

# ENHANCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND SOFT SKILLS OF THE LEARNERS BY INTRODUCING STUDENT CENTRIC METHODS OF TEACHING

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## Introduction

In Teacher centered learning the students passively receive information because the emphasis is on acquisition of knowledge, and teachers' role is primarily that of information giver and evaluator. In this pedagogy there is no room for students' personal growth.

On the other hand the student centered learning approach gives students ownership over their learning and helps them make necessary decisions and value judgments about the relevance of the content and the methods of teaching to their own lives and interests. When the students play a significant role in the learning process, the teacher takes the role of the facilitator or guide who helps students achieve their goals.

“Corporate India has two major concerns first to hire good employees and secondly to train them” says Assocham, Secretary General Mr. D.S. Rawat. He adds, “Soft skills learned by students during their university education help them to learn the trade efficiently by using their technical abilities as a part of a team, to understand conflict as a means for discussion instead of an angry confrontation, and to respect difference as a creative opportunity rather than an obstacle.”

A National Employability Study conducted by Aspiring Minds reveals that the current talent pool of technical graduates has a very low employability ratio. According to a NASSCOM report, each year over 3million graduates and post graduates are added to the Indian workforce but not even one fourth of them are employable.

## Statement of the Problem

The focus of this study is to investigate how student centric methods of teaching are different from lecture based teaching. The research examines ways to develop Soft Skills by altering the teaching pedagogy. In management colleges students are given practice in group discussions and interview skills. They are also engaged in various activities to foster their confidence and to improve their communication skills. Yet the managers are not satisfied with the fresh graduates and feel that they lack employability skills. The study has used ‘Task Based Method’ of teaching to show that shift in the teaching pedagogy can gradually help to hone the employability skills of students.

## Review of Literature

The review of literature suggests rapidly growing interest amongst teachers in task based method of teaching and expected increase in employability skills.

The ACCI (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry) has defined Employability skills as skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions.

Soft skills also called Transferable skills, Employability skills, Generic skills or Key skills are not job specific, but are skills which serve horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs at all levels in the industry. The degree to which students develop these skills determines how well they can communicate, make presentations & reports, solve problems, function in teams, self assess, learn new knowledge and manage stress when they have to cope with changes.(Assocham Business Barometer Study; June 2009)

India is struggling not with the problem of unemployment rather with the problem of employability. The students who pass out of the educational institutions are not employable in terms of their employability skills. (Sinha G.R)

The teacher's role is to awaken and develop the potentiality and ability of students for studying; to inspire and kindle the interest of the students. The teacher should know how to go from easy to difficult stages and help in development of habits by means of a practice pattern.(Tamura E.T, 2006 )

Sauvignon suggests designing the curriculum to include language arts (or language analysis activities), language-for-a-purpose (content-based) activities, personalized language use, theatre arts (including simulations, role-plays, and social interaction games), and language use “beyond the classroom” (including planning activities that take the learners outside the classroom to engage in real-world encounters). The communicative approach embraces the principle of “learning by doing.” Thus, language acquisition takes place as a result of using the second language in meaningful communication from the onset in the process. (Zainuddin et al, 2011)

## Hypothesis

Student centric method is successful in creating multiple opportunities to enhance Soft Skills of the learners

## Objective of study:

- 1) To list the important Soft Skills required by management students to be job ready.
- 2) To study how Student centric teaching methods is able to create multiple opportunities to enhance Soft skills of students.
- 3) To suggest measures for successful implementation of Student centric teaching pedagogy for improving employability skills of students.

## Theoretical Base

Collective work of theorists like John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky focused on various learning theories and are responsible for the move to student centered learning. Here the students participate actively in the learning process and the entire time in the class is spent constructing a new understanding of the material. The role of the teacher is that of a facilitator, who is supposed to help in a variety of hands on activities which promote successful learning.

The role of the teacher is to ensure that every student gets the opportunity to develop cognitive skills and participate actively in the learning environment. The teachers use a number of student centric teaching strategies and the list is endless.

Some of the common teaching-learning strategies are listed below:

Simple Strategies/ Methods	Complex Strategies/ Methods
Debates	Simulation
Discussions	Discovery/Enquiry Learning
Asking questions	Problem based learning
Guided Learning	Project based learning
Team work	Case based teaching
Pair work	Teaching with Botanical and Museum Collection
Practical Work	Individual assignments

Professor Ellis points out that methodological procedures should be followed in teaching tasks. He has proposed that any task based activity should be given in 3 phases: The pre-task phase, the task phase and the post task phase. Rod Ellis says “These phases reflect the chronology of a task based lesson. The first phase is the ‘pre-task’ and concerns the various activities that teachers and students can undertake before they undertake the task, such as whether students are given time to plan the performance of the task. The second phase, the ‘during task’ phase, centres around the task itself and affords various instructional options, including whether the students are required to operate under time pressure or not. The final phase is ‘post-task’ phase and involves procedures for following up on task performance.” According to Prof Ellis only the during-task phase is obligatory in task-based teaching. He adds, “minimally, a task-based lesson consists of the students just performing a task. Options selected from the ‘pre-task’ or ‘post-task’ phases are non-obligatory but can serve a crucial role in ensuring that the task performance is maximally effective for language development.” (Ellis Rod, 2006)

