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Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) at Work: From Concept to Classroom

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Abstract

Scenario of higher education in India, according to NASSCOM-McKinsey Report is that India produces over 3.1 million graduates, including more than 0.5 million technical graduates, but most of these technical graduates are unabsorbed. This is because majority of them are unemployable. One of the chief reasons for their unemployability is their inability to use English language effectively. They are not able to express their ideas and views properly in English language. The technical education in India has reached to its pinnacle, but still we are grappling with basic issues like how to teach English to engineering students.

Are we any closer to developing standard methods of teaching English to the students of technical education? What are the best practices in the world? What lesson can India learn from these practices?

While everyone involved in the field knows the importance of English, the efforts made for the same are not sufficient and satisfactory. They are not bearing the expected fruits. Still quite a lot of new avenues need to be explored. There is an urgent need of designing and implementing a need based course for the technical students. Present paper focuses on conceptualizing, designing and implementing *Communication Proficiency in English* Course based on CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language) at Marwadi Education Foundation's Group of Institutions (MEFGI), Rajkot. This course is designed by Department of Communication Skills, MEFGI. It also discusses the evaluation process and roles of facilitators and learners along with challenges that teachers face in executing this course at MEFGI. The paper aims at sharing the success story with a view to proposing a model which can be uniformly used in Gujarat in particular and in India in general.



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The Concept

Addressing at the “11th Annual Convocation of the Jamia Hamdard” at New Delhi in March, 2015, Shri M. Hamid Ansari, The Vice President of India referred to a survey carried out in 2013 which asserts that as many as 47 % graduates in India are not employable for any industry role. Most of the graduates (40% approx) were found suitable for clerical/secretarial roles. They are lacking in the knowledge of English language and cognitive skills. National Employability Report of India (2014) also asserts that English is required for a majority of jobs after engineering.

The aforementioned survey and figures apparently yield the importance of English language in today’s corporate world. If one wants to survive in today’s cut throat competition, he/she needs to learn the art of expression. And language of expression in modern market is English. So, students, especially technical students who are going to be an important part of corporate world are required to have proficiency in English.

Keeping this very fact in mind we at Marwadi Education Foundation’s Group of Institutions (MEFGI), Rajkot felt an urgent need to conceptualize, design and implement a need based course for engineering students. This course is known as *Communication Proficiency in English*. The whole concept of *Communication Proficiency in English* course is based on CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) which according to a research report by National Skills Development Council and British Council can be best integrated into vocational qualifications developed by the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF).

What is CEFR?

CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) is a framework of reference put together by Council of Europe. It is designed to provide a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. It embodies an instrumentalist ‘action-oriented approach’; the key concern is with what learners are able to accomplish when using a language rather than with their knowledge about language.

The CEFR describes foreign language proficiency at six levels: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, C1 and C2. It also identifies the scales of ‘can do’ descriptors which mainly focus on language functions.



Design & Implementation of *Communication Proficiency in English Course*

The course *Communication Proficiency in English* is divided into three levels (inclusive of all six levels of CEFR) keeping in mind the ‘can do’ descriptors identified by CEFR. Let’s look at each level one by one.

Table 1

	‘Can do’ Descriptors	Sessions – Level 1
Level 1	Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self Introduction • Introduction of Peers • Interacting in Inner Circle • Interacting with Peers/Colleagues
	Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing Oneself as per Need and Purpose • Effective Pronunciation for Communication Proficiency
	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visiting Places related to Studies and Work • Describing One’s Education
	Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring Information • Giving Information • Acquiring Opinion • Sharing Opinion
	Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visiting Places of Interest • Describing the City- History, Geography and Business



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Table 2

	'can do' Descriptors	Sessions
Level 2	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like...(Sharing One's Preferences • I believe...(ideas about self-career and life.
	Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think Education is for... • Public Speaking
	Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describing an experience • Describing an event
	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining Field • What can an engineer do?
	Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective Pronunciation • What's Your Opinion?
	Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debate • Public Speaking



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Table 3

	'Can do' Descriptors	Sessions
Level 3	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listening to a technical talk• Listening to a technical talk
	Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speaking on an Issue in pair• Speaking on an Issue in Group
	Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speaking on an Issue• Speaking about interdisciplinary connections
	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listening to science• Reading technical paragraphs
	Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Writing a Project• Writing a script for a video
	Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading a video-transcript• Panel Discussion – English in focus



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Major Characteristics of the Course

- **A Need based Course:** It is a completely need based course wherein we first identify professional needs of the students and then design the sessions to fulfil those needs. Here, it is pertinent to note that the branch of the students also affect their needs. Say for example, the needs of Mechanical Engineering students are different than the needs of Computer Engineering students. So, we need to design our sessions keeping in mind such differences.
- **Functions in Focus:** In this course we focus more on language functions. That is to say that the focus is on the usages of language. All the sessions are designed keeping in mind various language functions. For example, *Asking Questions*, *Expressing likes/dislikes*, *Summarizing* etc.
- **Beyond Traditional Grammar:** Proficiency in the second language as described in the book *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching* by H. H. Stern, is today emphatically expressed in communicative and not merely linguistic (i.e., grammatical) terms. But in defining the linguistic aspects of proficiency recent writers (for example Canale and Swain, 1980) strongly emphasize that the stress on communication does not mean that the grammatical components of proficiency can be ignored. In this course also we don't ignore grammar, but it goes beyond *traditional* grammar lectures. We attempt to incorporate grammar in our sessions with the help of functional approach.
- **An Activity based Course:** The whole course of Proficiency in English is activity based. Several activities are designed to involve the students in the learning process and make this venture student-centric rather than teacher-centric.

