CHAPTER 3

BACKGROUND TO THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 COMMUNICATION SKILLS LABORATORY COURSE DESCRIPTION

Anna University introduced the Communication Skills Laboratory course in 2007 and it is taught in the third year of the engineering course. It is a one semester course carrying 100 marks and offered either in the fifth or sixth semester of the B.E./B.Tech. programmes. This laboratory course was designed for the third year engineering students to develop their communication skills in English and help them to do well in their placement interviews. It was also anticipated that the course should train them to carry out tasks required in the workplace. A detailed syllabus was designed by the teachers in the English Department of Anna University to develop students’ listening and speaking skills and to train them to perform better in the campus recruitment drives.

The Communication Skills Laboratory course was merged with a component of Language lab course aided with Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) software and a Career lab with an interaction based component to develop interpersonal and group communication skills. The language lab course is a PC based session and the career lab is a classroom based session each equally distributed with 24 periods. The practical session of four hours were distributed further as two hours for language and two hours for career lab. A batch of 60 students in a class is to be divided into two
groups, with 30 students attending the language lab session and the remaining 30 students, the career lab session. The language lab software is extremely oriented with tasks pertaining to grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. The specification of the language lab syllabus is to make the students to practice listening, speaking and reading skills through comprehension passages provided in the software. Students need to listen to the audio and work out the language exercises. Language aptitude exercises are practiced to develop their grammar and vocabulary skills. The audio materials are played twice automatically and the students need to keenly listen the passage and answer the questions. Receptive skills are given more emphasis in the software and the students need to exercise the tasks through listening and reading the sentences given.

Only those English teachers trained in the administration and evaluation of the course are given to handle Communication Skills Laboratory classes. English teachers are expected to be familiar with operating computer and other technical tools. Since it is a lab based course, the institution needs to set up laboratory with adequate technical and electronic resources. With the technological equipments like 30 Personal Computers (PC), server, mike, headphones, handy-cam video cameras, colour television, LCD projector, and other computer related accessories, interactive teacher console software, the English language lab software and career lab software needs to be procured for the effective implementation of the course. In language lab session, both the teachers and the students are expected to use computers to work in the interactive teacher control language software. The teacher can monitor and assess students’ performances through the network environment. Students can assess their performance through the computer oriented evaluation and they can also redo the tasks till they perform better. For classroom based career lab sessions, electronic and multimedia oriented tools like television, handicam, video camera with video lights, mic input, collar mike and cordless mikes
with audio mixer, LCD projector with MP3/DVD provision as audio and video facilities are essential requirements. Oral presentations and other interactive activities can be monitored and assessed through these multimedia tools. Reference books and CD’s are prescribed in the syllabus and the students are expected to have a fair knowledge of these resources.

The end semester examination is for 100 marks with 40% of marks allotted for the language lab and the remaining 60% of the marks allotted to the career lab. In the language lab examination, the candidates will have three sets of questions assigned through the computer based software. The computer evaluated online marks will be taken as the score of the students performances in the language lab. For the career lab, the candidates will be evaluated by the course instructor, internal and external examiner. The total marks of both the language lab and career lab are to be endorsed by the internal and external examiners. The internal assessment is allotted with 20 marks. The marks allotted for the internal assessment is based on the performances of the students in both the language and career labs. The internal marks allotted for the language lab is 10 marks and for the career lab 5 marks and 5 marks for attendance. The assigned exercises of the language and career lab need to be evaluated and compiled as the record notebook by the students. It can be considered as the proof for the practical work done during the programme.

3.2 REVIEW OF THE THIRD YEAR B.E./B.TECH. COMMUNICATION SKILLS LABORATORY COURSE OF ANNA UNIVERSITY AFFILIATED COLLEGES

The Communication Skills Laboratory, a practical English communication course prescribed for the affiliated colleges of Anna University intends to develop the communication skills of the engineering students to meet the requirements of employment. Anna University
recognized the immediate effects of globalization as it has provided abundant openings for fresh engineering graduates in Tamil Nadu. The introductory passage of the syllabus reflects on the opportunities that globalization has brought ‘numerous opportunities for the teeming millions, with more focus on the students’ overall capability apart from academic competence’. These ideas show how Anna University is keen on developing students’ capability skills to meet the global challenges and to prepare them in adapting themselves in the industrial environment. This also shows how the students need to train and equip themselves to fit into the jobs they seek.

