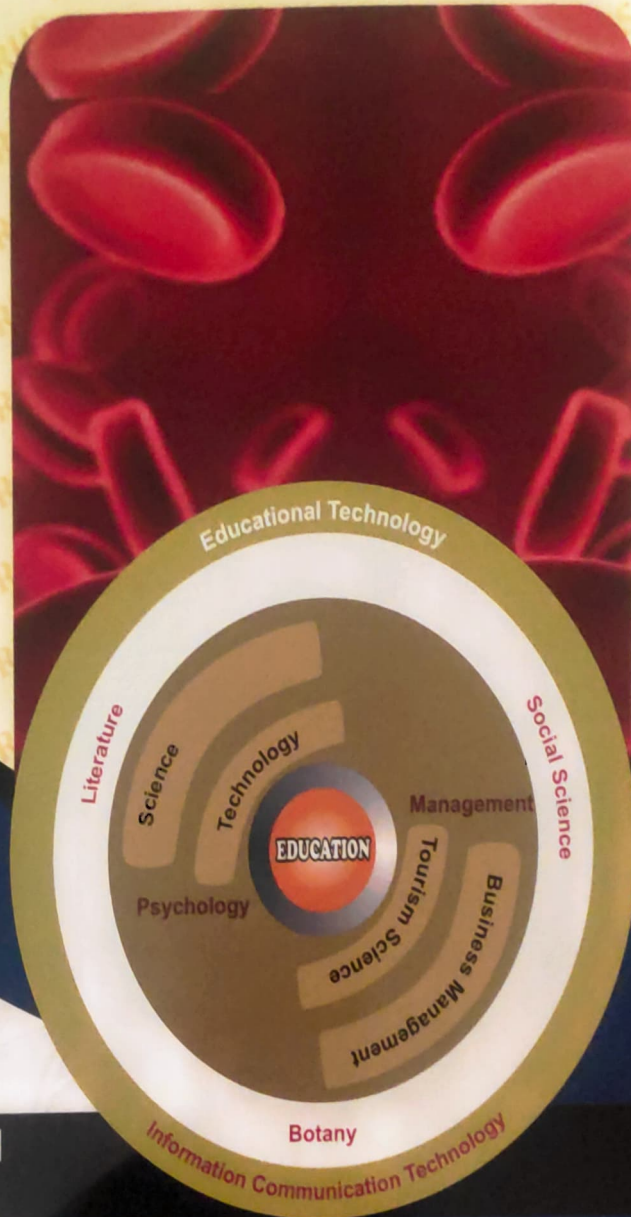


UGC Approved Sr. No. 49366



SRJIS

ISSN -2278-8808



An International  
Peer Reviewed

Referred  
Quarterly

# SCHOLARLY RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

JAN - FEB, 2018. VOL. 5, ISSUE -46

EDITOR IN CHIEF : YASHPAL D. NETRAGAONKAR, Ph.D.

**AN INTERNATIONAL, PEER REVIEWED, QUARTERLY  
SCHOLARLY RESEARCH JOURNAL FOR  
INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES**

*Special issue of*

Mula Education Society's **Arts, Commerce & Science College, Sonai**

on

**State Level Conference**

on

**"Employment Opportunities in Language and Literary Studies"**

*7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> February, 2018,*

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An International, Peer Reviewed, & Referred Quarterly

## Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

JAN-FEB, 2018, VOL-5, ISSUE-46

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## TEACHING SPOKEN ENGLISH FOR EMPLOYMENT: EMERGING ISSUES

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### Abstract

The Employment sector in India is diversifying with the liberalization of the economy. Education at the undergraduate level is however at present, not in tune with the requirements of the job market. In order to provide employment related skills to the undergraduate students, more stress needs to be placed on linking education with work. This is applicable to the teaching of Spoken English also. This paper addresses the need to give more importance to the development of the speaking skills in English, which is the most neglected skill among the language skills taught at the undergraduate level. The paper examines the following:

1. The notion of spoken English as it is taught in the undergraduate level.
2. The nature of spoken English taught through the existing English courses at the undergraduate level.
3. The scope of spoken English taught through the optional vocational –oriented Functional English course.
4. Spoken English at the undergraduate level.

