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Reforming Beliefs

**ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION OF VARIOUS SOFT SKILLS TRAINING MODELS
EMPLOYED BY PRIVATE TECHNICAL EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN INDIA****Prof. I. K. Kilam****Dr. Jyoti Sharma****ABSTRACT**

The growth of technical education has been unprecedented since the privatization of higher education in India. Almost all technical colleges attract students who meet the required eligibility criteria for enrolling in an engineering college, but unfortunately they are drastically deficient in soft skills and English language proficiency, which in turn makes these students unemployable, even after they complete their four years engineering degree course.

Students who have a positive attitude, effective communication skills, problem solving ability, effective time management skills, team spirit, self-confidence, ability to handle criticism - skills that are also known as soft skills as a whole; have better chances of survival in the tough engineering and corporate world, compared to the students who are lacking in soft skills

This paper offers to analyze the various aspects of Soft Skills Training Methods adopted by engineering colleges in India. Through analysis and evaluation of various models, the paper puts forward the best suited models for Indian technical colleges. The study is based on experience of imparting soft skills training in technical colleges, feedback from students and faculty members, study of models adopted across, study of Industry expectations and students' requirement in India.

Keywords: soft skills training methods, technical Institutes, language proficiency, employability, best model for soft skills training

Introduction

In response to the global demand for technical skills, Indian Higher Education sector underwent a welcome change through privatization of higher education. Thousands of technical

institutes have been established throughout India. In this scenario, the engineering colleges attract students from semi urban and rural areas who have received their school education in vernacular languages or Hindi. The global job market finds that these engineering graduates are not employable, even if they develop good technical skills while completing their engineering degree course. Their language proficiency, personality development standards and soft skills are not at par with their requirement.

A recent fall out of privatization and expansion of engineering education is the requirement of soft skills training and English language proficiency classes for students of technical institutes. In response to this demand, today there is an abundance of agencies offering soft skills training and personality development courses. The trend of offering soft skills training to technical students by the free lancing agency trainers has caught the imagination of numerous private colleges, and they spend lakhs of rupees on these agencies that promise to transform the rural youth into corporate honchos by the various training methods that seem very impressive when presented in the Board rooms, but fail miserably at the implementation level, in the “hard realities” of the classroom atmosphere. However, soft skills training and English language proficiency involves many intricacies. Simply offloading the task to external agencies is not a solution to this complex and copious problem. A holistic approach to the training is required for optimum results.

What are Soft Skills?

Defining soft skills is not easy, as it is a very broad term. In Wikipedia, the term soft skills is defined as “a sociological term relating to a person's "EQ" (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills complement hard skills (part of a person's IQ), which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities.” “Soft Skills are behavioral competencies. Also known as Interpersonal Skills, or people skills, they include proficiencies such as communication skills, conflict resolution and negotiation, personal effectiveness, creative problem solving, strategic thinking, team building, influencing skills and selling skills, to name a few.” (Wikipedia, 2013)

We all know about teaching technical skills, whether it is computer skills, welding techniques, or how to use a piece of equipment. These are “easy” to teach because we can design a rubric to assess knowledge learned, competencies acquired, and skills demonstrated. It takes far more to be successful in the workplace. What does it take, in addition to those easily quantifiable, task-oriented skills to be successful? The answer is soft skills.

The lack of soft skills is not a problem for the rural and semi-urban areas alone. Even many students from Metros like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Kolkata also need soft skills training as they lack such skills important for employability. This problem is in no way restricted to developing nations like India; it is also well known to industrial countries around the world. The British Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), reported that “Employers say many graduates lack ‘soft skills’, such as team working” and “They go on to explain that candidates are normally academically proficient but lacking in soft skills such as communication as well as verbal and numerical reasoning.” (AGR, 2007) Already more than 40 years ago the German Engineering Association recommended that 20% of courses of the engineering curricula should be soft skills. Engineering graduates should bring along knowledge of foreign languages, cultural awareness, should be team workers, and should perhaps have attended a Rhetoric course. (Ihsen, 2003). It was also regretted by the German Engineering Association that Engineering Graduates are more deficient in Soft Skills than a Graduate in Humanities.

Considering the worldwide scenario, imparting Soft Skills training to engineering students is imperative in India.

