RESEARCH ARTICLE

EMPOWERING ENGINEERING STUDENTS IN INDIA BY FOSTERING AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Language is a powerful tool for information sharing, catalysing students to evolve into adept global communicators. Learning a new language helps us understand different cultures and ways of life in far-off places. English is a very important language because it's used a lot, and it's like a window that lets us see the whole world. If you're good at speaking English, you can also find more jobs. But sometimes, it's hard for students to take charge of their learning and work well with others. In the past, teachers used to do most of the teaching when it came to English. But now, some teachers are helping students learn on their own. This change was sped up by the pandemic, which brought new tools like ELSA, MePro, and BBC Learn English, as well as websites where you can learn by yourself. In light of these developments, this research paper endeavours to shed light on the realm of independent English language learning, offering valuable insights into this evolving landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The English language is an official language in India with languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, and Tamil. Advancements in foreign relations, technology, society, and politics accompanied India's economic growth. There is a greater need to know foreign languages. The most common foreign language that connects Indians to the world has been the English language. English is the language of the internet as it is easy to write, read, or search for websites and information. It is a compulsory language in most schools, colleges, and universities in India. The English language is now a bridge language of international business, technology, research and aviation. There are great efforts to help English language learners learn English with the help of teachers. The English language is a window to the world and provides numerous career-building opportunities. It also helps one secure a seat for higher education in foreign countries. Those who are proficient in English have numerous opportunities in multinational companies as a result of globalization. Indian engineering students also learn English as a foreign language for these reasons. Does English have to be learned further after engineering students complete their secondary education with English as a second language? Engineering students come from diverse backgrounds, unlike students at schools where they study for a decade. Some of these students belong to vulnerable backgrounds and do not have the best schooling.

A classroom of engineering students generally has students who are excellent in English and others who are proficient in the vernacular medium of instruction. While creating a curriculum, many suggestions have been made to bridge the gap in the English language between these students. It said that the highly proficient students should learn a foreign language, whereas those with poor comprehension and usage of the English language should be made to practice the skills of Grammar vocabulary and usage. In reality, these suggestions would reduce the learner's interest since anything imposed would be like learning without enjoyment. It would also mean a bifurcation of students according to the merits of language skills. For all students, regardless of their learning background, short and enjoyable courses were designed after much consideration. It included the basics of English language and Communication skills with an emphasis on body language and teamwork in the first year of engineering. The idea of mixing up the students and pretending to be ignorant of the merits of English language proficiency was to help the vernacular students to get involved with the proficient students and learn subtly. It is also important to create awareness in the students about their language skills. The students need to prepare according to their needs and individual interests. Learning at their pace makes them accountable for their learning. This is called Learner Autonomy. The term was introduced by Henri Holec, who defined it as the "learner's ability to take charge of his or her own learning" [2] yet, we find that many students fail to take responsibility for their own learning. This is probably because they are unsure about their learning and wait for quick feedback. There should be quick feedback for every learning activity that shows a direction for the activity.

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While experimenting with novel sentence structures, students are not able to develop the confidence necessary to construct their own sentences or write with assurance. In the classroom, one or two hours are not enough to reach every student, but they are able to grasp the general rules and a few practice questions. Learner autonomy refers to the principle that learners should take a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. They should be involved in decisions concerning setting objectives for learning, determining ways and means of learning, and reflecting on and evaluating what they have learned. [3] Fostering learner independence is a crucial element of language instruction. In traditional teacher-led language learning, most of the decisions are taken by the teacher. The student finds it difficult to grow independent here as the learning is a learner-led one. Autonomous learning makes learning more personalized and focused, which results in better learning outcomes due to learners' needs and preferences. There is no end to language learning, as it is a lifelong process.

The term autonomy has been used in five ways as follows (Benson and Voller, 1997, p. 2): [4]

- Situations when students learn all by themselves,
- A natural ability that schools sometimes don't let shine,
- A group of skills you can learn and use when you're teaching yourself,
- When students get to choose what they want to learn,
- When students take charge of their learning and make choices about it.

The goal of a language teacher is to help students to use language independently to communicate in unpredictable real-life situations. This involves learner willingness to a large extent. Sinclair (2000) similarly suggests 13 aspects of learner autonomy [5], which 'appear to have been recognised and broadly accepted by the language teaching profession.

- Autonomy is a concept related to a person's capability.
- Autonomy entails the learner's willingness to assume responsibility for their learning.
- The ability and inclination of learners to take on this responsibility aren't necessarily inherent traits.
- Achieving complete autonomy is an idealistic aspiration.
- Autonomy exists on a spectrum with varying levels.
- The levels of autonomy can fluctuate and are not fixed.
- Autonomy cannot be achieved simply by placing learners in situations where they must be self-reliant.
- Cultivating autonomy requires a conscious understanding of the learning process, involving reflective thinking and decision-making.
- Fostering autonomy goes beyond just teaching specific strategies.
- Autonomy can manifest both inside and outside the classroom.
- Autonomy has both an individual and a social aspect.
- Promoting autonomy has both psychological and political dimensions.
- Different cultures interpret autonomy in diverse ways.

