

ROLE OF SOFT SKILLS IN ACADEMICS

*Mr. Ashok Navnath Borude, Assistant Professor, Department of English,
Ahmednagar College, Station Road, Ahmednagar Pin-414 001 Maharashtra*

Abstract: *This paper makes a survey of the importance of soft skills in students' lives both at college and after college. It discusses how soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job the student is trained to do. The paper exhorts educators to take special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students' college and university time, teachers have major influence on the development of their students' soft skills. Embedding the training of soft skills into hard skills courses is a very effective and efficient method of achieving both an attractive way of teaching a particular content and an enhancement of soft skills. Soft skills fulfill an important role in shaping an individual's personality which is the need of the time. It is of high importance for every student to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge.*

Key words: *Soft skills, hard skills, subject knowledge, communication skills, teachers, education.*

Introduction

It has been a long standing complaint of employers that the newcomers i.e. students fresh pass out of college or universities lack Soft Skills and are unemployable. Schools, on one hand, dump the responsibility on the parents to teach them Soft Skills and then send them to school and parents put the ball back to the school blaming them for charging high fees and for the lack of training their students are given in Soft Skills. These result into a situation where the colleges blame the parents and parents, on the other hand, feel that they have paid a heavy amount of fees to the college, so it is their duty of college or university to teach the students Soft Skills. The result of this entire process is this that students are the sufferers in current world of competition. It needs to be thought by all. They are really far behind in the demands of the workplaces. Predominantly missing amongst Soft Skill is the ability to communicate properly in the English language and express their views correctly and clearly.

Today, graduates are academically competent having good grades/marks and excellent with relation to hard skills or the performance in the written examination but seriously lack in skills like 'team-work', 'leadership', 'quantitative aptitude and verbal reasoning' and so on. The situation has deteriorated all over the world. That is the reason to introduce the subject of communication skill in technical courses as well. Nowadays teaching communication skills has become part and parcel of each and every course.

What are soft skills?

Before going any further in debating the importance of soft skills we have to clarify the question "What exactly are soft skills?" This basic question is not easy to answer, because the perception of what is a soft skill differs from context to context. A subject may be considered a soft skill in one particular area, and may be considered a hard skill in another. On top of it the understanding of what should be recognized as a soft skill varies widely. The online encyclopedia "Wikipedia" gives a very broad definition of soft skills, which leaves much room for discussion:

"Soft skills refer to the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people to varying degrees. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job." (Wikipedia, 2007)

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| 1. Common Sense | 2. Good attitude | 3. Communication skills |
| 4. Group Discussion | 5. Etiquette & Manners. | 6. Body Language |
| 7. Cooperation & Team skills | 8. Adaptability. | 9. Flexibility. |
| 10. Follow rules / Instructions. | 11. Initiative | 12. Responsibility |
| 13. Reliability. | 14. Honesty. | 15. Integrity |
| 16. Dependability. | 17. Work ethics. | 18. Punctuality |
| 19. Grooming | 20. Accountability | 21. Interpersonal Skills |
| 22. Intrapersonal skills | 23. Motivational skills | 24. Creative thinking skills |
| 25. Problem Solving Ability | 26. Public Relations | 27. Willingness to learn |
| 28. Time Management | 29. Prioritizing Tasks. | 30. Performance Excellence |
| 31. Commitment | 32. Ability to meet deadlines | 33. Listening Skills |
| 34. Judgment | 35. Leadership skills | 36. Decision Making |
| 37. Self-directed / Motivated. | 38. Presentation Skills | 39. Change Management |
| 40. Project Management | 41. Eye contact. | 42. Self-Supervising |
| 43. Personal energy | 44. Personal hygiene | 45. Intellectual Ability |
| 46. Sociability | 47. Empathy | 48. Business management |
| 49. Negotiating skills | 50. Cultural awareness | |

Table 1 above lists some of the Soft Skills that are considered worldwide. However, this is by far incomplete. More could be added and the list could go even longer.

What are the most important soft skills?

