

English for Business Education in India: an Empirical Approach

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Abstract

English seems to have become the global language of business. Most companies across the world are now embracing English as their corporate language. Indian business embraced English, initially at the corporate level and later the whole company were found communicating within and outside, in English. Indian Business Schools, in the quest to create global managers, now focus on improving English of their students. Can the Indian business schools improve the English fluency of its students in such a short time of two years, and if yes, to what extent, and how? This paper proposes an implementation approach to improve English for Business Education in India, based on empirical evidence.

The implementation approach considers the Indian legacy of culture, tradition, ethnic pride and capability. The paper also looks at the willingness of Indians to embrace English over their native language, especially in Business Education. The paper finds that not only it is important to understand the level of English proficiency required for the business or job at hand, but also to understand the level of English proficiency that can be achieved during the business management course duration of about 2 years. For the proposed action plan, the paper affirms the resistance points from the students and their response; and also the reinforcing points considering the motivations, objectives and resources. This paper exemplifies a successful implementation of improving English for Business Education in India.

Keywords: English, Business Education, Self Reference Criterion, Ethnocentric, Communication

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Introduction

In the ancient era, the Roman Empire through social refinement brought a major part of the known world into its order, and peace - Pax Romana. Roman society developed to an apex level ever known, and Latin became the refined language for all to learn. Roman invasion left back remnants of Latin. Even after the fall of the mighty Roman Empire, Latin words are still used in many languages including English.

In the modern era, the builders of the great British Empire similarly brought growth and extravagance to the world that was still coming out of the dark ages of the medieval times. British invasion came in the form of commerce that expanded their kingdom and extended their hold over the modern world. They imparted their refined culture and language (Bryson, 1990), and even after the Britain Empire contracted, their language English remained and embraced largely across the world. English in India remains a case in point.

English in the Society

It is easy to comprehend that the language English that British introduced in India was for their convenience. It was difficult to do business (as East India Company did) without communicating efficiently with the natives. Naturally, the early Indian English speakers were either the ones who studied in England or the ones who communicated with the English sailors and tradesmen at the wharf (sea ports). Slowly, British introduced their primary educational system in India and numerous primary schools in India started teaching English. Slowly, English became the first language for education and higher education in India, especially in professional courses, such as engineering, medical sciences and business. However, this did not happen without resistance. English was meted a status of the ruler's language and the society (common people at large) resisted anything linked with English as a mark of Indian national pride. Interestingly, even after independence from the British, India continued with English in its educational system and slowly the society accepted it.

Indian usage of English, with its own trials and tribulations, is mockingly known as Indian English by the native speakers of English. Is Indian English providing the Indians, a sense of retribution, with the fair influence of Indianizing English through inclusion of Hindi (or other native Indian language) vocabulary and pronunciations? Did Indian English evolve as a dialect that has absorbed Indian culture and sensibilities? Some proponents of native Indian languages feel that English language brings in occidental/continental beliefs in people, which is not healthy for the cultural heritage of India. However, India (and its businesses) still remains an enigma for most western countries. Is there a change that through better communication using English, this puzzling Indian culture (and business) is better understandable for the westerners? This is likely to benefit all.

English for Business

English now has become an indelible language for modern business. Many non-English speaking companies, such as Nokia (Finnish), Renault (French), Samsung (Korean), Airbus (French-German-Spanish), Daimler (German), and so many more

have embraced English completely for their internal communications also. They felt that having English as the only language within the company has facilitated communication and efficient performance across their geographically diversified business units and subsidiaries. However, there is no dearth of companies who felt otherwise. Many companies, especially from Russia, China and Brazil felt that their company works efficiently in their local language. Indian businesses embraced English, initially at the corporate level and later the whole.

It seems that in order to be global, a firm (company) has to essentially embrace English as its official language. A global manager needs to be fluent in English to be efficient and effective. Naturally, business education institutes have English as their sole medium of instruction. Many of these institutes make additional efforts to improve the English fluency levels of their students. Institutes feel that the student's contribution to the job severely gets restricted if the student is not fluent in English to communicate. However, it may not be essential for the student to have advanced level of fluency in English to communicate. Segregating speakers, based on the level of fluency of English in the number of words they have mastered, is a good starting point to ascertain the level of intervention.

Many experts feel that most students have a reasonable comprehension of English but lack more performance oriented English skills. It is important to map the performance oriented with comprehension oriented skills across reading, writing, speaking and engagement through English language for each student. Further the matters becomes complex when it found that all students do not take kindly to the forced language improvement initiative and many resist it.