**Keywords:** Communication, employment, Professional competency, vocational courses, functional, conversational English.

**Introduction:** The liberalization of the Indian economy in recent years has opened up more employment opportunities in the formal and non-formal sectors. Since, it is not realistic to assume that all undergraduates have an inclination for higher education, we need to utilize the current prospects for employment to our advantage. Education at the undergraduate level has however not been organized in consonance with the manpower requirement of the job market (Bhatnagar, 1987). This has necessitated innovations in the planning and implementation of education at the undergraduate level. Though the educational policies of the last three and half decades, notably The Challenge of Education; A Policy Perspective (1985), The Report of the Committee for Review on the National Policy of Education (1990) and The Report on the Vocationalisation of First Degree Education (1993) have stressed on the need to link education with work, there is still a dearth for graduates with the requisite skills for specific employment. On the one hand, we do not want a large number of educated unemployed and on the other, we have jobs for which suitable candidates are not available (Desai, 1995). Therefore, the responsibility of retooling the undergraduate student with appropriate employment related skills ultimately falls on the curriculum developers and teachers. In the present context, we shall examine this issue in relation to the teaching English at undergraduate level. This paper addresses the need to give more importance to the development of the speaking skill in students, which is generally undergraduate in India, gets some opportunity to listen, read and write in English, but hardly any, to speak in English in the classroom. Whether this gap is due to the structure of syllabus, the teaching methodology used or the activities and tasks the students are engaged in during the class hours require careful investigation. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that this trend, where the students not get much opportunity to improve their

proficiency in speaking skill is gradually maturing into a malady. The symptoms are evident, when the average graduate attends job interviews or try to become self-employed in urban areas, where a minimum level of communicative ability in English is expected. Apparently, to make up for the deficiencies in the existing undergraduate English classroom, several Spoken English Institutes have mushroomed, who claim to provide quick remedies, with high fees, to the desperate job seeker. The rapid pace of information explosion in all fields of knowledge has further reinforced the need to develop effective oral communication strategies to convey information and to interact with people with varied interests and pursuits in life. Gunnarson (1997) states that with the emergence of sophisticated communication technology, the recent trends in professional work consists of an "intricate interaction between people and advanced technical equipment and systems"(p285) yet, the usefulness of effective speaking skills for a successful professional cannot be underestimated. While the regional /local language will suffice for professional contracts locally, it has become inevitable that one should have a good command of the English language, for interactions not only within one's own professional group, but also between different specialist groups and between experts and lay people.

**The Notion of Spoken English:** Spoken English is usually associated with the teaching of phonetics. Students are exposed to the correct pronunciation of the "sounds of English, first in isolation, then in short isolated words, and finally in short isolated sentences" (Yule and Brown, 1983: 2) with appropriate stress and intonation. Practice is also given in listening and repeating the vowels and consonants of English. In addition, some importance is also given to accurate role play of short dialogues related to specific situations and in reading out passages from the classics of English literature. All these tasks help the students to get over their inhibition to speak in English. It however does not provide them with the conversational, interpersonal and presentation skills essential in employment. We therefore need to redefine the teaching of Spoken English, so that the undergraduate students learn how to perform basic interactional and transaction functions in English effectively.

### **The Undergraduate English Courses and Spoken English**

Let us here examine the English courses offered at the undergraduate level and explore the scope of teaching the skill of Speaking. There are mainly four courses: (1) Compulsory English, (2) General English for B.A./B.Com./ B.Sc. students, (3) Special English (elective) and (4) Communicative /Functional English (elective vocational course). As we are aware, the English Major courses predominantly focus on the teaching of English Literature (i.e. History of Literature and Literary Criticism, Poetry, Drama, and Prose). Teaching is mainly lecture mode and in the final written examination, the students are expected to write short essays, short answers and explanations with reference to the context. Some English syllabuses (Savitribai Phule Pune University) have components on "Sounds of English", but the examination is again restricted to writing short notes. There is no emphasis given on the focussed, integrated development of language skills (e.g. listening, speaking, reading and writing) based on the prescribed textbooks or other supplementary teaching materials, for the potential employee /employer / freelancer among the students. General English courses for B.A./B.Sc./ B.Com. students usually have sections on prose, poetry, drama, non-detailed texts