A framework for designing task- based lessons

Phase	Example of option
A. Pre-task	*Going through the study material, creating teams, doing research about the topic to be covered

B. During- task	*Brain storming, meetings of the team, presentations, corporate visits, submission of report.
C. Post- task	*Individual and team feedback

Source: Ellis Rod, The Methodology of Task-Based Teaching

## Procedure used by faculty to teach various syllabus topics from Business Communication through student centric methods:

The faculty shifted from lecture based method to Task based method of teaching to cover some Business Communication topics such as Presentation Skills, Agenda, Minutes of the Meeting, Report Writing. In each of this a variety of pre, during and post tasks were introduced to the student. The learner had to

### Presentation Skills (Oral and Written)

The students were given an outdoor activity which involved team work. The teams were required to choose an NGO and study its functioning in detail. They were also required to select an organization and prepare a presentation about their chosen NGO. The objective was to help the NGO's get sponsorship from the corporates in the form of CSR activities. The members of the group were required to work as a team, study the web site of the NGO and study all the material in the form of Brochures, pamphlets, newsletter and videos related to the NGO. They were required to prepare a power point presentation and plan a visit to the chosen organization and introduce the NGO and its activities through a formal team presentation. The objective was to invite the organization to adopt and support the NGO as a part of their Corporate social responsibility. The teams were required to create a WhatsApp group and add the faculty to the group for communication purposes. Once this task was over as a class activity the team was required to present the entire activity in the form of a report for which they were given several links related to Report writing. They were to discuss amongst themselves and find out the most creative way to present information. They were also supposed to give a presentation regarding this assignment. The students were evaluated on the basis of oral and written presentations.

This assignment was to be evaluated by the faculty and after the class teams were given feedback on the individual as well as team presentation skills.

### Business Proposal

The student groups were given links related to Business proposal, brochures, E mail writing and brainstorming sessions. In the class they were asked to discuss and think of a 'Start up business venture.' They had to prepare a 'Brochure' for their company which could be used by the marketing team. The teams were given an introductory lecture and some additional reading material on 'How to prepare a Brochure'. They were given time to do the entire activity in the class. At the end of the two sessions they gave a group presentation on their own business proposal. They were given feedback on the group discussion which was recorded and the written proposal was evaluated.

### Agenda, Minutes of Meeting, Report Writing

For this activity the students had to choose an event and conduct it in the college. The event could be Freshers' party, Farewell, Corporate Talk, Panel discussion etc. They had to conduct a meeting to decide the plan of action and also conduct the event by implementing the plan. The students drafted the agenda and conducted a meeting. They decided the activity in their group, carried it out in the group and prepared a project report on the entire activity. They also recorded it in the form of AV file and submitted the CD.

The students submitted a written copy of agenda; Minutes of Meeting and a Project Report and also gave a presentation of the same. They were evaluated on the oral and written work.

### Result Discussion & Conclusion (Part A)

1. **List of Employability Skills:** The researchers did an analytical study of the secondary data and have compiled a list of most important Soft Skills desired by the corporate world from the candidates.

Communication Skills	Oral Communication Written Communication Fluency in second language
Presentation Skills	Oral Presentation

	Written Presentation
Team work	Interpersonal skills. Ability to manage others Conflict management
Leadership Skills	Delegating
Time Management	Coping with multiple tasks
Creativity	Imagination
Adaptability	Flexibility
Entrepreneurship	Decision making Taking responsibility Planning Coordinating
Numeracy	Ability to deal with numbers
Technological Skills	Use of modern tools and techniques

Table 2: List of employability skills

## Result Discussion & Conclusion (Part B)

The researcher's observations on the tasks carried out by the faculty:

### Presentation Skills

Employers seek individuals who understand the broad issues and have the capacity to learn new things. This task created opportunities for the students to build on their knowledge base. Besides learning Presentation Skills the students also learnt to work in teams, interact with new people and enlarge their network. The NGO visit also created a very positive impact on the students and they were happy to look for donations and sponsorships. The WhatsApp group helped the teams to interact and plan the schedule very systematically. The making of power point presentation and report submission considerably improved their oral as well as written communication skills. A Social Project was chosen as the medium to teach these components so that the students are sensitized towards their social responsibility.

### Business Proposals

Besides learning how to write a business proposal the task helped improve creative thinking in the students. They thought of new products and innovative product campaigns. Team work skills contribute to positive working relationships. The students planned their course of action, exchanged a lot of ideas and information, agreed and disagreed with each other and then came to a consensus. This helped them develop their interpersonal skills, resolve conflicts and manage other people related issues. Writing a business proposal helped improve the written communication of the students.