Stages of Soft Skills Learning Process

The three stages of Soft Skills learning Process involve

1. Unlearning ingrained behavior Patterns that are undesirable
2. Learning Desirable Soft Skills
3. Frequent reinforcement of learned behavior patterns

Unlearning Behavior Patterns

Interpersonal Skills are deeply ingrained in the students when they enter college, since they are around 18 years old, and they have been brought up in a certain environment that is at

odds with the expectations of the corporate world. At this age, introducing new interpersonal skills is extremely difficult, because it means replacing the old skills. The brain is no doubt an information processor, but it does not work like a digital computer. There is no 'delete' button! Behavior patterns are physically established in the brain cells. The only way to replace this old pattern is to establish a new one that gets better results, more satisfaction and adequate period of reinforcement.

Learning Desirable Soft Skills

Various methods are adopted to change behaviour patterns in individuals. Over time and with a lot of effort from the individual involved in this process, the new pattern of behavior becomes accepted. Ultimately this new pattern is ingrained in the brain cells and becomes part of the person's personality.

Frequent Reinforcement

When we consider the methods adopted by technical colleges for soft skills training, it is a common practice to allot just one or two lectures per week for the training, mostly just before the placements start. The expectation of the institute is that the students can be groomed in a quick fix method. This pattern falls short for the obvious reason that the students do not get enough time for reinforcement of the behavior patterns imparted to them. As a result, nothing is achieved by these sporadic last minute training sessions.

Without reinforcement, most students periodically fall back on the old, comfortable patterns they grew up with. An Institute invests heavily on the students' training program, but no plan of reinforcement is in place, and therefore expected results are not achieved. This is why a training program of lectures, group exercises and handouts – even by world famous Soft Skills trainers cannot by itself provide enough reinforcement to establish the new pathways needed to change ingrained behavior patterns.

Understanding the Brain function makes it very clear that behavior patterns cannot be changed without frequent reinforcement. Especially so, when there is a wide gap between the learned behavior and the expected behavior, as is in the case of students in Technical Institutes from semi urban areas and rural areas. Therefore the frequency of the training sessions needs to

be increased. This method will give adequate time for reinforcement of the learned soft skills and language skills.

Models Used in Soft Skills Training

The three models generally used in imparting Soft Skills training in Engineering Colleges are:

- In House Training by Regular Faculty Members
- Out Sourced Training Model by Private Training Companies / Vendors
- Inbred Model - In House Training on Regular Basis for 2/4/6 semesters with some padding up inputs from external agencies before Placements in 7th / 8th semester.

I. The In - house Training Models

In house faculty for soft skills training is essential in every technical educational Institute. These faculty members should be carefully selected keeping in view that the faculty should not only be well qualified in English language but also be effective soft Skills trainers. These in-house faculty members should periodically undergo suitable faculty development programmes, to hone their language skills and soft skills training delivery methods.

Advantages of In House Training Model

- The in house faculty has many advantages. Since they are generally highly qualified academically and are in constant contact with the students, they are able to give valuable guidance to the students on a regular basis. Their presence in the campus is for long hours, which gives the students a chance to approach them whenever they need guidance. The outsourced trainers devote limited time, as they cater to various colleges simultaneously to earn more profit.
- Being permanent faculty members, they are loyal employees who have a good grip on various effective teaching methods. They are also aware about the knowledge levels of the students of various classes and sections. The outsourced trainers are recruited from various far flung areas and subsequently they are sent to many colleges simultaneously. The students of every region have a different level of English proficiency and different problems of pronunciation. Such fly by night trainers are unable to get a grip of these prob-

lems. The in house faculty is constantly in the same region, and hence they have better understanding of the pronunciation and other deficiencies in the students' soft skills.

- The permanent faculty understands that every student is unique and needs to be taught in a different manner. They improvise and modify their lectures keeping in mind the level of each group of students. The training companies on the other hand formulate structured lectures in the form of modules, and deliver it in every class, irrespective of the level and understanding of the students.
- The internal faculty members have a passion for teaching, whereas the main motive of the outsourced companies is to earn money.
- The in house faculty is readily available in the campus for any placement related training requirements.