All the activities are designed keeping in mind the following pedagogical rationale

- **Reception**

One needs to be receptive while learning something new. So, we believe in enhancing students' receptive skills by providing them ample listening and reading practice.

- **Interaction**

Here, the students are given the opportunity to interact with their peers in pairs/groups to consolidate what they have received.



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- **Production**

After reception and interaction, here, the students are expected to produce the language by performing various activities/tasks given to them.

Following are some of the major activities/tasks that are created and executed in the classroom.

- **Pair Work**

The students are divided into pairs and they are given some tasks to carry out. It is found that students can work more effectively when they are allowed to share ideas and views with each other.

- **Group Discussion**

The communicative approach to teaching language apparently asserts that group discussion is also one of the most effective learning tools. In group discussion the students are given various topics/activities for enhancing language skills. Say for example, they can be given a topic 'Social networking (Facebook, whatsapp etc.) sites are a waste of time.' Each student of the group is expected to participate in the discussion.

- **Role play**

Here also the students are divided into small groups or pairs and they are asked to play different roles such as a teacher, a doctor, a politician, a professor etc. This makes teaching learning process more interesting and exciting. The students enjoy performing!

- **Quiz**

Sometimes for the effective implementation of this course quiz is also organized in the classroom. The questions related to various topics such as literature, science, history, politics, religions etc. are included in the quiz. The students actively and enthusiastically participate in this activity.

- **Public Speaking/Elocution/Debate**

Activities such as elocution, debate, public speaking etc are also organized to enhance their speaking skill and to build confidence by removing their fear of using the language.



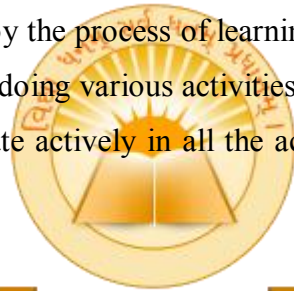
• **E – Classroom**

We all know that technology has become an integral part of everyday life and is now infiltrating the language education sector also. That's why ICT is also a very important feature of this course. Not only the teachers but also the students use Power Point Presentations, audios, videos etc. to make teaching/learning process more interesting and effective. Moreover, the department has also created a Facebook page and a Departmental Blog to bridge a huge gap between *Digital Immigrants* and *Digital Natives*. (Prensky, 2001)

The students have also created a blog on their own to take the classroom discussion further and make the process of learning more interesting and fruitful.

Apart from these activities many other activities such as story-telling, interview etc. are also carried out in the classroom to develop the students' proficiency in English.

It is said that we learn more when we enjoy the process of learning. The same principle works in this course also. Majority of the students really enjoy doing various activities and performing in the classroom. They are always eager and enthusiastic to participate actively in all the activities. For them learning English is now fun-tastic!



Evaluation

There is no formal examination in this course! At the end of each level we conduct evaluation process by giving students various tasks to perform. In this process students are given various tasks/activities which they are expected to perform in pairs/groups or individually. The performances of students are evaluated through criteria set by the department. At the end of the evaluation process the students are given certificates.

Teacher's Role

- In this course teachers work as facilitators. They facilitate the process of learning by guiding the students.
- Teachers give students various tasks/activities based on language functions. E.g. Acquiring and Sharing Information, Acquiring and Sharing Opinion, Describing the City, Describing an Event,



Describing an Experience etc.

- Teachers monitor the whole process and let the students carry out the tasks/activities.
- Teachers encourage students to participate in tasks/activities.
- Teachers counsel students when needs arise.

Learner's Role

- Students participate in tasks/activities zealously.
- Students learn from their peers by participating in group/pair tasks/activities.
- Students seek guidance from their teacher when and where they need.
-

Learner's Feedback

The students of MEFGI also understand the importance and relevance of this course. Most of the students enthusiastically participate in the activities carried out in the classroom and enhance their language proficiency. Let's have a look at some of the students' feedbacks.

1) "It gives me chance to overcome my fear of speaking in front of my classmates."

- Priyanka Doshi, Semester-4,

Department of Computer Engineering, MEF

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2) "It helps us in improving English Grammar and Pronunciation. It also makes the students confident, active towards surrounding by doing activities like Speaking about City, Public Speaking, Speaking on Current Affairs etc."

- Milan Kalola, Semester-7,

Department of Electrical Engineering, MEF

3) "It reduces our stage fear of speaking."

- Kaushik Santoki, Semester-7,

Department of Electrical Engineering, MEF



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Problems/Challenges

Undoubtedly the above mentioned activities are very useful for effective implementation of the course, but there is the other side of the coin also. There are some problems or challenges that as teachers we face in the classroom.

- Since the result of this course/subject does not affect their final result, some students don't learn it seriously.
- The strength of the students in the classroom is also one of the major problems.
- Heterogeneous classrooms.
- Mother tongue interference also affects the learning.
- Since English is not their mother tongue, the students do not get enough exposure to use English language outside the classroom in their day to day life.

All such problems have been addressed wisely. In fact, the course has been designed keeping in mind all these challenges. The Department has been trying hard to meet these challenges.

Conclusion

Marwadi Education Foundation is the only institute in GTU to introduce such a unique course for its students to develop their proficiency in English. We all know that students are at the centre of the process of education. One of the most striking features of this course is that it has been designed keeping in mind the needs of today's competitive world. The learners are trained intensively in terms of language proficiency which helps them to become better and confident professionals. The course has been bearing excellent fruits and we hope that it will reach the pinnacle of success in coming days.



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