The Communication Skills Laboratory course was introduced by the university specifically to help students with limited proficiency in English, particularly, the students from Tamil medium schools for they are not able to seek placements. Though these students have technical knowledge in their domain subject areas, due to their limited English proficiency and discourse competence, they are not selected in the campus recruitments. Anna University’s endeavour to provide a course in view to the consideration of ‘pre-employment needs and career requirements’ and to train them to adapt in the industry environment formed the basic initiative in prescribing the course.

When the audiolingual and audiovisual methods fail to attempt the rigorous pedagogical issues in the West in 1970’s, they are much sought after in developing countries like India, as they consider working with technology is an innovative move in language education. The technical institutions recognized the instrumental use of language lab software as they expected the students to use the language lab as self access learning centre with the required technical tools. They hoped that the students can learn and practice language skills with the instructional procedures in the inbuilt evaluation software. As the students are generally comfortable using the computer and speaking in the language lab, they gradually overcome apprehension problems
relating to shyness, stage fright, audience reaction, anxiety, nervousness, classroom or public embarrassment and uneasiness when communicating in the classroom. They are not worried about formal or social exchanges with the teachers and their peers. But the effectiveness of machine-oriented communication in enabling real interaction has to be explored in the Indian context. When the student is not able to use language and communicate in any situational contexts, technology-enabled lab is found to be deficient in developing language skills.

The installation of a language laboratory with multimedia tools and an air conditioned atmosphere has really made the students feel comfortable from the long run of the weary classrooms. It is true that students are immensely happy and enthusiastic to work on the computers with headphones and mikes. When they are acquainted with all the exercises in the software, they wish to move on to the next advanced level. When the institution has limited software packages, the students are uninterested and do not wish to work on the same routine exercises throughout the semester. To students from good English medium schools, the resources of the software packages are not challenging and exciting. They are not captivated with the audiovisuals and graphics of the software, as they plainly confess that these exercises are found in the printed workbooks too. They recognize that the software version of these exercises is no better than the printed versions of the school workbooks. Some students feel that they are not able to improve on the British accent, if the software is in US accent. To compensate their critical insights, the teachers need to redesign tasks to the level of their competence. But within the restricted time of the lab sessions, the extent to which the teachers can really help each and every individual student to develop their competence in a mixed level laboratory environment is a tall order.
In the language laboratory, listening and reading skills are tested through the comprehension exercises. The students need to listen and fill the gaps in the cloze questions. Due to technical and administrative problems, students encounter undefined disturbances and face difficulties in continuously practicing listening and speaking skills in the lab. Some Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students are not able to comprehend, as they are not able to cope up with the restricted time given in the software based listening and reading tests. The exercises found in the software are not very innovative, and they for the most part are routinely found in any typical syllabus at the school level. The only sophistication is, earlier, the students used pen and paper to do the tasks, now they do the same with the aid of technology. Earlier, they used to read and write, but now with the use of headphones and mike they are able to listen, read and type the answers in the computers. Some students are not interested in the pronunciation practice as they feel that it may not help them in the future. Some feel that it is sufficient to practice neutral accent, as they need to use it within the country.

The language lab is distinctly fair in testing listening and reading skills, but as far as the speaking skills is concerned, it is limited to the testing of pronunciation skills only. The discursive skills are not tested through the software. In India, the examination syllabus is quite popular and given more priority than the overall content prescribed in the syllabus. Hence, although the conversational activities like direct face to face conversation, indirect telephonic conversation and role play activities are prescribed in the syllabus, they are rarely practiced and tested through the software. It is evident that this prescribed Language lab component of the Communication Skills Laboratory course is practiced through the given software packages. Interpersonal and group communication skills are not developed through the software packages. Some video samples relevant to soft skills are displayed to help the students understand the attitudinal differences in the presentations. Though the
students identify the positives and negatives of the communication videos, they wish that they are monitored and their original performances are reviewed. Mere display and few samples of writing Curriculum Vitae (CV), letters, reports, emails, video clips of presentations, group discussions and interviews little help them to communicate in real life situations. Unless the students are practically involved in actual communication tasks, they will not be able to develop their competency skills to communicate effectively.