Disadvantages of In house training Model

- Teachers are not always very well trained themselves, or even if they are capable, they lose motivation because of the casual attitude of the students. This problem can be addressed by giving the in house faculty a chance to attend Faculty Development Programmes periodically.
- Students do not take interest in the PD classes as they feel that these are less important than the technical subjects. Students will take the course seriously if the course is allotted due credits and attendance is made mandatory. .
- Evaluation of soft skills poses a great challenge, since unlike hard skills they are difficult to measure.
- The in-house faculty may develop a comfort zone, and take least interest in upgrading their skills. Regular FDP is needed to keep the faculty abreast with the latest Corporate culture in different industries / groups.

II. Out-Sourced Training Model

Advantages

- Good Training Agencies can have great expertise in imparting Soft Skills Training since they are professionals and experts in their field. They have vast experience and use more modern and innovative techniques of teaching.
- Generally, these agencies charge exorbitant fee, and hence they are able to invest some money in developing study material in the form of workbooks, etc. These modules, if used properly can benefit the students.
- Their teaching methodology is non-conventional. They use various activities to teach the students. This method attracts students and induces them towards better learning.
- Some trainers belong to the corporate world. They are familiar with corporate culture and can help in the placement of students.

Disadvantages

- The out sourced agencies cater to many colleges simultaneously. The trainers are often rotated to suit the schedule of various colleges. As a result, trainers are often changed in the middle of academic sessions. This results in poor quality of training.
- Since the training agencies are on contract, mostly the aim is to make money rather than benefit the students by providing quality education.
- Before winning the contract, these agencies give impressive demonstrations, presentations and put forward extraordinary study schemes. In the actual classes, the standard is not maintained and the gap between presentations and actual delivery is quite large.
- Soft Skills classes require infrastructure like projectors, seminar rooms, video recording facility, language labs, which is not available in most colleges. If the infrastructure is there, it is not sufficient for the large number of engineering students admitted in the college.
- The outsourced agencies are very expensive, since their charges are on hourly basis. Even if the attendance in the classes is low, they charge for the whole class. This makes the out sourced option very expensive and unviable.
- Some trainers are out of work for a major part of the year. When they get an assignment, they are out of touch. They are unable to do a quality job.

- The agencies do not give proper training to their trainers. They pick up any graduate with a pleasing personality and put them in classes to be soft skills trainers. .

III. Hybrid Method

The hybrid training method involves training by in house faculty throughout the year, with special inputs by very experienced trainers from a professional agency just before the placement drive. This method has proved to be very effective for the students.

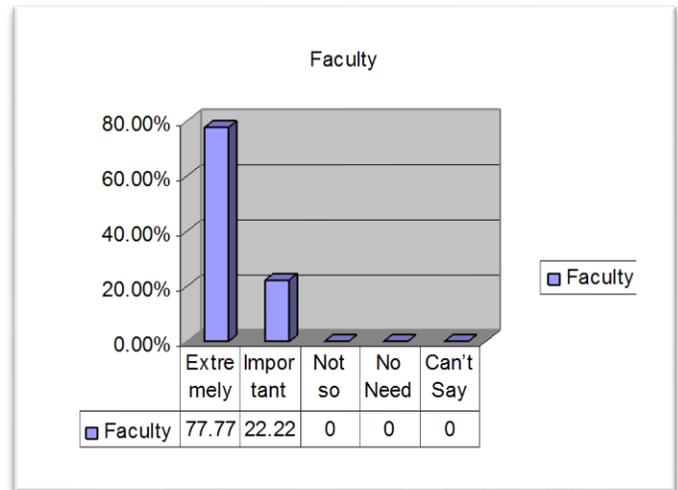
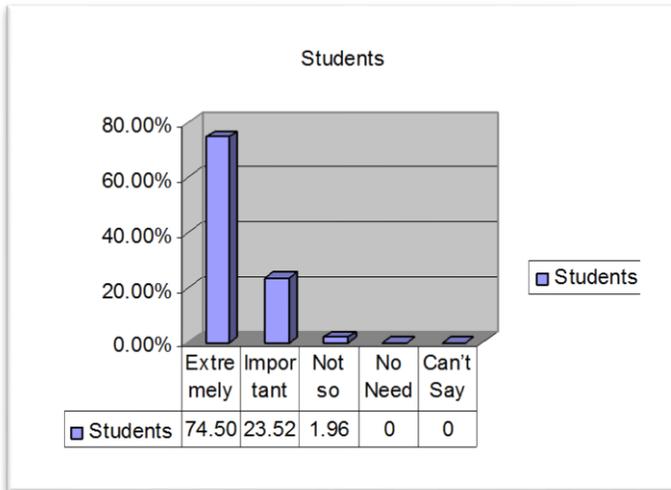
Advantages of Hybrid Model