Each individual has his own perception of Soft Skills and depends on it. Needless to say, whenever we talk about Soft Skills, the first thing that springs immediately to mind is Communication Skills because that is the skill that is mostly lacking amongst students of all ages and all categories. It ranges from colleges to universities and even to small scale basic educational institutions. Many cannot even define communication skills properly or are biased with the definition. The basic question that is asked is “What is Communication Skill?” The most common answer is “The English language.” The correct answer would be “*Communication skill is a skill where the message is transmitted in such a way that the receiver receives it in a way the sender intended it to be.*” No wonder, the students seriously lack both Communication as well as Soft Skills. We need to find a way to improve the qualities / skills within the individual. This is mandatory because the students study these skills. Their application is nearly impossible to monitor because the faculty / trainer is not always with the student.

It is suggested that the parents should be given regular training in Soft Skill and should be asked to monitor. Soft Skill training should begin at the primary school level and should continue till post graduation or at least till graduation. Almost all educational institutions force the students to pay more attention to subject knowledge and leave the training of Soft Skills to the parents. Most parents and faculties, in turn, are ignorant of the fact that Soft Skills exist at all.

If Soft Skills are to be inculcated in an individual, we need to look onto the important factors shaping his character as well as his skills of communication. First, we will look onto the factors how one can communicate properly because, communication is the first thing that a newborn does when it comes out

from the mother's womb. Body language is the second thing by means of which it lets others know what it wants or its feelings about a particular feeling or object.

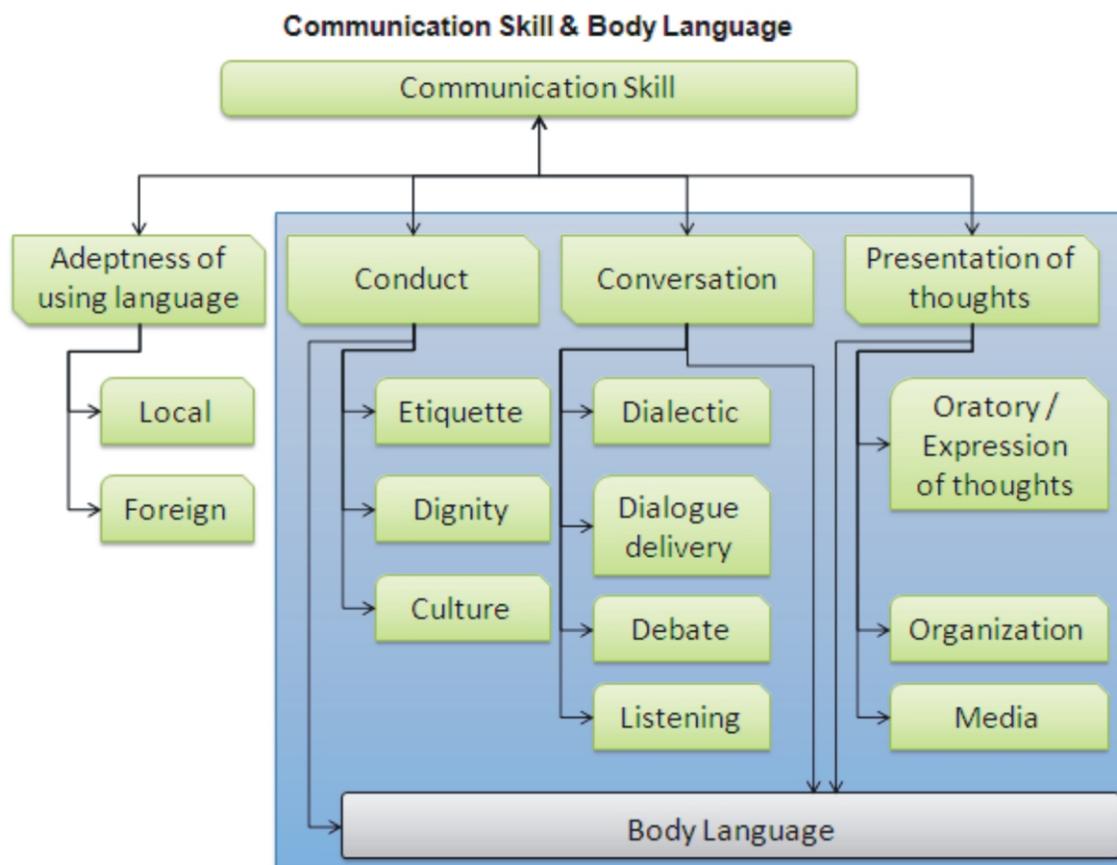


Figure 1: An overview of essential factors shaping a person's communication skills.

