

Language matters

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Abstract

It is a given that language is what sets us apart from the lesser beings. While animals communicate through the language of sounds, human beings are fortunate to be blessed with the gift of speech. To comprehend and produce language for effective interpersonal communication, the four skills of language acquisition, viz listening, speaking, reading and writing are the necessary pre requisites. Since language is most often acquired in the order of listening, speaking, reading and writing, these capabilities are referred to as LSRW skills. While listening and reading are known as receptive or passive skills as they require the use of the ears and brain to comprehend language; speaking and writing are called productive or active skills as the eyes or hands and brain are required to produce language through sound or in the written form. Communication is more than mere words. The ability to communicate effectively, more so in today's globalized world, is important as it may impact relationships positively or negatively in your work and life. Rather than what you say, what would matter are, 'how you say it', 'why you say it', 'when you say it', 'what you don't say' and 'what your body language conveys'. Another point to be wary of is the use of idioms in the right context.

This paper attempts to give a few tips for effective communication as well as the pitfalls to avoid.

KEYWORDS – language skills, effective communication listening, speaking, reading, writing,

Language is what differentiates us from the lesser beings. While animals communicate through sounds, human beings use language, a system of symbols to interact with each other. These symbols include vocal and written forms, gestures and body language. Language is a system consisting of the development,

acquisition, maintenance and use of different systems of communication by human beings.

Although communication is possible even with a limited knowledge of language, to be able to communicate effectively, there are four skills which are essential. They are listening, speaking, reading and writing. The acquisition of these skills gives the learner the required confidence to be engaged in any situation. Listening and reading are known as receptive or passive skills as there is no production of language. Speaking and writing are called productive or active skills since language production takes place in their engagement. The four skills, normally acquired in the following order of listening, speaking, reading and writing are called LSRW skills.

Listening, the first of the skills requires keen attention to sounds. For the proficiency of this skill, the ears and the brain play an important role to listen to the sounds and to comprehend the language. The second skill, speaking requires the use of the vocal tract and the brain to be able to produce language through sound correctly. The third skill which is reading, makes use of the eyes and the brain to understand the written form of the spoken language. The fourth skill requires the use of the hand and the brain to produce the written form that represents the spoken language.

In order to attain perfection in language skills, one needs to sharpen all the four skills. In any language acquisition, being exposed to and surrounded by the language in question will go a long way in mastering it and so too with English.

Listening:

Listening is very important in learning a language. Only through effective listening can one ensure proper understanding and speaking correctly since it matters not only what is said but also how it is said. Some of the ways which will aid effective listening are listening to music preferably with lyrics, watching movies, and the news and attending plays and talks in English.

Listening can be very challenging more so for an English language beginner due to the listener's limited vocabulary, lack of knowledge of the subject and the inability to distinguish sounds. Having a note book where you can take down the necessary vocabulary to suit the context, will help in understanding or predicting what is to come. For eg. while listening to a weather forecast, one should get familiar with words like 'rain', 'thundershowers' 'temperature' etc. Also familiarizing oneself with nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs will help give the overall picture of the context. Another factor is signposts in language, or link words that will take you from one sequence to another like 'firstly', 'next', 'moving on' etc. Deciding on the type of detailed information you want to practice listening for, and watching such programmes like the sports news or specific documentaries will help the listener make meaning of what is said. And finally, inferring or deciphering meaning in a situation for eg at a hotel, restaurant or travel agency will help comprehend the spoken language.

Speaking:

Though initially speaking could be difficult, once you begin, you could improve by joining social networks, talking and recording yourself and speaking in English as much as possible in and out of class. While speaking, there may be a need to emphasize on a particular word or part of a sentence. This is known as intonation. In

the absence of intonation, language can fall flat. In fact intonation gives rhythm or melody to language. Intonation is about how things are said rather than what is said. Tone and intonation are often confused with each other. While tone reflects the mood of the speaker, intonation is primarily the variation in the pitch of the voice. Intonation can convey differences in expressive meaning like surprise, anger, wonder etc.

For eg.