- Investing in developing and enhancing the skills of regular faculty for the hybrid model will be beneficial in the long term basis. All the problems faced due to involving external agencies can be eliminated by recruiting and developing regular faculty for this purpose. It will also be economical in the long run.
- The professional inputs by an outsourced agency will give the required push to the students during the placement drive.
- Hiring the best Company for a week will be economical, rather than outsourcing the entire semester.

On the whole, there is absolutely no doubt that English Language Skills, Communication Skills, Soft Skills & Personality Development (ECSPD) contribute a great deal towards engineering students’ placement & overall employability. In this connection, we administered a short questionnaire among students & faculty members. Analysis of the responses reveals as under:

1. How important is it for Engineering colleges to give regular courses / inputs on ‘English Language Skills, Communication Skills, Soft Skills & Personality Development (ECSPD) to its B.Tech students?

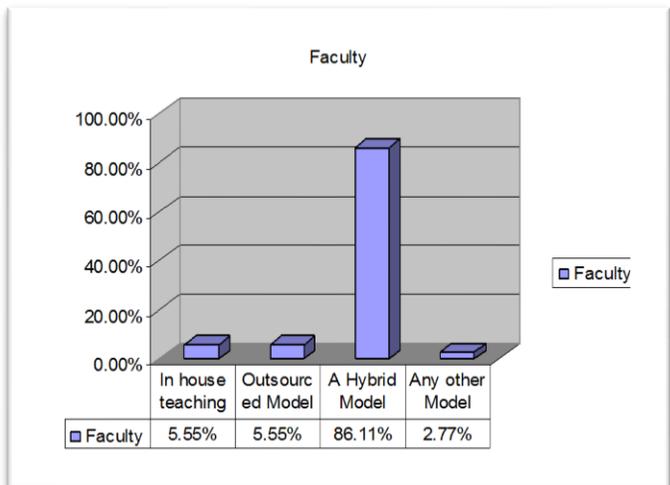
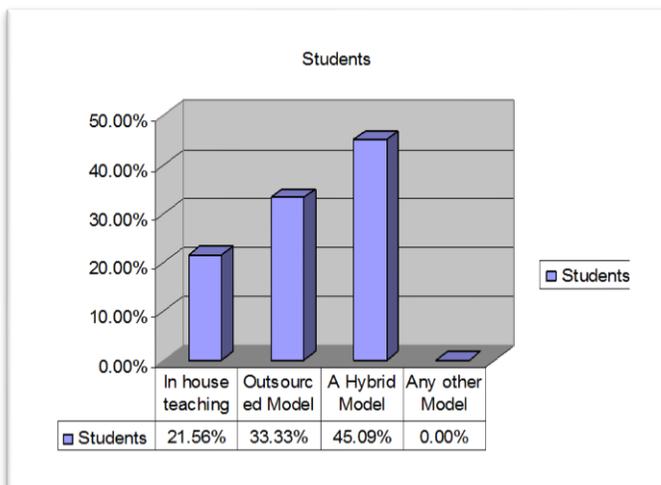
Responses by	Extremely Important	Important	Not so important	No Need	Can’t Say
Students	74.50%	23.52%	1.96%	Nil	Nil
Faculty	77.77%	22.22%	Nil	Nil	Nil



2. For Such English Language courses, Communication Skills, Soft Skills and PD related courses, what model of teaching you would find the best.