Figure 1 displays a collection of aspects that spans from basic skills of using a particular language, which in multilingual societies like India where every state has its own language and may not be taken for granted on advanced topics like Dialectic or Oratory skills. Minimum requirements for a graduate of a college or university should be that the student should be proficient in spoken and written language, a certain amount of dignity that should reflect in conversation as well as in his body language, adequate discussion skills so that he can contribute on a topic of discussion. One major thing of importance here would be good presentation skills so that he is able to market his skills & services successfully. He should have creative skills so that he is able to communicate his ideas properly. However, communication skills are not only necessary for their career and professional growth, but are even more contributing to their social standing or competence. Good social skills are reflected at his place of work and hence recursively further his career. All of these are interlinked and are interwoven in the very fabric of our lives providing we practice these skills because as the age old saying goes “practice makes perfect.”

However, as we probe deeper down into Communication skills the issue becomes more and more complicated. In the English speaking world, Language proficiency is the ability to speak, read and write Standard English in a way business people communicate. One may have the 'hard' skill of knowing what usage is correct and what is incorrect, but lack the 'soft' skills of knowing when to use only standard forms and in what tone to use them. (Waggoner, 2002). In this definition our basic Soft Skill “Communication

Skills” itself is divided into a “soft” and a “hard” part. It can be said that Communication skills are a prerequisite for a range of other Soft Skills like resolving or managing a conflict. Even in resolving a conflict, syllable stress, tone of voice and the quality of language that we use plays an important part.

Can personal traits and habits be changed?

The learning begins when we realize ourselves. An important aspect for a professional is to recognize his weaknesses, shortcomings and bad habits. If one recognizes his weaknesses, then there is scope for improvement. We can successfully say this because a person who does not want to improve will never accept his weakness or shortcomings. He will find excuses and work around it. The better way is, as soon as a deficiency is recognized; we need to start working towards its elimination. This is the best attitude towards learning.

For example, a person may have stage fear when he has to make a presentation. The fear may be due to a variety of factors: Lack of presentation skills, lack of confidence, and lack of software knowledge. When the problem area is narrowed down, he can start working on it. Let us assume that his fear is presentation skills. He can start by presenting before his relatives, close friends who will give him positive comments and help with improvement. After a few practice sessions, he would have conquered half his fear of presenting and can do a better job than what he would have done before the practice sessions. Once he presents before the audience, the next presentation will be even better because the fear is almost gone. A few presentations more and it becomes second nature to him. With similar exercises one can progress towards patching up his fears.

A negative habit or trait can be overcome only by a self-imposed training. A person must jump into the water to learn swimming and with constant practice; he can only do it better. Even Soft Skills training would be unsuccessful if the trainee is not convinced that it would improve him or prove beneficial for him.

Why are soft skills important?

The crucial reason why soft skills are necessary is the current job-market. There are many job seekers and too few jobs. The Indian corporate say that the current generation is unemployable because they have few or no Soft Skills. Only the fittest survive, and to be the fittest, we require the training in the 'cutting-edge' technology and a 'competitive edge' that singles you out as the best candidate for the position over others with similar qualifications and comparable evaluation results. And where do the candidates find this competitive advantage? It is by enhancing knowledge and adding up positive personal traits and habits that make one stand apart from the rest of the crowd. Youths nowadays often think that they can easily secure a job because they are considered 'professionals' after completing their tertiary education. In today's fast paced world, employers seek candidates who are productive from day one. If a fresher from a university has to be trained on the job to put more than two or three sentences together to make sense and express him clearly, or put together a proper presentation or how to chat up a client or a customer in a pleasant manner, this graduate student would not even qualify as a quick starter. Also basic knowledge, other than the subject he has learned, like business management, project management and general economy will improve the chances of a job candidate considerably. The candidate must also learn on his own, the subjects that were not taught but related to his core field of learning.