Measuring level of English in a B-School

The functional level of English justifies the level of intervention required. This is critical as a mismatch between the level of English fluency state and the level of intervention may yield undesired results. Building a functional measure of level of fluency of English becomes essential before we realize how much of improvement is to be achieved. A 'native speaker' (mother-tongue) of English is expected to fluently speak, read, write and understand complex contextual English to meet and exceed the language requirements at social life and work. A 'fluent speaker' of English has advanced understanding of the language, can speak, read, and write English almost at a similar level to the native speaker and can meet the language requirements at social life and work. A 'conversational speaker' of English can speak, read, write and understand English with some effort and manages the language requirements at social life and work, functionally. Conversational speaker can communicate functional (basic) requirements. A 'basic speaker' of English can speak, read, write and understand English with considerable effort and has unsophisticated ability to communicate simple instructions. Basic speaker barely manage to communicate in English at social life and work. The functional level of English, from high to low cited above (Neeley, 2012), justifies the level of intervention required.

It is essential to segregate speakers, based on the level of fluency of English in the number of words they have mastered. The segregation is found on four counts - Native speaker, Advanced speaker, Intermediate speaker and Beginner. A Native speaker, who can communicate fluently and idiomatically, is deemed to master more

than 10,000 words. Whereas, an Advanced speaker, who can communicate comfortably with nuances, is expected to master above 3500 words till it matches the native speaker. An Intermediate speaker, who is reasonably expressive and has functional communication, is expected to master words in the range of 1500 to 3000. A Beginner, is someone who can communicate at basic level and can cope with basic situation, is expected to function with less than 1500 words (Neeley, 2012; Economist, 2013).

It is important to map the performance oriented (ranging from Awareness to Understanding) with comprehension oriented (ranging from Engage to Skill) in light of five dimensions - Presentation, Report Writing, Interview, Speech and Body Language will put Speaking as orientation towards skill and awareness, Reading as engage and awareness, Writing as skill and understanding, and Listening as the measure of engage and understanding (Neeley, 2012).

Moreover, all students do not take kindly to the forced language improvement initiative and sometimes resist. Many felt that “We already know English, why learn it again?” Student’s response to improvement is English also comes from their mindset and belief of their uncertainty of achieving result (Maybe) and certainty of achieving results (Yes). Based on the Capability (Can Do) and Belief (Good Idea), the students can be segregated as Frustrated, Oppressed, Inspired and Indifferent. The Frustrated student lacks the capability to learn English, yet feels that English will help him in his job. The Oppressed student is close to giving up on improving English as he lacks the capability and does not see any benefit in learning English for his job. The Indifferent student has the capability to learn English but does not see any benefit for himself and his job. The Inspired student is capable to learn English and feels that improvement in English is good for him and his job (Neeley, 2012; Frendo, 2005).

Research Question

Should institutes, such as business schools in India, try to teach (business) English to the students so that they achieve a level of fluency comparable to native English speakers? During placements, companies do insist on English fluency as eligibility. How does one improve English in Indian business schools, given the legacy of culture, tradition, ethnic pride and capability? Will the Indians embrace English similar to their native language? Overall, how should the business schools in India improve the English proficiency of their students to Advanced levels?

It is important to understand the level of English proficiency required for the business or job at hand. It is also important to understand the level of English proficiency that can be achieved during the business management course duration of about 2 years. Further, before implementation of the proposed action plan, it is important to understand the resistance points from the students and their response. Finally, it is typical to build an implementation plan, considering the achievable level of English proficiency, considering the motivations, objectives and resources.

Methodology

Quantitative techniques cannot be used as the empirical study on improvement of English in a business school, as the interventions are not identical, are infrequent and

have far too less composite instances for any statistical relevance. Hence the elements of the process of improvement of English are described here with detailed qualitative importance. It is natural that any change in the process of improvement of English amongst business school students will not have a linear impact on their overall learning of business English. Hence, the research outcome is likely to be inductive in nature. Keeping this in view, Grounded Theory method (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) is proposed in this research to answer the research questions outlined in the previous section.

Grounded theory emphasizes the generation of theory from data and the empirical data is provided in this paper as a starting point to generate and reconfirm the proposed theory. Although analytic induction technique can also be used to iteratively build of theory from data (Denzin, 1978), but Grounded theory approach is preferred in this paper as an implementable approach is achieved for the benefit of the students with large certainty.

Stern (1995) suggests that grounded theory provides a novel perspective to the situation, giving way to a plausible theory that can be tested empirically. The approach to formulate—and then reformulate—hypotheses or explanations based on conceptual ideas is used to refine the theory based on data generalization (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This paper tries to confirm the proposed theory, but does not try to generalize the theory. However, triangulation of data, from published sources, interviews from the faculty members, participants (students) and companies who hire the students, increases the validity of this research, a process that is suggested by Denzin (1978).