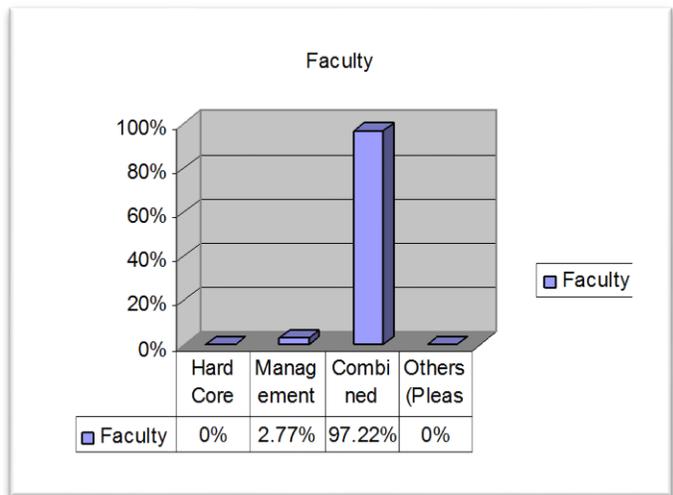
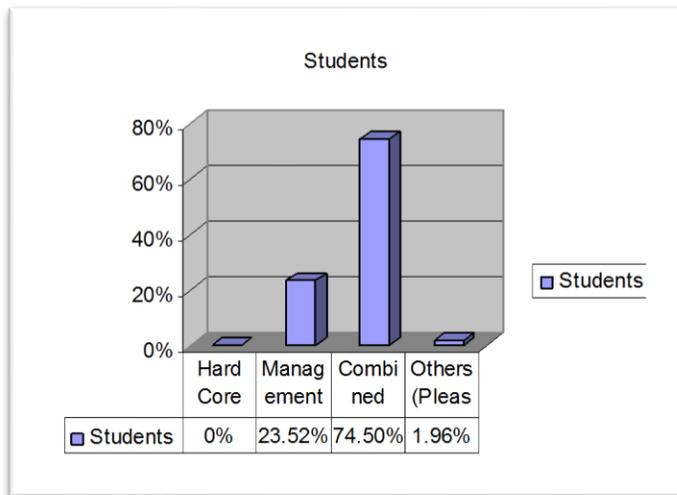
Responses by	In house teaching Model (All inputs by internal Teachers for 1 st to 8 th semester)	Outsourced Model (All inputs by external training agencies / trainers for 1 st to 8 th semester)	A Hybrid Model (Internal faculty for 1 st to 6 th sem. and need based padding up by external agencies in 7 th & 8 th sem.)	Any other Model (Please Specify)
Students	21.56%	33.33%	45.09%	Nil
Faculty	5.55%	5.55%	86.11%	2.77% @

@ Quality of trainers matter, no matter which model is adopted.



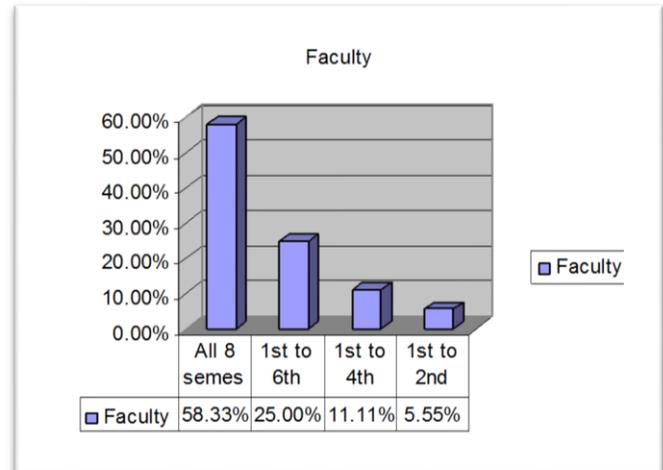
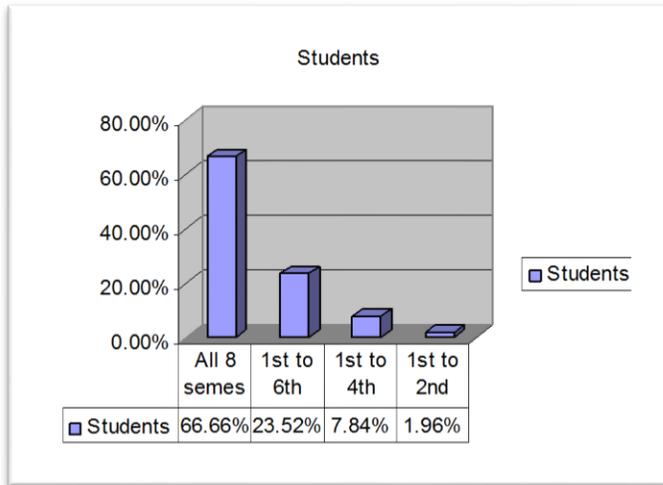
4. Among the in house teachers, who could provide such training on ECSPD more satisfactorily:

