the day to day happenings in the society.

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The present paper aims to highlight successful conversational and content-based discussion skills in English through an experimental approach with Under Graduate Engineering students from rural and regional background of GVP College of Engineering (Autonomous). YouTube as an effective tool for language learning is also taken as the model to enhance the spoken skills of the learners. The students of tech-age are quick learners, creative thinkers and innovators. They have enough potential to learn, relearn and unlearn. In order to help the learners to enhance their conversational and discussion skills, a group of 10 students were part of the academic conversations and group discussions based on a variety of educational topics. Daily conversations, discussions and videos from YouTube assisted the learners enhance spoken English skill. The paper also discusses the techniques to attain art of conversational and discussion skills through academic interactions and content-based group discussions.

Speaking in English is Important:

Aldous Huxley (1958) once wrote, "Language has made possible man's progress from animality to civilization." (P. 167) He continued by explaining the value of language: "Language permits its users to pay attention to things and persons are absent and the events are not taking place. Language gives definition to our memories and, by translating experiences into symbols, connects the immediacy of craving or abhorrence, or hatred or love, into fixed principles of feeling and conduct (P. 168)".

According to the British Council's survey:

- English is the language of books, newspapers, aviation and air-traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music, advertising and so on.
- over two-thirds of the world's scientists read in English
- three quarters of the world's mail is written in English

- eighty per cent of the world's electronically stored information is in English
- of the estimated 200 million users of the Internet, some thirty-six per cent communicate in English. (<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learning-faq-the-english-language.htm>)

Students with various academic backgrounds aspire to learn English language skills. The ideal purpose of advanced learning is to communicate with peers and to address colleagues, superiors or subordinates effectively in English. The learners have to meet the society's hardest questions related to personal, academic or professional issues. Speaking in English tackles the real, practical needs of the students and helps them to earn their living while demonstrating the art of knowledge confidently without hesitation.

As Jeff Zwiers and Marie Crawford stated "Conversations are exchanges between people, who are trying to learn from one another and build meanings... (2011)." Constant conversations and subject-oriented discussions help the learners to enrich their academic knowledge besides language i.e. vocabulary, syntax, discourse used to describe learners' abstract concepts, complex ideas and higher-order thinking process. "Partners (students) take turns talking, listening and responding to each other's comments" (Zwiers & Marie, 2011). Students will be able to learn, understand and express cause and effect during the conversations and discussions from the texts they read and tasks they engage in their everyday lives.

The Two Visages of Interactions:

- **The Internal Dialogue:** It is Intra-personal communication and often takes place within oneself. This Self-talk is so powerful and it consists of language, thoughts, beliefs and it has a powerful influence over how we see ourselves in our communication. This kind of self-interaction generates thought provoking activities which are based on the quality of our language and shapes our self-perceptions. The series of our thoughts impact on our behavior and communication.
- **The Interactive Dialogue:** This is a mixture of vocabulary and expressions, pronunciation or intonation, non-verbal cues and our intentions we maintain while engaging with others to meet our expectations in human relations. Its quality affects many aspects of our day-to-day lives, viz. our status, personal and professional relationships, shapes comments of others on us and increases the effectiveness in our actions. One should explore *Communication* from a new outlook by acknowledging *Inclusive Interactions* which impact his or her success and quality of life.

The students can be allowed to converse or discuss classroom lectures, examination patterns, action plans, use of language and details of vocabulary, democratic participation

across roles and responsibilities. They will get room to imagine, plan, think about, wonder and speculate about subjective and other areas of knowledge. The discussions just do not end with academics; they are life giving when they extend through the length, width and depth of all they experience. Once the students develop communicating in English, their confidence and language allows them to question, deliberate, negotiate, ponder and imagine. They will also develop fluency and ease during such activities. This kind of talks will lead to the development of students' target language and academic learning and they will succeed in:

- ➡ Setting up purposeful talks by incorporating standards, establishing a clear purpose; and identifying learning, language, and social objectives for lessons.
- ➡ Meeting an environment which uplifts learners' academic communication and their routines of talk.
- ➡ Managing the academic communication through grouping and collaborative activities to amplify students' confidence for effective conversation with peers.
- ➡ Assessing academic language development by means of realistic approaches to supervise self-progress.

These activities also meet the educators' tasks, diverse needs of learners, stay on to high expectations; develop students' sense of self as productive and valued students, graduates, employees and citizens. When it comes to language, the students were able to explain, inquire, question, dispute and elaborate. Vocabulary is the most important element of English for its learners. To convey or exchange wishful opinions and a lot of meaning, learner requires adequate vocabulary. Mostly the application of vocabulary takes place and can be learnt outside the class room.

According to Douglas Fisher et al. the language teachers should develop a framework that 'we use in our own teaching to foster the kind of talk that leads to the development of academic learning necessary for students to succeed: *Planning for purposeful talk*, *Creating an environment* (that encourages academic discourse), *Managing the academic discourse* (thorough grouping and collaborative activities), and *Assessing academic language development*' (Douglas Fisher et al., 2008).

