HUMANITIES

Bridging Communication, Professionalism and Technical Competency: A Reflective Case from Teaching English to Engineering Students

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Abstract

Engineering graduates are expected to combine sound technical knowledge with clear communication and professional conduct, yet these three strands are often taught separately, if at all. This reflective case paper examines how they can be developed together in the English classroom. It draws on the author's experience of teaching grammar, spoken English and communication skills to undergraduate engineering and management students in Ballari, Karnataka, and of training students and teachers in presentation, scripting, anchoring and interview preparation across schools and colleges. Using Gibbs's reflective cycle as a structure, the paper describes classroom practices, considers what worked and what proved difficult, and proposes an integrated triad framework in which communication, professionalism and technical competency are developed through the same classroom tasks. The paper reports no experimental data. It offers practitioner insight and practical recommendations for English teachers, technical faculty and institutions that wish to improve the workplace readiness of engineering students.

Keywords: Engineering education; communication skills; professionalism; technical competency; reflective practice; English language teaching; employability

1 Introduction

Engineering is a profession of problem-solving, but it is also a profession of people. An engineer must explain a design to a client, write a clear report for a supervisor, work with a team, and behave responsibly when others depend on the quality of the work. Employers and educators have long recognised this. Surveys of business executives place communication, integrity and professionalism among the most important soft skills in the modern workplace (Robles, 2012), and engineering educators have argued that communication is a core competence for the twenty-first century engineer and not an optional extra (Riemer, 2007; Sheppard et al., 2009).

In many engineering colleges in India, however, these expectations are met unevenly. Technical subjects carry most of the credit and most of the teaching time, while English or "communication skills" is often a short, low-credit course taught in isolation. Students may then treat language learning as something separate from their "real" engineering studies, and technical teachers may assume that communication and professional behaviour are the language teacher's responsibility. India's National Education Policy 2020 calls for holistic and multidisciplinary education that develops skills such as communication, teamwork and ethical reasoning alongside subject knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2020), which makes it a good moment to ask how these strands can be taught together.

This paper is a reflective case. It does not claim to prove that one method works better than another. Its purpose is to describe, in an honest and structured way, what an English teacher has learned from several years of working with engineering and management students, and to turn that experience into a framework other teachers can test. The paper asks three questions:

1. Which English-classroom practices help students develop communication, professionalism and technical competency at the same time?
2. What difficulties arise when these three strands are taught together?
3. What practical framework can teachers and institutions use to integrate them?

2 Conceptual background

2.1 Communication, professionalism and technical competency

Communication here means the ability to listen, speak, read and write clearly and appropriately for a specific audience and purpose. For engineers this includes explaining a procedure, describing a fault, presenting a project, writing an email or a report, and taking part in a meeting or an interview. Professionalism means the habits and values that make a person reliable in a workplace: punctuality, preparation, courtesy, honesty, respect for confidentiality and for other people's work, willingness to take responsibility, and ethical judgement. Technical competency means knowledge of the discipline and the ability to apply it to real problems.

These strands depend on one another. A technically correct solution that cannot be explained may never be used. A confident speaker who has not prepared the content wastes the audience's time. A well-prepared student who copies a report from another source has failed in professionalism, whatever the quality of the text. In this paper the three strands are treated as a triad in which weakness in any one reduces the value of the other two.

2.2 English for specific purposes and learning through use

The field of English for specific purposes argues that language teaching should be built around the real needs of the learners and the situations in which they will use English (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). For engineering students those situations include technical description, project presentation, report writing and workplace interaction. A second influence is the idea that learning is strengthened when students use knowledge in meaningful activity and in interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978) and when they move through cycles of experience, reflection and new action (Kolb, 1984).

2.3 Reflective practice

Schön (1983) described professionals as people who learn by reflecting on their own practice, and Brookfield (1995) encouraged teachers to examine their assumptions through their own experience, their students' eyes and their colleagues' views. Gibbs's (1988) reflective cycle gives this process a clear structure: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and action plan. This paper uses the cycle to organise Sections 4 and 5.

3 Context and method of reflection

The reflection draws mainly on the period 2013 to 2017, when the author served as Assistant Professor and Head of the English Department at Ballari Business College (BITM), Alipur, Ballari. In

this role the author taught Basic and Additional English to B.B.M. and B.Com. students and taught basic and advanced grammar and spoken English to engineering students. The author also trained colleagues and students in effective teaching methods and presentation skills, served on panels for recruiting English lecturers, and edited the annual college magazine. A paper on teaching English to engineering students was presented at the 60th All India English Teachers' National Conference in Ballari in December 2015 (Basha, 2015).