Responses by	Hard Core English Teachers	Management / Corporate Experienced Teachers	Combined team of English Teachers and Management / Corporate Experienced Teachers	Others (Please specify)
Students	Nil	23.52%	74.50%	1.96%
Faculty	Nil	2.77%	97.22%	Nil



5. If we propose one lecture per week on ECSPD related courses, should these be covered in:

Responses	All 8 semesters	1 st to 6 th semesters	1 st to 4 th semester	1 st to 2 nd semester only
Students	66.66%	23.52%	7.84%	1.96%
Faculty	58.33%	25.0%	11.11%	5.55%



5. To an open ended question, inviting specific suggestions for making English Language Skills, Communication Skills, Soft Skills and PD related teaching / learning more effective in Engineering Colleges, the following responses were received.

a) From students:

1. Ensure that everybody participates and attends classes.
2. Organize literary events more frequently.
3. Special workshops after college regular timings for interested students with full focus on just communication skills
4. More events must be organized in the engineering colleges, more interaction of students with teachers in English, presentation by the students in classes, extra compulsory time for communication skill development.
5. All Classes should be conducted in English only
6. We should provide soft copy related to content or topic
7. Teachers should look after all the students which are present in class or not. Students should be forced to make presentations in such classes to improve their communication skills.
8. Group discussion exercise should be carried out in all semesters.
9. PD related classes must be made compulsory.
10. Group discussion, extra-curricular activities should be held in every week on different topics.
11. Involve more students in different assignments & projects; make various activity clubs to

create interest among students.

12. Focus more on such students who shy away from assignments and communication exercises. Also share experiences of successful students in past placements and career progression.
13. Always take the classes regularly, pay attention to individual students.
14. This subject must be part of the main course, especially for weak students.
15. Corporate experts should be invited for lectures, repeatedly.
16. Frequent aptitude tests must be conducted and should be taken into account seriously.
17. We should provide minimum 2 lectures in a week and at the end of the month group discussion should be held to test and develop speaking and comprehension ability.
18. Announce and hold different competitions related to ECSPD
19. Such Classes must be held before break or 5th lecture of the day & not towards the end of the day.
20. Teach the student as a student not anything else. All students should be treated equally.
21. Group discussions, extra classes, activities should be performed.
22. To make English language skills more effective in engineering colleges the teachers of all subjects must be experienced and good in English Communication.
23. The teachers must teach ECSPD like "Practical" by using media etc. By this method it becomes interesting and the students who think PD classes as a boring class, start getting good interest in it.
24. Don't make students focus on attendance rather than knowledge. Students must find such subject easy to remember. Make separate classes where projectors are installed and may be some movie clips on relevant subjects are shown to cultivate interest and help in better learning.
25. The PD session should be interactive session in friendly environment. It should not create any fear in students.
26. Make these ESCPD classes compulsory, else charge suitable fine as penalty.
27. Regular lectures with strictness on attendance.
28. Please tell (elaborate) to students why this is important for them but also how? (with examples from students life) of college who got placed, etc.

29. Colleges should monitor whether these classes are going correctly or not and examine students through group discussions, formal preparatory interviews etc.
30. External training agencies are the best to teach some useful matter on ECSPD.
31. Students must be given a feel about situation of corporate interviews, GD, VIVA round, dressing, presentation etc.
32. The class should be more interactive rather than theoretical. I think it is a better way to learn anything.
33. Regular presentations, speaking tests, pronunciation improvements, debates & GDs should be regular activity.
34. The outsourced model is good but the teaching faculty must regularly emphasize the importance of soft skills during classes so that students understand how important it is.
35. ECSPD is important for the all students not only for the B.Tech students.

b) From Faculty:

1. Frequent exposure of students to corporate and / or ECSPD competitions
2. Practical exercises like debate / GD / Public speaking / Story telling / story competition etc.
3. English Newspaper reading specifically the Business times, Economic times may be taken up for honing their English language. This will not only cover the language part but also make them aware what kind of people business houses are looking for.
4. Somehow the interaction from the students' side should improve and increase which is lacking.
5. Other than technical skills extremely important emphasis should be on the ECSPD inputs which are extremely important.
6. Regular feedback by taking tests. The attendance in classes should be connected with participation in placement.
7. They should be trained to write various kinds of letters (Business, Personal), read case studies analyze the same and trained on the nuances of GD and cracking of interview.
8. PD exam marks must be included for grading student semester exam results.
9. At the entry level, students must be segregated on the basis of their level of English language & communication skills & inputs be given accordingly, over six semesters through activities,

debates, discussions & other regular inputs.