Grounded theory method oriented results may not confirm the concepts or hypotheses developed from empirical data (Glaser 1998). However, validity in grounded theory is judged by conceptual fit, relevance to theory and practice, and ease of implementation (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Glaser 1998). This paper has considered grounded theory to generate a learning approach that is essential to transform the capability of business school students in improving their business English.

In most empirical and action research, individuals are the unit of analysis, whereas in grounded theory driven research, the incident is the unit of analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The unit of the study is ‘individual’, where multiple interrelated interventions or incidents affect individual and the class, and co-exist (Garud & Van de Ven, 1989:204). Further, the functions of the individual (elements) define the boundaries which is not arbitrary (Easton et al, 1993:3). This way, not only the process of learning business English and its constituent parts are analyzed longitudinally, but also their beneficiary interactions to provide an approach towards implementation.

Analysis

There are three primary reasons for improving English in businesses: Competitive Pressure (need to communicate with buyers-suppliers-other business partners more efficiently than your competitors); Globalization of Tasks and Resources (geographically dispersed employees now need to work closer on a regular basis); and Mergers and Acquisitions across National Boundaries (cross-cultural integration becomes easier with fluency in the accepted business language – English).

It is essential to consider the primary reasons for improving English in businesses, before finalizing the implementation plan for improving English fluency. One needs to also look at the primary obstacles in improving English in business education. Teaching business English comes as a shock to students who feel they already know English and feel withdrawn when forced to go through a course, such as business communication. Some implement their learning from the subject – Business Communications, while others seldom do and sometimes avoid, which makes the compliance checkered. Students may feel that their worth has diminished, regardless of the English fluency level; they may often underestimate their capabilities. Overall, there may be a general resistance when students feel it is not very efficient to avoid Hindi (or their mother tongue) for business English; moreover their poor English language skill may become conspicuous and this may lead to a fear of making mistakes, thereby making them resist the language outright.

Hence, it becomes important to have a clear comprehension of the legacy that we have incurred after our freedom from the British and their language English. It is important to note that students need not have an advanced level of proficiency every time to contribute to business. Hence, an acceptable level of English fluency target needs to be ascertained by each student in their quest to improve their English. The focus of the students should be turned to the finalization of their individual objective, based on their capability and confidence. Armed with this, implementation plan can be drawn considering the linkages with the problem, alternatives and recommendations.

Level of Fluency	Subjective Measure
Mother Tongue (Native Speaker)	Can fluently speak, write, read and understand complex English with ease. Able to meet and exceed language requirement at work and social life.
Fluent (Advanced)	Can speak, write, read and understand English with comfort. Able to meet language requirement at work place. Can effectively participate in conversations in English.
Conversational (Intermediate)	Can speak, write, read and understand English with effort. Able to manage language requirement at work place. Can communicate functionally with native speakers. Can use English to communicate basic requirements.
Basic (Beginner)	Can speak, write, read and understand English with considerable effort. Lacks fluency but can respond to simple instruction in English. Has Unsophisticated ability to communicate in English and can understand when spoken slowly.

[Fig. 1]

The objective of the English level fluency can be achieved by considering the functional measure of level of fluency (Fig. 1) and also by considering the quantitative measure of level of fluency in English (Fig. 2), as given in the following:

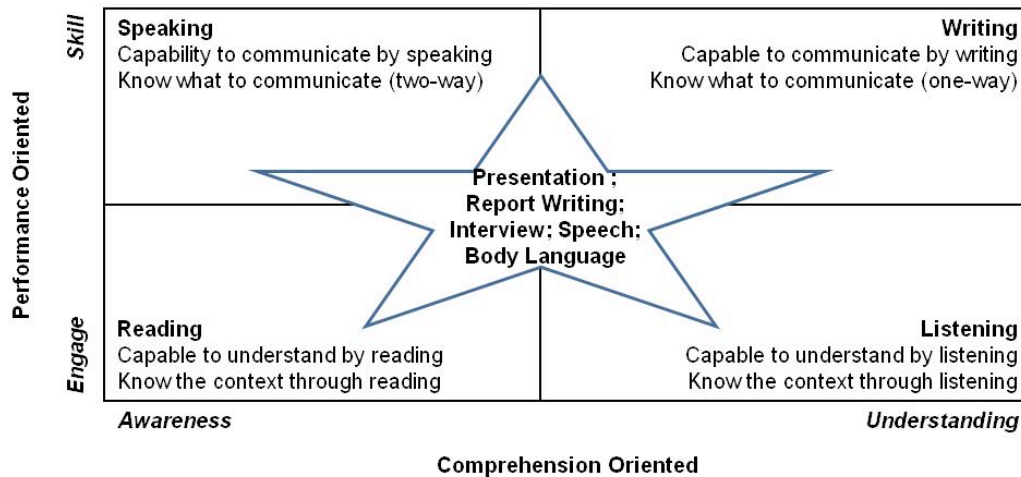
Level of Fluency	Mastering Words (Count)
Native Speaker (Fluently and Idiomatically Communicate)	10000-15000 words
Advanced (Comfortably Communicate with Nuances)	3500-10000 words
Intermediate (Functional Communication, Reasonably Expressive)	1500-3500 words
Beginner (Basic Communication, Cope with Basic Situations)	<1500 words

[Fig. 2]

From the above two tables, it becomes clear that advanced level of English proficiency, although desirable, is seldom needed to perform efficiently on the job for a business management graduate. Hence, a proficiency level of 4000 words (which is largely achievable) may be kept as a target to achieve during the course.