and grammar. As in the English Major courses, the first four (i.e. prose, poetry, drama and non-detailed texts) are taught through lecture mode and tested through written examination, on the content of the prescribed textbooks. Grammar is restricted to the use of prepositions, passive and active voices and direct and indirect speech-again in the written mode. The students are given exposure to general essay and précis writing. While reading and writing skills are minimally focused on, the syllabuses do give any importance to the listening and speaking skills. According to the CDC Report (1989: 17), the General English syllabuses, in general, do not take into account the learner's needs and interests. The Functional English course offered as an optional subject focuses specifically on the use of language for effective communication- written or oral. Speaking skill has been given a prominent place in the course, for it has been identified as the most important skill which fulfils the demands of the job market by potential employers and Functional English teachers. In addition to these, there are also provisions for on-the-job training, project work and entrepreneurial development. The functional English course thus, apparently attempts to bridge the gap created by the literature oriented English studies offered at the undergraduate level and the growing need for more function-oriented English courses.

**The Functional English Course: A Case Study on Teaching Spoken English:** The Functional English course being vocation-oriented, students are to be given training in the use of the English language for effective conversational, interpersonal and presentation skills. Irrespective of the syllabuses consulted, the FE students are expected to be able to speak English with a "high degree of confidence, accuracy and fluency in a wide range of life situations"(Prototype syllabus) by the end of the course. Practical training includes facing the camera and visits to the TV and radio stations to understand the various aspects of broadcasting. On-the-job training related to Spoken English is offered in announcing, news reading, giving commentary, teaching conversational skills and journalism. While teaching Functional English, the teaching methodology offers scope for interaction among the students in the classroom. Students are given some opportunity to interact with each other and with the teacher during the class. As there are no compulsory textbooks, the teacher has the freedom to adapt teaching materials to suit the requirements of the students. Audio/video programmes, reference materials, dictionary, newspaper clippings, maps, charts, diagrams, subject textbooks, teachers' notes and TV/video programmes are the main teaching materials used.

**Suggestions and Recommendations:** We have seen that the existing English Compulsory, General English and Special English courses at the UG level do not equip students with the adequate skills of speaking. The Functional English course, though more geared towards providing employment related skills, also need to relate the teaching of the speaking skill more specifically to vocational training. In the light of these observations, I extend the following suggestions/recommendations to improve the teaching of Spoken English in order to enhance the employment prospects of the UG student:

1. Role of the teacher to be a facilitator who would encourage the students to do maximum-speaking with minimum communication stress.

2. Minimum correction of pronunciation and intonation, i.e. more emphasis on fluency than accuracy is needed.
3. Training to be given on discourse management during long transactional turns and short interactional turns with genuine information gap between the speaker and the listener. In other words, more importance to be given on what the speaker means than what the words mean.
4. Speaking tasks should take into account the students' reasons for learning spoken English, his/her cultural identity and academic background.
5. Exposure of the students to authentic day-to-day conversations, announcements, commentary, compering, news bulletin, radio/TV programmes for understanding the art of speaking English and modifying as the conversation progresses.
6. Training needs to be given regarding how to modulate one's voice, for presentation of scripts, extempore speeches and conversation with others. A range of employment related language functions like greetings, making requests, enquiries, complaints, extending invitations, negotiating and persuading people etc. may be practised. Special emphasis can be given on the speaking skills and non-verbal gestures needed for business communications, appropriate and effective telephonic conversations and different types of interactions with clients and customers.
7. Testing should focus on the student's ability to communicate effectively in the spoken mode, with due credit given for accuracy, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and presentation. A continuous record of student's performance in different occasions for different purposes can be useful to assess the student's overall development of the employment related speaking skills.

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