Effective communication skills and proficiency in the four language skill of English i.e., LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) skills are one of the required skills that today's engineering students should acquire to explore the necessary skill-sets that the contemporary (competitive) employment world demands. The graduates may be well recognized when they explore and demonstrate their multiple intelligences and to be the world-beaters. Attaining proficiency in English language is an additional asset which every student has to acquire alongside academic eligibility.

YouTube as a Contemporary Learning Tool:

YouTube as an effective tool for language learning is also taken as the model to enhance the spoken skills of the learners. The students of tech-age are quick learners, creative thinkers and innovators. They have enough potential and resources to learn, relearn and unlearn. YouTube meets individuals' different propensities for learning and explaining through the sources available in it.

Students with different levels of understanding abilities and learning tendencies can utilize plentiful resources from YouTube accordingly the students' interests in multi-disciplines. They will also familiarize with technology-mediated learning. In today's globalised world English, reshaping of the English language is being absorbed in many geographical and cultural contexts and naturally adapting it is inevitable. Studies of British, American, Australian, South African, Indian, Chinese, and other 'Englishes' show the distinguishing or varied use of pronunciation, spelling, grammar, vocabulary, and communication.

The differences in the learning tendencies among individuals were observed as intra-group differences – low-functioning individuals among different groups can adapt to the technology mediated learning's stimuli and requirements of the self by direct exposure. Today's students should be taught how to think and demonstrate their abilities. "In many countries, the dominant educational ideologies have recognized that to teach children to think would be compatible with the maintenance of the status quo. In those situations, education does not create thinking students and autonomous learners." (*Mediated Learning*, p-ix)

The Learner-centered Activity:

The activities took place for 6 days. Everyday 60 minutes of time is allocated for the activities. The students were formed groups and pairs. The discussions and conversation mainly aimed to develop their spoken English skills using the academic-related vocabulary and make them speak spontaneously about what they want to ask, question, express a doubt, share or respond while discussing or conversing.

Activities started with a diagnostic test to test their Speaking abilities. As a test evaluation at the beginning of their discussions, they were asked to speak about themselves for two (2) minutes. It was observed that about 40 to 60 percent of the students were good at some grammar rules and they try to construct sentences using the grammatical structures while speaking. The test has given a great result in assessing the students' speaking abilities and allowed them to know what they are and how to recognize their skills and identify their self-interests. Most of them were unable to meet the inclined expectations due to their stage fright and lack of accuracy of the target language. Group Discussions and

conversations create a platform for the students to socialize the language as well as internalize the inputs given by the teacher.

The following areas were identified and assessed in order to enhance their spoken English skills:

- Application of basic grammar and accuracy of the language
- Content, Clarity and Fluency
- Participants' levels of interaction.

Unlike many of the whole class interactions, one student at a time talks while the others listen. They may clearly use a lot of academic language related to the concern subject – it is great for the students as they get a chance to learn. They also learn to balance their talk in the class as well as outside the class. Wilkinson (1965) introduced the term 'Oracy' as a way for people to think about the role that oral language plays in literary development defining it as – the ability to express oneself coherently and to communicate freely with others by word of mouth.' Oracy is the foundation of literacy. The Plan for a model Group Discussion or Conversation...

Aim	Speaking Skill
Level	UG Level (Pre-Intermediate)
Organization	Group Discussion (with a group of 5 to 6 students)/Conversation/Situational Dialogues (2 students)
Material	• Smart-phones with or without Internet and pre-downloaded YouTube Videos (Related to the topic) • A scribble pad and a pen
Time	20 - 30 Minutes (to prepare and organize themselves)
Procedure	Step 1: The students form groups themselves and each group with a minimum number of 6 students (2 students in the case of conversation) and choose a topic of their own to discuss and decide their roles. Step 2: Watch video(s) or explore relevant information from other websites and take or make notes. Step 3: The students should develop their own ideas relevant to the topic and expand their talk by giving examples now and then besides quoting the sources. (the students can also do some homework if the topics were given in advance and prepare with their groups or pairs.) Step 4: Finally, the students get ready for exchanging their views and demonstrate the discussion or conversation in front of the class.
Outcomes	The students were able to...

	• Develop listening comprehension skills • Make and take notes • Develop spontaneous ideas or views accordingly the topic. • Watch, listen to and communicate more authentic and relevant information. • Build self-confidence • Learn to coordinate and get along with groups • Enhance inter-personal communication skills • Learn to identify and solve problems • Learn to manage their emotions • Command over English language and communicative competence • Learn to play a variety of roles such as 'Initiator, Information Seeker/giver, organizer, summarizer, problem solver, decision maker, and summarizer.
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The conversations and discussions may take place between teacher and students and students – students. If it is between teachers and students – teacher initiates and student responds and teachers evaluate and initiate again (i.e. initiate-respond-evaluate cycle).