### Agenda, Minutes of Meeting

The students were required to study the basics of writing Agenda and Minutes of Meeting. They practiced planning and conducting a meeting and learnt how to conduct themselves in a formal setting. Submitting a formal report helped strengthen their report writing skills.

All the activities were completed in a given time period. Submissions were in time. This helped develop discipline and time management in students. The faculty also encouraged reflection on the work of all group members.

#### A tabular presentation of the tasks and the learning opportunities created:

Business Communication Topic Covered	Pre-Task Phase	Task Phase	Post task Phase	Observations about Soft skills practiced

Presentation Skills (Oral and Written)	1. Studying the NGO through web site, pamphlets, brochures and audio visual files about the NGO.	1. Connecting with an organization and understanding their CSR activities. 2. Presentation and report submission	Evaluation and feedback given	1.Communication skills. 2.Interpersonal skills 3.Team work 4. Brain storming skills.
Business Proposals	1)Discussion on Business Proposals. 2)Additional reading material on how to write a business proposal.	1. Role plays and advertisement campaigns. 2.designing a brochure	Feedback on advertisement campaign and evaluation of written proposal.	1.Creative thinking & designing ability 2.Planning 3. Team work 4.Communication Skills
Agenda, Minutes of Meeting, Report Writing	1) Agenda and Minutes of Meetings had been covered in the class. 2) Power point presentation on Report Writing was shown to students.	1. Planning &conducting a meeting. 2. Opportunity to conduct an event.	Feedback on group presentation and evaluation of minutes of meeting and report writing.	1.Conducting oneself in an office setting. 2. Planning, coordinating & working in a team. 3. Presentation skills. 4. Technological skills. 5. Advanced Business Communication. 6.Time Management

Table 3: Table of tasks and learning opportunities created

**Suggestions**

**Change in Curriculum-**The universities, in consultation with the companies, should explicitly define the skills that the graduates need at work. They should then decide how these skills can be aligned to the course content and made a part of the general curriculum.

**Shift in teaching pedagogy-** Student centric method is effective in generating opportunities.For every topic the faculty will have to plan the 3 phases of the task according to the nature of the learning outcome. The faculty should also provide pre-reading material to the students to maximize the learning with lots of opportunity to interact individually in pairs, to team discussion

### **Task based teaching methods: A suggested framework for faculties to design task based lessons to enhance Employability Skills**

PRE TASK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Framing the activity.</li> <li>• Defining learning outcomes.</li> </ul> <p>These should be defined keeping in mind the topic and the Employability Skills to be reinforced.*</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing pre-reading material</li> <li>• Providing students the overview of the task</li> </ul> <p>This framework will provide an advanced organizer for the task.</p>
DURING TASK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instruction to the students on how to perform the task.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty acts as facilitator for successful achievement of learning outcomes.</li> </ul>
POST TASK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Objective evaluation.</li> <li>• Subjective feedback aimed at raising consciousness about learning outcomes.</li> <li>• Refining/ redesigning tasks based on classroom experience.</li> </ul>

Table 4: Suggested framework for faculties

\*Refer to Table 2 on Employability Skills

## Suggestions for Stakeholders

### a) For the Institutes

- Curriculum designers, Faculties and students should be sensitised about the gap that exists between the student's communication levels/soft skills and the expectations of the industry from job aspirants.
- Institutes to take a policy decision to adopt 'Task-based Methodology' as a teaching pedagogy for some of the sessions for the students to enhance employability skills.
- Faculty Development Programmes to explain the role of teaching pedagogy and how to teach through the chosen pedagogy should be provided.
- Provide additional aid in the form of infrastructure and equipments such as mikes, camera, language lab, IT facilities such as projector, Internet availability and well equipped library for making the exercise yield better results.

### b) For the Curriculum Designers

- Provide guidance for teaching through Task-based method of teaching with additional help to achieve the objective of enhancing employability skills of the students.
- Suggest reading material for the students which is customised, conversational and contemporary for Task-based methods.
- Provide, develop and recommend additional study material such as popular websites, Videos, films etc to the faculties with teaching notes to bring uniformity in teaching material.

### c) For the Faculties

- Prepare session plan according to the objectives.
- Provide students with clear instructions about preparing for the topic and give them pre-reading material. The method of evaluating the conceptual knowledge along with skills should be made known to the students in advance.
- Plan and reduce time spent in speaking on the topic and provide time for student interaction to encourage more participation from the students.
- Create forums to enhance the reading and writing skills of the students since the present generation is quite tech savvy.

### d) For the students

- Should commit themselves to developing their employability skills.
- Prepare for the class discussions and tasks by following the instructions given by the faculty.
- Actively participate in the class discussion by interacting as well as listening to others and utilise every opportunity to enhance skills and conceptual knowledge.

### Limitations

- The researcher has focused mainly task-based teaching pedagogy even though there are other participatory methods like Case study method.
- Due to time constraint the researcher has not studied all the disciplines of Management studies separately. If done, this would have made the research more exhaustive.
- It was not possible for the researcher to check the progress made by the students in their oral communication and hence only opportunities are being taken into consideration.

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