

Business Communication Courses in the MBA Curriculum: A Reality Check.

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Abstract. Indian B-schools churn out thousands of MBA graduates every year, a significant percentage of which is unemployable. One of the main reasons cited by recruiters is the inability of these MBAs to communicate effectively. This paper investigates the present status of the Business Communication courses in Indian B-schools. A survey of full time and part time teachers/trainers teaching Business Communication to MBA graduates reveals the inadequacies in these courses. Telephonic interviews with these teachers gave several insights. They indicate that the courses need to be revised to motivate the students to improve their communicative competence. In light of the discussions, suggestions have been made to make the delivery of these courses more effective and prepare managers who communicate well in business contexts.

Keywords: B-school, Business Communication (BC), Business English, Communication skills, Masters in Business Administration (MBA).

1. Introduction

India is a multi-lingual country and the English language has evolved to be the language predominantly used in business in different parts of the country. This is especially true for the Multi National Companies (MNCs), private banks and media houses which employ MBA graduates. This necessitates training these graduates to communicate properly in English for business. The Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is the proverbial golden key which opens the door to a successful career for future managers. Business schools (B-school) in India have the responsibility to produce MBA graduates who are not only business savvy but also good communicators. *The Skills Gap Survey* (2011:1) presents employers' views on MBA graduates recruited mainly in the banking and insurance sector in India. "They expect new MBAs to come to the corporate world with the proper attitude...they must possess strong analytic, listening and communication skills..." Surveys have shown that a large number of MBAs remain unemployed as they lack the requisite communication skills. Graddol (2009: 106) observes that :

"a part of the unemployment problem emanates from the mismatch between the skill requirements of the market and the skill base of the job seekers. English is a vocational skill which substantially improves labour mobility and improves employment outcomes. He goes to state that the Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) has demanded that accelerated English learning classes must be included."

The B-school curriculum in India does not emphasize on developing the English language skills of the students. This is because the students are expected to possess good command over English when they join the course. Some B-schools do offer training in enhancing Communication skills in business contexts. However, it appears that these Business Communication (BC) or Managerial courses still have a long way to go to produce graduates who meet the employers' expectations. Reviews of literature accentuated with

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telephonic interviews with ten Business Communication faculties from different parts of India were conducted to understand the reasons for this gap.

2. Status of Business Communications Courses in India

There are many reasons why BC courses in India fail to enhance the Communication Skills of MBA graduates. Exploring all the reasons is beyond the scope of this paper. This paper will discuss two of the major reasons.

- The inability of the stakeholders to recognize the significance of the course.
- The lack of qualified faculty to teach BC in Indian B-schools.

2.1. Failure to recognize Business Communication as a discipline

India has close to a thousand B-schools approved by the All India Council for Technical Education (A.I.C.T.E.) which include the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), university departments and autonomous private institutes. Joshi (2006) says that “the sudden spurt in these B-schools has also raised concerns about quality and the need for regulatory mechanisms among academia and industry captains.” It was only in the recent years that BC was even considered a discipline in Indian B-schools. Even today there exist several management schools that offer it as only as an elective or do not offer the course at all. Kelly and Sokovitz (1996: 57) observe the drawback of treating BC as an elective, “... it implies that communication is not a core expertise for managers...the students who need the course most are often the ones most likely to avoid it.” Students tend to take these courses very lightly as these they carry negligible credits. Some B-schools justify the absence of an exclusive BC course by arguing that aspects of communication are dealt in the core subject classes in the MBA.

A faculty from one of the IIMs reported that it was very difficult to convince the curriculum designers the need for a full-fledged course in BC. India could learn some lessons from other global B-schools. American Business schools can be considered the pioneers who conferred BC the status of a separate discipline. Dulek (1993: 315) reports how the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) recognized the significance of BC courses in the undergraduate and MBA level. This had elevated it to the status of a discipline. The AACSB prescribes norms for BC courses for management programs in American management schools. The Indian B-schools come under the purview of All Indian Council for Technical Education (AICTE) however the latter has never laid emphasis on Communication courses. Since there are no specific standards listed by the AICTE varying levels of importance are attributed to these courses. Consequently, myriad approaches are adopted for teaching communication courses.

In other Asian countries, such as China and Singapore, where English is a popular language of business there has been a proliferation of Business English (BE) courses over past decade. The reason is because their governments have recognized the need for BE and BC courses. These countries also have undergraduate as well as post graduate courses in BE being offered in the colleges and universities. Such courses are not being offered in India. The only formal coaching in Business English is offered by the British Council. People who take up the three levels of the BEC (Business English Certificate) exams are usually those employed in corporates or those who intend to work outside the country. The first step towards recognizing the importance of BC is for the Government in India to establish a regulatory body such as the AACSB which endows BC the status of a compulsory discipline for management students.

The other problem reported by the ten faculties interviewed the constraint of time. The core courses such as Finance and Marketing take precedence over BC within the short span of six semesters of the MBA. Communication courses may be assigned anywhere between 15-20 hours in one semester, generally in the first year. Teachers claim that no remarkable change in the communication abilities can be achieved in this short span. Both graduates as well as recruiters also agree that communication skills can hardly develop in such limited time.

It is indeed a paradoxical situation, where on one hand employers and graduates cite communication skills as most important and on the other hand this is the most neglected area in the MBA curriculum. It is high time that BC courses get the attention they deserve in the MBA curriculum. All the stake holders- the

curriculum designers, teachers, students and employers should be included in the development of such courses. BC should therefore be allowed to evolve as an important discipline in the Indian sub-continent.