In the career lab, two periods are allocated to the students to practice and prepare CV, letter and report. It is truly a great expectation from limited proficiency students to draft, practice and prepare a fair copy of the written tasks within the two periods scheduled in the syllabus. Six periods are allocated to develop group discussion skills which are also an unfair distribution to involve the students to develop their discursive skills. The students need to understand the content and theme relevant to the topic; understand the strategies involved in practicing them with the team members; and need to follow the appropriate paralinguistic and nonverbal cues during the interaction are some of the important factors that need more instructional practice from the faculty and the students. Though presentations and mock interviews are prescribed in the syllabus, the students do not have confidence to introduce themselves and elaborate on their CV if asked. Reference books and CD’s prescribed in the course are not actually read and followed by the students. As practicing the components of the language lab and career lab are new to the students, more responsibility is required on the part of the teachers and the institution to provide the required facilities in the lab.

It is often found that most of the colleges that the researcher visited are equipped with adequate resources for conducting lab classes. Both manual and technical resources are quite important for the smooth functioning of the lab. Though the institutions have purchased the required teacher console and
computers for the students, along with the prescribed English language lab and career lab software, it may not be properly installed in all the computers in the language lab. Even if, it is installed, Uninterrupted Power Supply (UPS) connections may not be adequately provided. Hence, the whole session of the lab will not utilize the software tools, if the power supply is off. As the language lab has multimedia and software tools, the lab requires electrical and computer technicians and most of the institutions do not provide technical support to the English department. It can be also found that most of the multimedia tools may not be procured solely for use in the English lab rather than for multipurpose in the institution.

Again, the computers need to be updated and configured with regular services. There may not be spare equipment and tools to be replaced faulty ones in the lab. Mikes may be there without the battery, this means students cannot practice speaking skills in the lab. Most of the colleges do not provide internet facilities in the language lab for the students to prepare topics for presentations and discussions. Using internet is found to be important to surf relevant topics on the net and to exchange email communication, where this is lacking in the Communication Skills Laboratory course. Hence, the priority for the 60% weightage of the career lab is not properly conducted, as the students are not directly monitored in selecting the topic, segregating the theme and subtheme, collecting the necessary information to shape the content, and overall, the pretask activities are generally ignored in the lab. The consequence is that students are not adequately prepared with the topic. When the basic preparation is inadequate, the student lacks confidence and eventually engrossed with communication apprehension problems.

A major problem with the syllabus that has not been answered is the lack of sufficient guidelines for conducting the career lab. If a career lab is a practice session, where is it to be conducted? Does it need to be
conducted in the classroom? If it is so, how can a traditional classroom with a teacher fronted model be appropriate for conducting group discussions and interviews? When the oral presentations are conducted, is a student really audible in the whole classroom? This may not be true for all the students, as most of them are engrossed with the problems of language or inhibition. To be audible in a whole class, they need to be provided with mike, and again, the other classes nearby will be disturbed. These practical issues in the implementation of the lab are not highlighted or discussed. Even, if career lab is to be conducted in the language lab, the students are seated in a linear fashion, making it difficult for them to participate in group discussion. Most colleges are not interested in providing oval shaped or round tables in the lab so the students can be seated comfortably to discuss in the career lab. Accommodating the students in language lab or in the classroom or in indefinite places is not feasible for the smooth conduct of the career lab. The linear seating arrangement in the classroom or language lab does not help the students to develop their nonverbal cues in communicating face to face with the members in the team.

A major problem that should draw immediate concern is the teachers’ lack of preparation in handling both the components of the lab. Teachers lack adequate technical knowledge in handling the lab. A majority of them are not involved in renovating the lab and resolving the technical problems as and when they arise. Teachers need to update their computer skills for the smooth conduct of the language lab classes. As most of the teachers lack sufficient knowledge in operating systems, they are unable to get the students to their best in the lab classes.

ESL teachers need to update their technical knowledge when they expected to handle a language lab. They need to attend training programmes regularly to update their knowledge and skills to successfully handle a
session. It can be also found that some English teachers are disinterested to make their students work on the same limited package of the software. When they are not able to design tasks to suit the level of students’ competence with the available software, they complain about the insufficient provision of the lab. It can be also found that some teachers are not happy with the technology based learning as they may prefer the traditional teaching styles or they may be more radical and innovative in their approach to explore teaching to the needs of the student. When the teachers are not confident and when they lack institutional support in the smooth functioning of the lab, it is the students who ultimately suffer with a relatively poor input of language learning. It is also disheartening to find some teachers uninvolved in the language lab sessions because they feel that the whole task is to be done by the software. Their guidance to the students is essential and it can be done only if the teachers monitor the students’ progress and counsel them for a more improved performance. Even in the career lab, the teachers’ role as a facilitator, monitor and mentor in guiding and providing feedback to the performances of the students is necessary.