Anyway, good communication skills are invaluable during the job interview itself. If the candidate is less qualified or does not have substance on the 'hard skill' side, well 'Soft skills' can be an excellent cover up for it. We can see people who are super smooth talkers with performance not worth mentioning. Then there are advantages of displaying positive traits like courtesy, honesty, flexibility, common sense, flawless appearance, etc. during a job interview which are not even to be discussed. These are mandatory in every job irrespective of the level.

Soft Skills shape an individual's personality. Any teacher's dream is that their students get a well rounded education and grow to become well balanced and matured personalities. However, this character

is reflected in Soft Skills and not hard skills. People who socialize more and extrovert by nature are more appreciated than introverts who can speak less than ten sentences. Gone are the days when a person who is an expert in his field was rated as 'good' and with Soft Skills as 'nice to have'. Tables are turned and it is the other way round today. Soft Skills is the need of the time today.

Where can soft skills be acquired?

Two methods for improving our Soft Skills is identified. The first way to get enrolled on a Soft Skills training course on rhetoric, languages, presentation skills, conflict or cultural management. This is a well-proven concept with the advantage of having some kind of certificate at the end of the course. Most people undergo this training only for the certificate because it will come in handy for career development or for jumping jobs. The slender sarcasm in the last sentence is deliberate, because it is not always guaranteed that a certain course actually successfully enhanced a person's Soft Skills until & unless it is vigorously practiced.

The second way of acquiring Soft Skills is by self-training via books and is the most useful because an individual trains himself because he wants to get ahead in life. He knows that if he does not practice, he will be the one to be blamed for the failure. With the advent of the Internet, Soft Skills material can be found easily on the net. Of course, it goes without saying that you would have to filter some unnecessary things out as there is also a lot of unwanted information on the internet.

A sure shot way to train oneself in Soft Skills is to begin by socializing with friends, colleagues, peers and other members of the society. Start by engaging in small talk to improve communication skills in an informal way on topics like; language proficiency, listening, discussing, self-esteem, overcoming stage fear, body language, etiquette and manners etc. The list could be endless.

A lot of effort should be put by the parents to make sure that their children's personality is pleasing and habits are excellent. As the world is fast shrinking to become a global village, both parents have to work to meet the high standard of life as well as to pay the ever rising cost of education. Parents rarely have time to interact with their children let alone inculcate Soft Skills. Since the cost of the education is high, they expect the school to teach them the Soft Skills and schools, in turn pass the buck to colleges or centers of higher learning to equip them with the Soft Skills required. The end-case scenario is that everyone knows that they have to do it and nobody does it. The students are the sufferers in the process of the blame game.

What can lecturers do to enhance their students' soft skills?

Needs analysis is the first step. For the educational institutions to recognize the needs of the students and then take steps to patch them up with the required training. They also need to raise the awareness of the students about the importance of Soft Skills and doing a SWOT analysis of each and every student. Specialists can be hired for this. Students should be encouraged to read books that are focused on improving Soft Skills, attend training courses, take part in debates and socialize with their peers. Each student should be encouraged to present a topic of their choice during the seminar sessions.

An addition to this, a period with a defined syllabus should be incorporated as a subject. At school level, students may be required to do a research and present a paper or a small write-up and submit the results during a particular period. At institutes of higher learning, a Soft Skill class can be arranged with topics like leadership skill, listening or writing skills, cross cultural conflict, problem solving can be introduced. Such practices are well received by student and it basically turns out to be fun learning for them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that Soft Skills occupy supreme importance and individuals who do not have them will soon be out of job. One has to take the trouble to acquire Soft Skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. Soft Skills are gaining importance in all areas of the work industry. Faculties have a

major role to play here by imparting their respective courses by using Soft Skills and at the same time making sure that their students practice Soft Skills during their University time. It is high time for the trainers, lecturers and faculties to change their methodology in imparting education. This holds true for schools, colleges, Universities as well as parents. It is everybody's responsibility to make sure that proper grooming, etiquette and Soft Skills are practiced at all times. This world would be a better place to live in. If each individual contributes his / her bit, the society, at large, would improve dramatically, thereby contributing to the peace of the world in a big way.

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Internet Resources:

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2. Waggoner, Jaqueline: <http://mountainrise.wcu.edu/html/waggoner.pdf>
3. Wikipedia: www.en.wikipedia.com
4. www.softskills.com
5. www.softskillsindia.com
6. www.softskillsworld.com