1. 'Why did you do this?'
2. 'Why **did** you do this?'
3. 'Why did **you** do this?'
4. 'Why did you **do** this?'
5. 'Why did you do **this**?'

In each of the above sentences, it can be noted that there would be a slight change in meaning when the pitch or stress shifts from one word to another. The correct pitch on the different words will therefore have different connotations.

Reading:

This is a skill which requires the brain to process meaning of the words, phrases and expressions represented by symbols and also understand the grammar and structure of the language used. Correct pronunciation and intonation would be essential. To develop strong reading skills, it would help to read books and articles in English on the web or from libraries or have all the operating instructions on your mobile, laptop and other devices in English. The art of reading well requires the correct pauses shown by the punctuation marks.

For eg,

1. 'I live in Bangalore' begins with a medium pitch and ends with a lower one
2. 'You live in Bangalore?' requires a rising intonation.
3. 'What a beautiful day!' needs a rising pitch.
4. 'Oh! What a pity!' begins with a high pitch and ends in a lower pitch.

Writing:

Here comes the part which can be difficult for most people since there should be correctness in usage of words and expressions. Hence it is important that you write down words and expressions that you think would be useful for use and also attempt short paragraphs on any topic. In fact blogging could prove effective since the comments from readers could help improve your writing skills. In writing as in reading, care needs to be taken for the pauses and punctuation marks since meaning could be altered.

For eg.

1. An accused was left to go scot free because of a verdict which read 'Leave him, not hang him' instead of 'Leave him not, hang him'.
2. The BBMP cleared the trees that were brought down by the storm on Sunday. (The storm took place on Sunday)
The BBMP cleared the trees that were brought down by the storm, on Sunday. (The clearing was done on Sunday)

The use of idioms or verbal phrases needs to be understood well as the meaning may change. For eg. there are different expressions with the word 'get' that one may use wrongly if not familiar with the right usage.

For eg:

1. Get up –It's time for school. **Get up!** (stand up / wake up)
2. Get up –She looked gorgeous in her new **getup**.(costume / appearance)
3. Get down –Enough of fooling around, let's **get down** to business!(begin)
4. Get over – It took her some time to **get over** her mother's demise. (overcome)
5. Get away –The robber **got away** with the bag of diamonds. (escape)
6. Getaway –A hill station would be a good **getaway** during summer. (place)
7. Get off–The mischievous boy was lucky to **get off** with a warning. (go free)
8. Get on– Well done, **get on** with the good work!(continue)
9. Get in –**Get in** quickly before you get drenched!(enter)
10. Get through –She was delighted that she managed to **get through** the exams.(pass)
11. Get between – Let them sort it out. Don't **get between** the two of them.(interfere)
12. Get along- The couple **get along** very well with the neighbours. (to be friendly)
13. Get on board –Although the boy was a newcomer, they let him **get on board**. (be part of the team)
14. Get into –Be careful! Don't **get into** trouble unnecessarily.(involve)
15. Get across –Did you manage to **get across** your ideas to the board? (convey)

India is a country of diverse cultures with close to a thousand languages and as many dialects. Although only twenty two languages have been granted national language status, each of the twenty-eight states in India has a language or two and many dialects. It is not a surprise therefore that it is well-nigh impossible for the most proficient polyglot to be able to master all the languages. In this scenario, English, a legacy left behind by the Colonizers has been able to bridge people of different cultures and languages. Across the length and breadth of the country, English is the language that connects people of different tongues, cutting across all barriers.

English has also assumed significance the world over as the language of communication due to several factors, one being that it is the most common foreign language in most countries. Secondly English is the language used primarily in several fields namely education, travel, business and more than anything the language most widely used in the World Wide Web. In many countries even if there is an official language, English is taught as a second language.

Although the language in discussion here is English, the same can be said of any language. For communication to be effective, it is necessary that one listens well to the spoken word and its usage so as to be able to use it correctly and further to be able to read and write well. Gaining mastery over a language can be achieved only through practice, practice and more practice since only practice can bring about perfection.

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