The student's response to English comprehension and performance towards improvement is given in the following:

Level of Fluency: Comprehension vs Performance



[Fig. 3]

From the above Fig. 3, it is important to note that during most primary and secondary education, focus and due importance on listening and reading. But in fact, most modern businesses demand refined skills across speaking and writing. The later is more performance oriented than the former, which is more comprehension oriented. For speaking and writing, it is important to refine the 'train of thought' before something is spoken or written. A structure, a logical flow, and so on is expected, naturally for the performance oriented English, and modern business workplace demands extempore performance.

Some of the actions in English communication, based on general experience would be to know who is the target audience is, how and how much to communicate with them, a mechanism for a feedback. Fig. 4 highlights the student's response to the improvement in English, given in the following:

Student's Response to English

Good Idea	Yes	Frustrated Lack capability to learn English Feel it will be good for me and my job	Inspired Capable to learn English Feel it will be good for me and my job
	Maybe	Oppressed Lack capability to learn English Don't see any benefit for me and my job	Indifferent Capable to learn English Don't see any benefit for me and my job
		Maybe	Yes
Can Do			

[Fig.4]

A typical misstep by many business schools is their focus on doing traditional English communication development activities, such as the traditional passage speaking, memo-writing, letter writing, application writing, and précis writing skills. The preferred way to improve English for the current business school students should focus more on social media type communications, e-mail etiquettes, and so on.

Conclusion

It becomes clear that it is essential to make students understand the importance of English language in conducting business transactions efficiently and effectively. This will make the 'indifferent' students category to move to the 'inspired' category. For the 'oppressed' category, foster positive attitudes towards English. This can happen when students see around them others who have positive experiences with the change. Fluent English speakers (and the teaching faculty) can positively influence the confidence of this category of students. This will make the 'oppressed' students category to move to the 'inspired' category. In addition to the above, for the 'frustrated' category, more opportunities are to be provided to gain experience with the language, especially in a business setting. For this, the student may be encouraged to undergo internship in a company that depends more on stakeholder interaction in English. Opportunities can also be provided through real-life projects and international exchange for the student. Under crunch situation, it is likely that the student realizes his/her potential and feels that the targeted level of English proficiency (Intermediate level) is in fact, achievable. Confidence of the student can be restored by appreciating their efforts. This will make the 'frustrated' students category to move to the 'inspired' category. Once, the critical mass for improvement is achieved, peer pressure and support will achieve the rest. Finally, make the student appreciate and feel the benefit they derive from improving their English communications. The skill that is being developed should immediately help them in their corporate life.

Implications

Making students appreciate the need for English language refinement during their business management course is tricky. Students mostly feel that they already have the adequate level of fluency in English. However, it is important to make them understand the importance of high level of proficiency in English for a global manager that every business management school strives to deliver. The need of business communications as a course is imperative, considering the demand from the prospect companies at the time of hiring business management students.

It is important to understand the softer factor of resistance and indifference from the student's side and link them to deeper factors of culture, ethnic pride and the usefulness of this refinement of fluency in English. This paper brings out an implementable plan that makes the business communication course achieve one of its primary objective – English fluency requirements for business management. Linking the culture and history to English language and its development in India makes the student understand the inherent resistance for refinement. Many students still feel that English as a language should not be taught in Business schools and its refinement cannot be achieved in the short span of two years.

Limitations

Extensive use of data from all plausible sources—essential in grounded theory studies—ranging from field interviews, to research from noted scholars, with divergent richness of instances, remains an important limitation. Bringing the primary and secondary data to a common platform is essential in this research, as is typical with grounded theory research. However, as the theory is built from the data instances of the study, more iterative instances would refine the conclusions, better. Grounded theory is preferred as a research method in this paper over an equally strong approach to similar study, the analytic induction technique.

The explanation and findings presented in this research, is done with respect to idiosyncratic instances, which may not be applied empirically in its current state to other study of similar nature. This is because; the certain attributes enjoyed by the subject under study may not exist in others. This research may not identify the portability of findings over other organizations. Further, research bias in similar studies is difficult to completely neutralize, which is also a limitation of this paper.

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