The guidelines to the course as given by the university states, “The English Lab (2 Periods) will be handled by a faculty member of the English Department. The Career Lab (2) periods may be handled by any competent teacher, not necessarily from the English department” has made most colleges to allot any subject teacher handle the career lab. In some colleges, the task of handling career lab is assigned to the placement coordinators. The commitment with which the career lab needs to be conducted is truly lacking as the other subject teachers are not much dedicated to handle a lab throughout the session and that too for the entire semester. Even the placement coordinators feel that their prime duty is to identify, locate and call the companies for placement. They considered placement training needs to be done by outsourcing it to corporate trainers in the industry. They often engage
agencies to provide placement training and invite companies to conduct campus recruitments, rather than providing training themselves. Thus, their commitment to patiently conduct an academic course is for the most part absent. These indifferent attitudes, inconsiderate assurances, professional shortcomings, and lack of commitment of other teachers are traced in the weak performances of the students too. Though the notion of involving other teachers in the lab is a new venture, the part of interest, involvement, commitment and responsibility in facilitating, monitoring, mentoring and providing feedback to the students is truly never seen. On getting the undesired results and unfavourable feedback in the end semester examination, most of the colleges realized that the task to conduct both the components of Communication Skills Laboratory needs to be given to English teachers only.

Though the present syllabus has envisaged the job requirements of the students in pursuit of their ‘pre-employment needs’, it has not conducted a systematic needs analysis to analyze the needs of the students and their learning situation; and also it has not thoroughly investigated the demands of the target situation. Moreover, it has not conducted ‘gap analysis’ and explored the lacks and deficiencies of the students that could be addressed in the programme. The prescribed syllabus has sufficiently done to improve listening and reading skills through the software. Though reading skills are developed through comprehension passages, it has not specifically focused to develop extensive reading skills. Writing has not been given sufficient importance and practice, though students are expected to write resumes, letters, emails and reports at the end of the semester. Though the first objective of the syllabus envisages developing effective speaking and listening skills, it has not provided sufficient insight to develop the skills of convincing, arguing, negotiating, persuading and problem solving through real interaction. The students are not given sufficient practice in both formal and social aspects of discourse in speaking.
The second objective of the course is to develop soft skills and interpersonal skills. These are generally untouched as they are not adequately emphasized and practiced in both the language lab and career lab. Even the internal assessment is allotted comprehensively to English lab and career lab components as a whole and no specific mention is given to award any marks exclusively for soft skills. In the complete syllabus, just two periods have been allotted to provide a demo on the video samples of relevant soft skills like time management, articulateness, psychometric, innovation and creativity, stress management and poise. And in the career lab, it has not been mentioned at all. This reflects how the second objective of the course has merely listed in the syllabus because it is fashionable but not concentrated upon teaching, learning and testing of the course.

The third objective of the course to develop the performances of the students in placement interviews, and group discussions are partially fulfilled as the prescribed course does not provide adequate resources for the smooth conduct of these activities. The specification of time is not given to conduct these tasks. Hence, even in the end semester examinations, the possible time to engage in these activities is uniformly not fixed. As there is no specific guideline available in the syllabus, the disparity in time and allotment of marks to these activities is common. Only few students who are able to communicate competently are able to involve and participate in these activities during the lab. Others participate in these tasks, but they are not truly communicative. Sometimes, they memorize the content that they need to speak at the presentation or discussion. As they are not able to interact with the demanding situation, they remain passive in the group. Ultimately, they are not able to speak confidently and face the interview board. These language issues need to be seriously considered as the prescribed syllabus has facilitated in developing receptive skills but not absolutely on developing productive skills.
3.3 THE SCENARIO OF ENGINEERING STUDENTS IN ON CAMPUS AND OFF CAMPUS TECHNICAL RECRUITMENT DRIVES

The advent of Multinational Corporations (MNC) in both IT and non IT sectors in India and abroad has attracted the young engineers to seek better profession. Since, the professional courses have globally opened a huge job market, engineering colleges are serious about making their students develop their communication in English to prosper in their professional endeavours. The Principal and the Management representatives of the technical colleges often invite core companies to conduct on campus interviews in their college. They encourage the students to participate in both on and off campus recruitment drives. They always look forward to see their students placed in better positions in the core companies. The third and final year engineering students are given placement training to understand the needs of the positions they offer. Placement procedures, recruitment ideologies and company profile are briefly stated to the students to procure information on the requirements of the company. Dinesh Jain, VP (HR), Flex Industries Limited shared the HR vision of the company,

While recruiting people, our accent is not just on qualifications, but more on the mindset. (http://www.timesjobs.com.Mailers/HRDialogue/July06/19.8.06/landingpage.htm).

