

# Counseling AND C Oral. Communication

**A**t the college where I teach, undergraduate students of engineering and technology need to learn English in their first year. Some new students already communicate well in English when they arrive at the college from English-medium schools. However, other students, who are from secondary schools where the medium of instruction is a vernacular language like Tamil or Telugu, find communicating in English a problem. This article is about our students of lower proficiency in English and our experiences helping them.

The local government of Tamilnadu has sanctioned certain concessions and quotas for those members of society that were suppressed in the name of caste and religion and for those individuals who are economically poor and from rural areas. These students are exposed to English only in their English classes. Though these students' marks in the final secondary examinations are good and they are as intelligent as their classmates from English-medium schools, outside of class, they are not used to communicating in English. It is little wonder if their self-image and self-confidence are eroded when they see their peers from English-medium schools speak fluently and even eloquently. In our department we may have 50 lower proficiency students out of the approximately 600 new students admitted each academic year.

Based on our interaction with these lower proficiency students, my colleagues and I have learned that though they are able to listen and comprehend lectures in English, they have difficulty in understanding technical terms and phrases. They also find it difficult to understand when the lectures seem fast, or when they come across

words that they are not familiar with in terms of pronunciation and usage. As regards reading, they are able to understand materials and texts that are in simple English, but when they come across jargon, very long sentences, and complex technical passages, they have difficulty in comprehending. With regard to their productive skills, speaking is more of a problem than writing. As they use English to take notes and to complete assignments and tests, they somehow manage either by memorizing answers or with the help of their more proficient peers.

They avoid speaking in English in their day-to-day life situations. Even in classes where they are supposed to answer questions, they adamantly choose to remain silent, thereby inviting the wrath or indifference of the content-area teachers. All these factors result in the loss of confidence these students may have in themselves and the ensuing loss of motivation to learn and progress. They hardly socialize with classmates from English-medium schools and make friends only with other low proficiency students. In this situation, the English teacher's role as a motivator and counselor becomes vital. The teacher needs to spend more time and effort to help these students shed their inhibitions and build confidence.

From our conversations with the students, we've learned that most of them avoid speaking in English because of the fear of making mistakes and facing humiliation. We tell them that making mistakes is part of the natural process of language learning and that learning results from making mistakes. We make sincere efforts to do everything we can to get the learners out of this negative mindset of inferiority and even guilt. We have designed simple but effective activities and imple-

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mented them successfully to help students gain confidence speaking English. They do these activities at three stages.

In the first stage, the first few English classes are used as ice-breaking sessions for motivating students and stressing the importance of acquiring speaking skills in English for their current academic and future job needs. Students are asked to identify the reasons that prevent them from facing an audience and sharing those reasons with the rest of the class. It is interesting to note that while some students from non-English medium schools believe that they would be confident in giving a speech if their English was fluent, some students from English-medium schools are worried about their public speaking skills and also lack confidence facing an audience. These ice-breaking sessions give all the students, who are from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, an opportunity to be comfortable with their peers. In face-to-face interaction, the students discuss their problems and together try to work out methods of overcoming them. In this process they develop a positive interdependence as they help, comfort, and support each other. As teachers, we make all possible efforts to ensure that the class proceeds effectively and that all students are treated as equal members of the class.

In the second stage, students introduce themselves in a speech to their classmates. They talk about their families, hobbies and interests, attitudes toward life, and anything else that they would like their classmates to know. In this stage, not much importance is given to the content or even to grammar. There may be an occasional query or two from the class. The intention is to let them face an audience, make sense to themselves and to the audience, and in the process help them to gain confidence. At the end of each speech, feedback is given by teachers and classmates.

In the third stage, students make well-prepared speeches on topics determined in class or that they have chosen. During this speech, sequencing of content, nonverbal gestures, and how they handle questions from the audience are analyzed. Good work is highlighted with applause from the audience and with encouraging gestures from us. Afterward, we recommend corrective measures in the form of suggestions. At the end of the third stage, we


observe a lot of improvement in their confidence level as well as their language skills.

During the speech classes, we have observed that almost all students are not very willing to give speeches. Some of them find all possible excuses to keep away from class and absent themselves when speeches are given. When they come to us with excuses, we talk to them. We tell them that we were in the same boat as they are now and that we overcame our difficulties. We also make them realize that what they consider an individual problem is, in fact, a common one among all students and they can overcome it with a little effort and a positive attitude. When possible, we get students from senior classes to talk to the first-year English classes about their experiences and success in communicating in English.

When students come “on stage” they get very good cooperation from their classmates. After completion of their speeches, they admit that they have gained confidence in facing an audience and at the same time they have realized that they need to improve.

At the third stage, we encourage and praise their speeches, their sincerity, and their courage. Our classroom contact with students comes to an end when they go on to their classes of specialization and do not have English as a subject.

During our interactive sessions with students, we not only understand and help them to improve their oral skills, we also get to know their academic and even personal problems in relation to their peers, teachers, and in some cases in relation to their families. The students open up and speak to us as they develop trust in us. I should say that our counseling sessions help all students, but in particular, they have helped students with low proficiency, especially when they realize there is somebody who cares and who wants to help.

I remember one low-proficiency student who was very reluctant to speak in his first-year English class who became a tutor to younger students in his senior year at the college. As you can see, in our department we believe that a student is a human being first and then a student. 

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