Some of the topics that the group discussed:

- 'The importance or role of Social Issues in 21st century's students or academic contexts'.
- 'Mathematics and its importance in academic, professional and personal careers and logical thinking.'
- 'Work-study programs and planning and time management for academics, entertainment and extracurricular activities'.
- 'Learning English, Communication/Soft skills through Smart-Phones & Tabs.'
- 'Human – Computer Interaction and Contemporary Learning Technologies'.
- 'Is life today better than in the past? Think about the following':
 - a. Education - employment - job satisfaction;
 - b) Health: prevention, treatment, new discoveries, social security, etc.;
 - c) Comfort : standard of living (housing/transport/leisure);
 - d) Violence; Social issues: single mothers, unmarried couples, homosexuality ...

Some of the topics that Pairs conversed:

- 'Possibility of learning Advanced Communications / human intercultural interactions course'.
- 'Learning computer software and hardware skills – the need of the hour for every student'.
- 'Financial Management of bachelor-graduates and increase in tuitions and in daily needs.'
- 'Career in the field of Information Technology & Computer Science Engineering'.
- News Coverage on TV Today.
- The Effects of Medical and Scientific Progress :
a) health b) beauty c) comfort in the home d) transport

Outcome of the Action Plan – Learner/Learning-Centered Activity:

** Learners' development has been leveled as shown below:*

Learner	Basic Grammar		Content		Accuracy		Fluency		Levels of Interaction		Questioning & Answering Strategies	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Student – 1	2	3	2	4	1	3	1	4	2	4	1	4
Student – 2	2	3	2	4	1	3	1	4	2	4	1	4
Student – 3	1	2	2	3	2	3	1	4	2	4	1	4
Student – 4	3	4	2	4	2	4	2	4	2	4	2	4
Student – 5	1	2	2	3	2	3	2	4	2	4	2	4
Student – 6	3	4	3	4	3	4	2	4	2	4	2	4
Student – 7	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	4	2	4	2	4
Student – 8	2	3	3	4	3	4	3	4	2	4	1	4
Student – 9	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	4	2	4	1	4
Student – 10	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	4	2	4	2	4

** 5 = Excellent; 4 = Good; 3 = Average; 2 = Below Average; 1 = Poor*

After six (6) days of activities, 80% of the learners' English language communication or interpersonal skills have been shaped up and evolved.

Learning through videos is the method from normal to extra-normal and text-to-movie approach. General classroom environment is almost a teacher-centered and students or learners do not get much room to exchange and show their active participation. Students demonstrate their academic knowledge through presentations in front of their co-students. They can explain, elaborate, express doubts and get feedback to do better job for the next levels of his abilities. They have learnt to deliver effectively and improve performance besides maintaining rapport with the peers on a high note.

Content-based discussions have become solution oriented and focus more on a positive outlook and energize students and boost their confidence in academics and English language communication. During the discussions and conversation students suggest each other and observe each other and they can be more attentive listeners. They imbibe the advice given by co-students and teacher and concentrate on improving their performance. They learn to cope with stress and learn to conduct themselves in friendly and future based approaches.

These activities stimulated students' thought process by acknowledging their need to self-analysis. They also find several ideas to discuss and there is a possibility to get various options or suggestions and freedom to choose. Content-based discussions facilitate instructive style of learning and clarify the context and explain and communicate their expectations clearly. They also facilitate the learners, engage and energize themselves successfully.

Humans play a variety of roles in life and all adapt themselves to act accordingly. The students of computer age are supposed to be the world-beaters and ready to handle and lead things and people.

- ➡ The discussions facilitate students demonstrate conflict management, self identity, avoid egos and help in many ways of personality development.
- ➡ The learners will be able to take on new roles with great responsibility:
 - Listening rather than just telling
 - Supporting and understanding rather than blaming
 - Honest and open communication
 - Consistency and integrity
 - Empowering people to problem-solve rather than just giving directions
 - Giving constructive, balanced and solution oriented feedback rather than just criticism
 - and a focus on learning and development rather than completing tasks.

The Present Paper Explored:

***PROMOTING UNDERGRADUATE ENGINEERING STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS
IN ENGLISH THROUGH CONVERSATIONS AND CONTENT-BASED GROUP
DISCUSSIONS***

- ➡ How Conversation and Content-based Discussions help language learners
- ➡ Importance of Spoken English to play active role in interpersonal relations
- ➡ Language and Communication for Effective Personal and Professional Career
- ➡ Successful Human or Peer Interactions or Discussions
- ➡ Use of Appropriate Language for Collaborative Communication
- ➡ Enhancement of Academic Knowledge

“Learning about language goes well beyond the classroom. If classrooms become heavens of extensive deliberative talk, we can depend on the joy and exhilaration of such participation to spill into other participatory occasions. We need to ensure that our learning is *lifelong, life-wide and life-deep*” (Banks et al., 2007). Students develop interpersonal communication skills and quick learning abilities to explore more of their potential and creative ideas. Listening and non-verbal communication skill can also be enriched. The researcher’s feedback facilitated the learners Self-awareness, Self and Peer management skills and decreased blind-spots of their communication skills.

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