The reflection is supplemented by later experience: training students in interview skills, presentation and scripting at Nandi Degree College (2018 to 2019); training students in anchoring and stage communication and conducting teacher-training sessions at Jindal Adarsh Vidyalaya (2019 to 2025); facilitating teacher-capacity programmes as a CBSE Resource Person; and teaching in the Department of English at Kishkinda University from August 2026.

The method is practitioner reflection. No experiment was run, no student data are reported, and no student is identified. The observations are the author's professional judgements, built from classroom experience, lesson planning, informal feedback from students and colleagues, and results seen in class activities over several years. They should be read as hypotheses for further testing and not as measured findings.

4 Reflective case: What happened in the classroom

4.1 The starting point

Engineering students often arrived in the English class with strong ability in mathematics and technical subjects but with limited confidence in spoken English. Students came from different school backgrounds, including regional-language-medium schools, and so their exposure to English varied widely. Many saw English as a subject to be passed rather than a tool to be used in their careers. Some feared making mistakes in front of classmates and therefore stayed silent. This silence was frequently mistaken for lack of ability, when it was more often lack of practice and fear of being judged.

The first feeling that I, as the teacher, had to manage was frustration at the gap between students' technical potential and their ability to express it. The second was the realisation that grammar lectures alone were not closing that gap.

4.2 Practice 1: Spoken English through low-risk speaking tasks

Because fear of error was the main barrier, the first task was to make speaking safe. Short, playful and repeatable activities were used: pronunciation drills, tongue twisters, reading aloud, two-minute talks on familiar topics, and pair conversations before any whole-class speaking. The same logic was later used with undergraduate students at Government First Grade College, Kurugod, in a special lecture on the role of tongue twisters in spoken English (23 January 2024). Tongue twisters work because they treat accuracy of sound as a game, which removes much of the shame attached to mis-pronunciation.

Evaluation: students began to speak earlier and more freely when the first tasks were short, low-stakes and done in pairs. *Analysis:* confidence precedes fluency, and fluency precedes accuracy. Starting with accuracy-focused correction tended to silence the quietest students.

4.3 Practice 2: Grammar for clear technical writing

Grammar was taught at basic and advanced levels but was connected to what engineers actually write: instructions, descriptions of processes, definitions, comparisons, emails and short reports. Students practised the passive voice by describing how a machine or process works, sequence words by writing a procedure, and conditionals by writing safety instructions. This approach made grammar visibly useful. It also showed students that precision in language is a form of technical precision, because an ambiguous instruction can cause a wrong action.

Evaluation: when grammar was tied to technical content, students accepted it as part of their professional preparation rather than as a school exercise. *Analysis:* the technical content was supplied by the students' own discipline, so the English teacher acted as a language facilitator and not as a technical authority.

4.4 Practice 3: Presentation, scripting and stage communication

Presentation training was one of the most effective practices across institutions. Students prepared short presentations, received feedback on structure, voice, eye contact and body language, and practised answering questions. In school and college events the author wrote scripts and trained students in formal and informal anchoring, including a cultural programme in which more than sixty students performed without notes. Scripts forced students to organise ideas in a sequence, choose the right register for the audience and speak to time, which are exactly the skills required in a project review or client meeting.

Evaluation: students who had practised anchoring or scripted presentations showed noticeably greater composure when speaking to larger groups. *Analysis:* rehearsal and feedback are the active ingredients. Confidence is a result of repeated practice with feedback and not a personality trait that some students have and others lack.

4.5 Practice 4: Interview and placement preparation

Training for group discussions and personal interviews linked communication directly to professionalism. Students practised introducing themselves, explaining their academic background and projects, listening to other speakers, disagreeing politely, and presenting themselves with appropriate dress and manner. Mock interviews also made explicit the professional behaviours that employers notice but rarely teach: arriving on time, being prepared, answering honestly, and showing courtesy to every person in the room.

Evaluation: interview practice was the point where students first saw communication, professionalism and technical knowledge working together, because an interviewer's question is usually technical but is judged by how clearly and honestly it is answered. *Analysis:* when students were asked to explain their own project or subject in simple English, weak understanding became visible. Language practice therefore also acted as a check on technical understanding.