The following table gives an overview of the learner capacities of language learning according to the CEFR levels. An engineering student needs a B2 level in the English language to get placed in a reputed multinational company.

They should be clear in communication and should be able to present presentations.
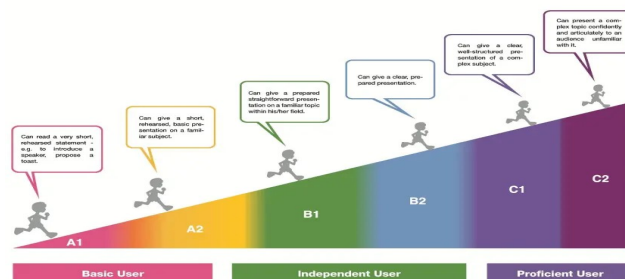
[6] **Strategies for Fostering Learner Autonomy:** It is important to develop strategies for learning that foster learner autonomy. These strategies help learners set their objectives according to their needs. For example, a student seeking placement in a multinational company has to set a goal of a B2 level [CEFR] of Language skills while a student seeking higher education has to work towards achieving a C1 level [CEFR]. When learning a language, social strategies of collaboration and sharing knowledge are important. This helps the learner use language for small talk, conversation and communication. It brings learners closer through questioning and sharing knowledge. This also invokes a spirit of cooperation and empathy. It is also possible for English Language Learners to work independently in groups to develop positive study habits. It is beneficial to watch YouTube channels created by Cambridge, Oxford to improve pronunciation. Listening to Podcasts and creating blogs and following technical blogs allows the learner to understand the technical content and put it across to the people in a community in lucid language.

A lot of learners read stories, novels, magazines, and dailies. They listen to audiobooks, and podcasts which expose them to the English language regularly. They share their understanding with others in the classroom by speaking about the interesting aspects they came across. During the pandemic, numerous English language sites opened their resources for free practice. One such one is the PTE versant practice questions have more than five hundred practice questions to test various Listening, speaking, Reading and writing skills. Now it is available as the PTE versant app too.

"The Versant tests helped us standardize and scale up our recruitment process. This led to significant improvement in the quality of hires on communication skills."Abraham Zachariah, Global Head, Learning and Development, Cognizant BPS [7]

There are numerous other sites like English club, BBC Learn English, Cambridge Learn English [8] and others that offer free practice to grow the learner's skills from A1 to C1 levels. Another way to learn the English language is by addressing the code of conduct and environment that align with Program objectives 7 and 8 with lifelong English Language learning. Environmental; themes related to the UN's sustainability goals help students learn sustainability through these themes. It helps students get involved in their projects and have the opportunity to express them. 'Speak Out for Sustainability is a Pearson and BBC Studios project that allows learners and educators to participate in a worldwide project designed to raise awareness and inspire interaction around key themes such as reducing our carbon footprint or avoiding water waste.'[9] We have many applications that support learning the English language

independently. Additionally, these help the students learn at their own pace and gain confidence to use it later in the community. The fear of losing out during language learning amongst proficient learners is usually overcome with these applications. Some of the applications that are most widely accepted are ELSA which supports speaking and pronunciation skills by giving immediate feedback. Duolingo helps a learner learn many languages. The learning is in the form of fun games and it leads the learner to higher levels after the learner finishes the prescribed practice questions. It helps in speaking and writing. One can practice many times and grow in their proficiency. It is similar to Wannalisn where one can earn points. In this case, the learner uses real-life situations while practising pronunciation, listening, and vocabulary through short pop culture clips. Wannalisn connects education with entertainment making it a popular application. Unlike Duolingo, Babbel helps learners learn languages by helping them connect with other learners. Cambridge Enguru, Cambridge Communication App, the beta application by Cambridge can help you learn English and prepare for professional communication. One can use these applications to learn how to answer politely and formally during interviews or meetings in the workplace.