Timesjobs.com an international job portal (cites TheEconomic Times) in HR dialogues section on January 2006 reflected the views of Ms. Hema Ravichandar, Senior VP (HR), on the recruitment ideologies and trends of Infosys Technologies.

… Infosys follows a competency-based recruitment philosophy, wherein all the steps starting with the
requirement definition to the final selection, maps onto a role and competency matrix.
(http://www.timesjobs.com.Mailers/HRDialogue/January/18.01.06/landingpage.htm)

As most of the companies conduct aptitude tests for initial screening, students are unable to face the discrete point tests. Most students are nervous about writing aptitude tests. The oral performance of the student is found to be truly unconvincing as their cognitive, language and behavioural skills are not truly revealed. This affects their overall personality development. Due to lack of confidence, they are not able to present themselves in oral presentation and group discussions. As the students are not able to reveal their knowledge, they are not able to convince the recruiters in the job interviews. It can be inferred that their placement failure is because of the lack of adequate knowledge, expression and personality. In the issue of January 2006, timesjobs team cites The Economic Times on the issues of skilled technical force. GD Sharma, Head (HR) of L&T ECC, the construction division of engineering major Larsen & Toubro, revealed,

Our order books are growing at an accelerated pace, but timely project completion requires a large pool of trained manpower. The industry is facing a severe skills shortage. We have more than doubled our annual intake in the current year, but still we can’t get enough number of skilled engineers and technicians.
(http://www.timesjobs.com.Mailers/HRDialogue/January/18.01.06/landingpage.htm)

The ability to communicate in English has become necessary in getting placements and to sustain employability. The engineering students recognize the significance of English communication for seeking placements. They need no introduction about the present academic and industrial demands. Though the students are aware of the importance of communicating in English, they face communication difficulties for the want of both language
and information (Lee & Ridley 1999). Due to their lack of expression and knowledge, they are becoming unfit for their job. Though the engineering graduates are able to obtain a professional degree, they are unprepared to face the challenges in the prevailing job market. The industry demands the professionals to prove their talents and skills to the best of their expertise. Most of the human resources managers consider the industrial prosperity with the potentiality and growth of the employees. In an interview with the timesjobs representatives, Dr. Pallab Bandyopadhyay, HR Head for Asia Pacific in Perot Systems stated,

Clarity of thought, communication abilities and demonstrated ability to apply skills/knowledge and attitude in one’s job are some of the inherent traits. We value our associates and respect our clients—always striving to enable them to achieve the measurable results that support their success. We provide our associates with the tools and opportunities to grow both professionally and personally.

(Source: http://hireblog.timesjobs.com/November 2008)

Campus interviews and job fairs have created awareness in developing engineering students to practice speaking skills and contribute their knowledge in group discussions and oral presentations. The urgency for developing English communication skills in getting and sustaining jobs has made it a compulsory subject to be studied in academic and technical courses. Students need to think about the significant use of skills and strategies in the context of the nature of the job and should develop sufficient ability to communicate in English. It is in this perspective that the present research focuses on.
3.4 CONCLUSION

The present third year syllabus followed in the affiliated technical colleges of Anna University generally includes LSRW skills, but it in-depth does not focus on those skills that are specifically productive. Though, the students are given adequate practice in listening, reading and speaking tasks, they are unable to participate in interactive communication. Though most students pass Communication Skills Laboratory course, it is clear, that when they face the campus recruitments they are not able to communicate and perform well in the recruitment tests. They need to seek placements and sustain employability in the workplaces through exercising job related verbal and soft skills. This practical communication and language learning problem of the engineering students is of immediate concern and needs to be probed to update, modify and revise the syllabus. The present research has studied this practical issue of the engineering students and aims to develop relevant competency skills to help them communicate effectively in their target situation. As the present academic course is devoid of analyzing the needs of the learner, target and learning situation, and just specifies the product factors, it is equally essential to understand the learning situation, process of instruction, learning, evaluation and the revision of the course. The target situation based syllabus is the need of the hour. The specification of the target situation needs and learner and learning needs have to be thoroughly analyzed through conducting needs analysis to train the students to acquire the required employability skills. The next chapter will represent in detail of the study conducted.