10. Involve alumni students (1-2 yrs old) & let them share their interview and work experience – for the benefit of students' development.
11. ECSPD training is more required in private colleges where the number of students from rural background is significant. More stress should be given to spoken English & personality development to enhance employability status.
12. Language skills are learnt by practice. Some mechanism needs to be developed so that language development is a continuous process rather than a single period affair.
13. Encouraging activities like GDs, extempore in the campus.
14. More and more students' involvement in workshops and exercises.
15. Technical teachers should make students make presentation on technical topics and this should indirectly help students to improve their communication skills.
16. Students should be made to write and practice variety of applications which will be of use to them in their interview and work life.
17. Inputs should be taken from the corporate & also before designing the curriculum so that the coaching is relevant.
18. Students are less interested initially in PD classes so there must be some awareness that how important this subject is and there should be presentation based examination.
19. ECSPD related exams should be made compulsory to pass.
20. More stress should be given in the initial stage during 1-2 semesters.
21. A hybrid model should be introduced for students for overall skill development with a proper practical approach.
22. More classes for PD so that confidence level of students is increased.
23. Audio, Video equipment must be used to train students more effectively.
24. First year must be dedicated for English inputs only. Many IITs offer literature as elective subjects also; this can be replicated in other colleges as well.
25. More practical group discussions among students.
26. There should be some sort of competition events, so that students can be attracted more towards such classes.

27. Along with 2 lectures 1 tutorial should be taken in 1st year. Practice sessions are not effective in a class of 60 students.
28. Language Lab should be used for practice, more often.
29. Case studies related to the engineering field, dealing with the customers and people at all levels could be discussed through role plays and audio video aids.
30. Each individual college / faculty within the group must have & develop its own internal faculty for the purpose & closely monitor the delivery & its effectiveness. At best, the outside agency may give some special periodic inputs to such internal faculty members to improve the delivery aspects.
31. Language Lab should essentially be setup in the institutions as it will enhance their vocal skills.
32. While awarding the internal marks in 1st and 2nd semester and General Proficiency in subsequent semesters following should be the criteria of the judging the same.
 - (i) Vocal skills (students may be asked to appear in pronunciation & vocabulary based tests)
 - (ii) Public speaking / presentation skills (students may be asked to give individual / group presentation on any of the current topics)
33. Special emphasis should be laid on Presentation skills of the learner and should be made ready to face the cut throat competition of the Corporate World.
34. Hands – on – workshop on formal documentation.

Conclusion

From the survey among students & faculty members, it is doubtlessly revealed that learning, English Language and Soft Skills etc are extremely important for engineering students. As far as the training delivery on ECSPD in concerned, a hybrid model of internal regular faculty covering 1st to 6th semester students, and special padding up inputs by external agencies /trainers during 7th & 8th semesters is the preferred model. It is also revealed that “What matters is the quality of such trainers, no matter which model is adopted – in-house or external”. The respondents in the survey have preferred a blend of English teachers and management / corporate trained teachers rather than exclusive English or exclusive management teachers to be more effective for the purpose. And finally the survey findings prefer that ECSPD input should be

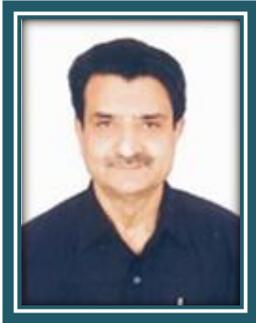
given in all the eight semesters.

The best model seems to be the hybrid model where the advantages of both – the in-house model and the out sourced model can be incorporated and best results achieved. It may also be mentioned that to enhance English proficiency in engineering students the first year students should be offered one paper of English language and literature. Most engineering colleges frown upon the 'literature part', terming it redundant for students who are being trained for technical jobs. However, it is observed that the engineering students generally do not have a good reading habit. Introducing literature to them will create an interest in the students to read quality literature. This in turn will enhance their language proficiency.

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