2.2. Shortage of Competent Faculty

In the 1970s, American B-schools realized the key role BC courses played in providing requisite training in developing appropriate communication and language skills. The implication was that the skills gap can be bridged with the aid of rigorous training. In India such courses have for long been treated as unimportant. This is because there is a general perception that the ability to communicate well is an innate ability. However, research has shown that communication skills can be developed and polished through appropriate training. Though a number of business schools have introduced communication courses as part of their curriculum India still has a long way to go when compared to the American, European and other Asian business schools. This paper also focuses on the role of business communication faculty in the Indian B-schools.

According to Zhang and Wang (2011: 145), “ The rise of Business English as a major poses immediate challenges on faculty development, curriculum development and modes of multi-competent Business English talent as well as academic requirements such as quality standards and criteria of Business English teaching just to name a few.” Most BE teachers have been primarily trained to teach English Language Teaching (ELT)/ General English (GE), and therefore have no relevant training or experience in the BE field. Kelly (2005) highlighted the growing demand for teachers with Business English skills across Asia. He further reports that since no qualifications are specified for BE teachers in Asia there is no clear concept about what has to be taught in BE classes. Lamenting the shortage of competent teachers he reported that “There are various reasons for this ranging from non regulated teaching institutions to poor government legislation.” Even though BE teaching materials proliferated in the market but there is a dearth of qualified and skilled teachers to teach them.

It is important to understand that teaching BC is different from teaching of English. In several Indian B-schools it has been found that the faculty employed to teach BC or Managerial Communication are post graduates in English Literature or Linguistics. However proficiency in the English language alone cannot be sufficient criteria for teaching Business Communication. One of the faculties interviewed reported that very often BC teachers relied on “bookish knowledge” to teach the management students. She felt that the teachers should also possess sufficient knowledge about business and be familiar with workplace communication practices.

A significant problem in floating a compulsory course in BC in Indian B-schools seems to be the shortage of competent teachers. Due to the lack of qualified teachers “...Indian B-schools seem to prefer using part-time/ visiting faculty to teach these courses (Hynes and Bhatia 1996: 54). In a large number of B-schools there is no permanent faculty teaching BC/ Managerial Communication/ Corporate Communication. Most B-schools invite guest faculty which include HR managers, recruiters and Soft Skill trainers as and when they are available. There is no doubt about the credence of the skills they bring along to the B schools. These people share hands-on experience about communication breakdowns at the workplace and how they can be overcome. They delve on the socio-psychological aspects of workplace communication and provide insights into inter-personal and cross-cultural communication. However, the author having interviewed 50 MBA graduates across India* unearthed interesting insights. Surprisingly, most of the MBA graduates account that though they learn more about appropriate communication styles from these experts, their linguistic abilities undergo little change. Rajadhyaksha (2002:54) criticized the preference of B-schools to employ only part-time /visiting faculty who lack specialist educational training in communication or in English literature/linguistics instead of permanent staff. This seems to be reiterated by the students of BE in China who claim that “ the responsibility for providing opportunities for improving speaking skills firmly in the teacher’s court, criticizing the strong focus on business and lack of oral interaction.” (Trinder and Herles, 2010: 357).

Therefore, the ideal Business English Communication teacher should strike a balance by possessing adequate knowledge in BE and workplace communication strategies and be up to date about global and local business. Čepón (2005:49) perhaps best describes the role of the BE teacher as one who shifts roles from being a controller of teaching/learning activities to being a facilitator.

*The author carried out a survey of 50 MBA graduates from Indian B-schools as part of her doctoral research. The purpose of the survey was to understand how the BC courses in their MBA curriculum are meeting their workplace English language requirements.

3. The Way Forward

This paper has highlighted two major reasons that result in ineffective BC training imparted to Indian MBA graduates. A few suggestions have been made which can help overcome the obstacles:

- The first step to help the future managers in India communicate effectively is to introduce more core communication courses as highlighted by Rajadhyaksha (2002:51). This is to ensure that students are compulsorily exposed to them.
- A regulatory body such as the AICTE should ensure that all Indian B-schools offer compulsory B C Courses. There should be a standardization of these courses across B schools according to a syllabi framed by such a regulatory body. Business is in a constant state of change so also the communication trends in business. Efforts have to be made to ensure that the syllabi is reviewed and updated periodically.
- It has to be emphasized that BC is as significant as the other core subjects. This can be done by allocating more hours as well as credits for the communication course which makes it at par with the core courses taught in the MBA. Students should understand that possessing theoretical knowledge of business subjects is not enough. One must be able to communicate business ideas effectively.
- More B-schools should adopt the practice of integrating communication across the MBA curriculum. This has been successful in the American B-schools and also practiced in some of the IIMs. This should be done in addition to an exclusive course on BC.
- Steps should be taken to introduce a under graduate as well as post graduate courses in BC in Indian universities and colleges. Such courses have proved to be effective in the United States in providing adequate training in meeting workplace requirements. An M.A. in Business Communication should be made the minimum qualification to be considered eligible to teach Communication Courses in B-schools.
- Permanent staff should be appointed in B-schools to teach Communication courses. This ensures there is some uniformity in the training imparted to the MBA graduates.

These are some ideas which when implemented can help overcome the roadblocks that have long been ailing the BC courses in India. When the courses are made effective they will definitely produce truly global managers. These managers with their excellent business communication skills can contribute immeasurably to building the economy.

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