4.6 Practice 5: Professionalism through mentoring and ethical discussion

Professionalism was seldom taught as a separate topic. It was built into routines: deadlines for submissions, expected preparation before presentations, honest acknowledgement of sources, respectful listening during peer feedback, and mentoring conversations with individual students. Discussion of ethical values in higher education, a theme the author presented at a national conference in 2020, was used to connect everyday classroom behaviour with workplace responsibil-

ity. Students were asked to consider questions such as what a team member owes to the group, and when it is right to admit a mistake.

Evaluation: students responded best when expectations were stated clearly and applied consistently. *Analysis:* professionalism is learned by habit and example more than by lecture. The teacher's own punctuality, preparation and fairness are part of the curriculum.

5 Analysis: An integrated triad framework

Looking across these practices, a pattern emerges. The most effective classroom tasks were not "communication tasks" or "professionalism tasks" or "technical tasks". They were tasks in which all three strands were needed at once. Table 1 summarises tasks that proved useful and the strand each develops.

Table 1. Tasks that develop the three strands together.

Classroom task	Communication	Professionalism	Technical link
Describing a process or machine	Sequencing; precise vocabulary	Accuracy; responsibility	Explaining a real procedure
Short project presentation	Structure, delivery, answering questions	Preparation; respect for time	Presenting project work
Team report	Clear register; editing	Fair sharing of work; acknowledging sources	Technical report writing
Mock interview or group discussion	Listening; spoken fluency	Courtesy; honesty; punctuality	Explaining technical background
Email or letter writing	Tone and format	Courtesy; confidentiality	Request, query or report

Three principles follow from the reflection.

Principle 1: Make speaking safe before making it accurate. Students who feared error were silent. Low-stakes, short and repeated activities created the confidence on which later accuracy could be built.

Principle 2: Use the students' own technical content. When the topic for a talk, a report or an interview answer came from the student's discipline, language practice became relevant and also exposed gaps in technical understanding.

Principle 3: Build professionalism into routines. Deadlines, preparation, courtesy and acknowledgement of sources worked better as daily habits than as occasional lectures.

Together, these principles describe a triad in which each strand supports the others: communication makes technical knowledge usable, technical content gives communication something worth saying, and professionalism makes both trustworthy.

6 Challenges and limitations

Several difficulties were met repeatedly. First, time allocated to English was limited, and large classes made individual feedback hard. Second, students' starting levels varied widely, so a task that stretched one student could embarrass another. Third, technical teachers and language teachers

seldom planned together, so students did not see English as part of the same programme. Fourth, assessment tended to reward written accuracy in an examination more than oral and professional performance, which reduced students' motivation to practise speaking.

The paper also has limitations. It rests on one teacher's perspective, it does not use measured outcomes such as test scores or employer feedback, and the settings described (a business college, degree colleges and schools) differ from a fully technical engineering institution. The conclusions are therefore suggestions to be tested, not proven results. Future work could pair similar practices with pre- and post-tests of speaking and writing, employer feedback and student reflection journals.

7 Recommendations

1. **Teach communication through technical content.** Language teachers and technical faculty can co-plan tasks such as process descriptions, project presentations and short reports.
2. **Give speaking regular time.** Short daily or weekly speaking tasks are more effective than a single end-of-term presentation.
3. **Use clear rubrics.** Marking criteria for presentations and reports should include structure, clarity, preparation, teamwork and honest acknowledgement of sources.
4. Make expectations of professional behaviour explicit and consistent, and let teachers model them.
5. Include interview and group-discussion practice early, not only in the final year, so that students see the link between language and employability.
6. Support teachers through training, peer observation and shared reflection so that good practice spreads within the institution.

8 Conclusion

Communication, professionalism and technical competency are not three separate courses. They are three aspects of the same professional identity, and they grow best when they are practised together. The English classroom is a natural place for this integration because every task in it asks students to say something, to someone, in a particular situation. This reflective case suggests that low-risk speaking tasks, grammar tied to technical writing, rehearsed presentations, interview practice and consistent professional routines can help engineering students become graduates who are not only technically capable but also clear, reliable and confident. The suggested triad framework gives teachers and institutions a starting point for testing these ideas in their own settings.

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