Preparing the UG Students to Face Virtual Communication Challenges at Work Place

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Abstract

In recent years, the process of recruitment and the nature of work has been completely changed. The focus has been on soft skills, mainly presentation skills, which are integral to communication skills. Though graduates are technically sound at present, training the students in soft skills is persistently challenging. Virtual communication challenges are what the new world order is. Universities and institutions should bring in reforms in their curriculum so that the students graduating will be better equipped to face the challenges at their workplace. The onus lies in the hands of the academic institutions to bridge the gap that is so evident between the courses trained and industry requirements. Along with soft skills and virtual communication, the graduates also should be informed about cultural difference and how it affects communication. This paper focuses on understanding virtual communication and its challenges and also highlights the need for designing courses and developing materials for the graduates to face virtual challenges and make them ready for the future.

Keywords: Virtual teams, challenges, work place, training, presentation skills, course design, material development

Introduction
What is Virtual Communication?
The communication, that takes place amongst the people when they can't be physically present. For instance, communication through web cams, video conferencing, video chats and virtual classrooms etc. are a few to name. The technology makes it makes possible to see and hear one another in real time without any time lag. It enables the people to work from home without travelling to any foreign land, which is cost effective. These days, the Multinational companies have been using this technology for their business development. This change has been created due to globalization; and, it created virtual communication and collaboration. Today, with the rapid changes in business and leadership, the entrepreneurs cannot ignore the requirements of the global market.

"Imagine a time traveller from the 1960s instantly transported to 2008. They would see some truly astonishing things going on: people working and collaborating across cities, time zones, and even continents; messages sent to anyone, anywhere, anytime without using the U.S mail; other people attending meetings virtually from their offices, hotels, or even homes; and the ability to easily keep in touch with co-workers in the oddest places like air terminals, trains, cars, and golf courses. The world of work in the twenty-first century is a very different place than it was 40 years ago, and we don't just mean dressing business casual [1]."

Therefore, it is important to understand the challenges faced by the industry and how, this gap can be bridged by the institutions. This is where the role of language teachers, soft skills trainers/facilitators becomes significant. We, as facilitators and teachers of language have been training our students in soft skills. But, with the technical advancements, a new challenged has been faced by the language teachers and trainers. Training the Students in soft skills is not enough as per the growing needs of the industry. The students are to be trained in understanding the virtual world, the importance of communication through technology, importance of culture in virtual communication, understanding the non-verbal communication, Body language and Working in different time zones.

Virtual Communication Challenges
Some of the challenges faced by the associates working in the companies are: Barriers in Language, Trust, team intimacy, cultural differences, differences in communication styles, communicating across time zones and inability to read the nonverbal cues.

- **Barriers in Language:** Communicating effectively is the 'key' to be successful in virtual teams. Since, the teams are scattered at different locations across the globe, pronunciation-use of proper stress and intonation, effective listening and comprehension, email etiquette, sentence structures, writing with minimal errors, handling calls,

responding, having small talks are imperative and play a vital role in effective communication.

- **Trust:** It takes a lot to build trust amongst the team members working in normal organisations, it is all the more difficult to build trust amongst the teams working in virtual environment; as, people meet seldom. With divided leadership, individual talents and working styles affects the trust factor. Lack of interaction in person leads to lesser understanding of behaviours exhibited by the team mates. The lack of rapport, absence of interpersonal communication, absence of non-verbal communication can lead mistrust between the teams.

- **Cultural Differences:** "Culture makes people understand each other better. And if they understand each other better in their soul, it is easier to overcome the economic and political barriers. But first they have to understand that their neighbour is, in the end, just like them, with the same problems, the same questions." (Paulo Coelho). Cultural difference is another challenge, which can create damaging impression on each other.

Like everything else we learn, the way we communicate is determined strongly by the culture we grow up in, and there are many aspects of communication which differ from culture to culture, including how loud we talk, the directness with which we speak, how much emotion we express in various situations, the rules for turn taking, the use or avoidance of silence, and many non-verbal aspects of communication like posture, eye contact, proximity, touching, tone of voice, etc. that occur almost totally beneath our conscious awareness. Today's multicultural work place creates significant challenges to effective communication beyond the obvious barriers created by varying competence in the primary language of communication, which, for global businesses, is generally English [2].

Understanding culture is very important aspect when working in virtual teams. Being culturally sensitive creates respect and avoids misunderstandings and conflict. For instance, greeting someone with a hug is customary in certain cultures; instead if, one is greeting another with a handshake, then the other person may feel offended. This can lead to misunderstanding and might affect the business deal.

Working in Different Time Zones: Working under different time zones can be a major problem for the teams as it leads to stress. When working in different time zones, a person could be working in one's own comfortable time zone, but the other might be asleep or could be working in mid night or early morning. These differences can be quite challenging. Working under these conditions requires adaptability, empathy, respect and strong organisational skills. Respect for other person's sacrifices would lead to strong relationships and success in virtual world.

Bridging the Gap between Institution and Industry: In the past, getting placement itself was considered as a great achievement. As the time passed by, the requirement of the industry has been changed in a drastic way. The companies are not only looking for the candidates who have good communication skills; but also, for candidates who can work with the associates distributed across the globe. Culture sensitization, Understanding different communication styles, showing empathy and understanding of different channels of communication should be include in the requirements of the training module.

To understand the needs of the industry, associates working in various organisations were interviewed and questionnaires were administered. Based on the data collected, a detailed analysis has been done.

Wongsuwana believed that speaking skills can be imparted and it does not depend on the talent [3].

The analysis shows that the students need to be trained in functional language skills acquisition; for instance, starting the conversations, making small talks, ending the conversations in formal and informal situations and Telephone etiquette. Apart from the spoken skills, the students need to be trained in basic writing skills-writing without errors or with minimal errors, practice should be given in syntax, use of linkers, writing cohesively. In technical writing-e-email writing-how to write emails in crisp and to the point, report writing-language and grammatical structures used in writing reports.

The students should also be trained in understanding the non-verbal communication, paralanguage like tone and accent (voice Modulation). They are to be trained in proper articulation of sounds and accent neutralization. Since, India is a land of diverse Languages and Cultures, reducing Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) has greater impact while speaking to native speakers or to the associates working on the other side of the globe. A lot of misunderstanding can happen, if the speaker has MTI. Therefore, it is very important to train the students to get rid of MTI.

The students are also to be trained in understanding different cultures across the globe, understanding the non-verbal cues, understanding the body language and its nuances in different parts of the world; thus, making them culturally sensitive. Culture-specific skills aim at analysing the differences between two particular cultures and their likely impact on communication between people of those cultures. It is also based on an understanding and synthesis of many factors, such as the other person's values, individual and group perceptions, social structure and decision making process.

Conclusion

Virtual communication is one of the prominent modes of communication through which global businesses operate. Outsourcing of many jobs by different countries led to virtual communication. In order to communicate in virtual teams it is necessary that the associates use effective English language skills to be successful.

Hence, the training should include projects that would give the students hands on experience. Role plays and simulations play a significant role in enhancing their communication skills and given them confidence to face the virtual world after they leave the portals of the institutions. As per the analysis, a consensus has been reached to design courses and develop materials which would enable the undergraduate students to face the challenges at the virtual work places.

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