Fluent U app helps learners learn English with real-world videos from TV commercials, news, and popular talk shows. It also helps in enriching and building vocabulary. It offers an interface where learners can tap on the word and hear its usage. The BBC Learning English app connects one to its website. The site is regularly updated with current affairs, stories and everyday conversations. It has 6-minute videos that have a transcript and tasks with vocabulary practice. Regular use of this application not only makes one proficient in the English language but also increases the content that's required for speaking. The BBC Learning English app now allows you to listen to audio programmes whenever you want and share them on social media or send them to your friends. Other ways of learning the English language are reading books and newspapers regularly. The Hindu newspaper offers a variety of activities and the English language is one of the easiest to learn. Students can write their opinions in a column in the Indian Express. Times of India have content on films and entertainment. It is good to begin a notebook and write new words and their usage. This helps learners to update their knowledge and grow proficient. A lot of learning happens through practice. Write and Improve by Cambridge is a free tool that helps learners practice English writing on various topics. It allows the learners to write using hints. The learner can practice from the beginner to the advanced level of writing. A timer and quick feedback make the learners motivated towards the cause.

Speak and Improve [11] is a research project from the University of Cambridge that improves the speaking skills of English learners all around the world with regular practice. It involves the learner speaking to the Robot named Sandi who asks questions. Sandi gives a CEFR grade for the learners' speech and also helps the learners improve their speaking skills. Sandi has the technology to rate a speaker through conversations and learn for work or fun. Sandi begins with eight basic questions and it is fun answering them. One can continue the conversation.
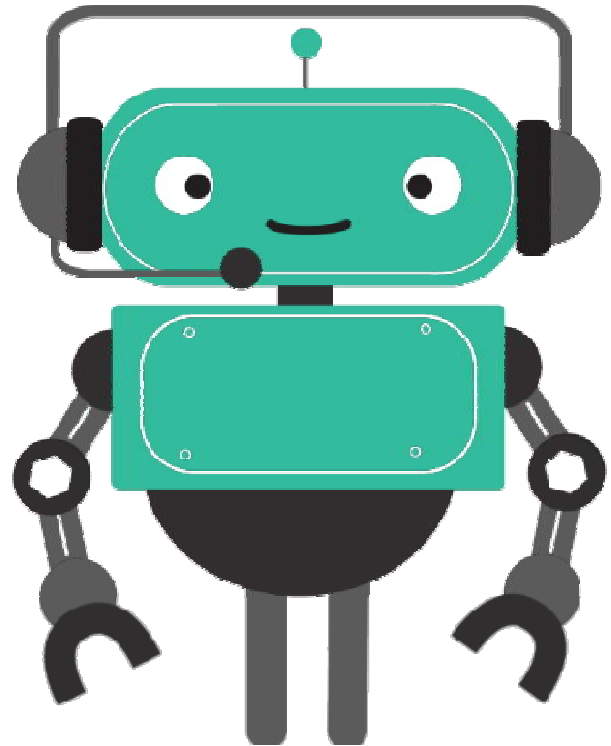
When an undergraduate Engineering student practices these ways of language learning independently, he is ready for his placements and professional development. This also helps in appearing for IELTS, TOEFL and Duolingo exams independently. One can integrate this application in the classroom and help the whole participate by adding topics that the students can write. The student can get personalized feedback but the autonomy of choosing topics is reduced here. The virtual labs by the Indian Institute of Technology and the English language skill development sites in association with AICTE are valuable and work exactly like an English Language Lab. For example, the Sakshat Virtual Lab by IIT Guwahati addresses Business communication, finding errors, Grammar, communication skills and many other topics that are useful for an engineering student to get placed. The practice exercises and feedback make it as easy as a language lab in the college. This can be accessed by the student according to his schedule. Benson (2001) points out; that the teacher cannot teach students to become autonomous. However, the teacher may create such an atmosphere and conditions in which they will be encouraged to develop the autonomy that they already have.[12]

One can practice the English language on the numerous free sites and applications but a daily reflection of the learning and punctuality towards using the language takes a learner far ahead. It is generally accepted that autonomy implies particular skills, behaviours, and methods of teaching and learning. Lee (1998) argues that human beings are born with autonomy [13]. Phillip Benson has written a great deal about learner autonomy

and describes five principles for achieving autonomous learning:[14]

- Active involvement in student learning: This means students getting involved and participating actively in their own learning.
- Providing options and resources: This means giving students different choices and tools to help them learn.
- Offering choices and decision-making opportunities: This means letting students make decisions and choose how they want to learn.
- Supporting learners: This means helping and assisting students as they learn.
- Encouraging reflection: This means prompting students to think back on what they've learned and what it mea

Teachers need to help learners learn more on their own through the activities or practice exercises that they like. Readers can choose their choice of topics to read to grow their language skills. Listening can be varied too. Learners are subjected to discussions and analysis of their talks. A sound evaluation of this is a reflection of their learning. Goal setting, collaboration, thinking, pairing and sharing are class activities that promote autonomy. Product reviews, sales and other entrepreneurial and leadership activities also promote autonomy in language learning. Autonomy in language learning for engineering is one of the best ways to reach one's destination in language learning.

"Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement."— Daniel H. Pink

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