

English Communication Skills: A Study at Undergraduate Level

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Abstract

The present work is an attempt to study the communication skills of the undergraduate students studying in the different colleges of the Srinagar City. The main objective aim of this paper is to assess the level of proficiency of speaking among the undergraduate students. The participants in this study were 148 undergraduate students taken from five different colleges of Srinagar. They were interviewed by a structured questionnaire. A questionnaire eliciting demographic data was also administered to the students. The results revealed that the communication skills of the students were marginal. They are not able to speak competently in real life situations. Their mean score on the 9 band scale (adopted from 'The International English Language Testing System') was 4.

Key words: Communication Skills, Speaking Skills, Undergraduate Students, IELTS (International English Language Testing System).

Introduction

Communication skills are defined as the abilities that are used for sending and receiving different kinds of information. It can take place between two persons or a group of people, either in spoken or written form. In order to be competent in a language one has to be proficient in all the four language skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Among the four skills, speaking is considered to be the most important (Khamkhien, 2010). The first impression of a person's language skill depends on his/her ability to speak fluently and comprehensively. It provides a number of advantages to the speakers especially in professional aspects like business, jobs and higher studies.

In the 20th century, the importance of evaluating speaking skills of ESL learners has been stressed by various scholars (Louma, 2004; Kang, 2013; Celce-Murcia, 2013). It helps the teachers find out whether the students have learned what they have been taught. It also helps them to find remedial measures if the students have failed to achieve a desired proficiency (William, 2007).

Objective

The main objective of this paper is to assess the speaking skills of the undergraduate students of the Srinagar city. These students are expected to have

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been exposed to at least twelve years of English classes from their primary to the higher secondary level.

Review of Literature

A number of studies on testing English communication skills have been reported by various researchers.

In 2006, the effect of attitudes and motivation on the listening and speaking of young learners learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was studied by Petrides. The study was carried out in Cyprus, where 250 students from different schools were included in the study. The results revealed that attitudes and motivation had a strong correlation with the performance of learners with respect to listening and speaking. The students who were motivated and had positive attitudes towards learning English enjoyed attending the classes and believed that it will be beneficial for them in their future life.

In 2007, Chelvi, S. carried a study to assess the English language proficiency of engineering students in Tamil Nadu. The aim of the study was to find the English language skills with respect to four dimensions: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. It also aimed to find if there exists a correlation between English language proficiency and the habit of listening to English news, exposure to programs in English, habit of reading English books and habit of written communication in English. The result revealed that the English language proficiency of engineering students in total and with respect to four dimensions was average. Among the language related activities, oral communication in English was found to have a significant correlation with English language proficiency of the students. The proficiency of female students was found to be better than their male counterparts especially in speaking.

In 2012, Oradee carried a research to study the development of speaking skills among the students using communicative activities (discussion, problem solving and role playing). For this study a sample of 49 students from a secondary school (Grade 11) of Thailand were taken. A pre-test and post-test design was used for the study. The results revealed that there was a significant difference in the scores of pre-test and post-test "(Pre-test = 60.80; Post-test = 85.63)". Thus, the speaking skills of the students improved significantly after using communicative activities. The attitude of the students towards learning speaking skills using discussion, problem solving and role playing was positive. They rated it as 4.5 on a five point scale.

Methodology

The objective of this study was achieved by adopting a systematic procedure. A questionnaire for eliciting demographic data including attitudes and motivation to learn English language was given to the students. A mechanism was also devised in the form of questionnaire to test the speaking skills of the students. The questionnaire was prepared and finalized after careful evaluation of research objectives, review of related literature and consulting questionnaires from various researchers and standardized tests like TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign

Language), ELSA (English Language Skills Assessment), ECCE (The Examination for the Certificate of Competency in English) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) etc.

The speaking test consisted of five sections. The first section consisted of semi structured interview in which pre-planned, basic questions to elicit the personal details like hobbies, favorite subjects; short answer questions were asked. This section consisted of 25 questions, each carrying 2 marks. The second section required students to express opinions about certain things. It consisted of five questions/statements. They were given sixty seconds to speak about each question/ statement and were encouraged to speak as much as possible in the given time. In the third section, the students were presented with a problem and they were asked to propose a way of dealing with the problem. They were given sixty seconds to speak for each problem. It consisted of three problems and each carried three marks. In section four, two paragraphs were presented before the students and they were asked to read the text aloud. They were given sixty seconds for each paragraph and each paragraph was assigned four marks. In the last section, a picture was presented to the students and they were asked to describe the picture in as much detail as they can. They were given 30 seconds to prepare their response and then 2 minutes to speak about the picture. This section carried 8 marks. All the responses were recorded for further analysis. They were given marks out of 90 which were then converted on a 9 band scale (adopted from IELTS).

Before collecting data from the students, they were briefed about the process and the purpose of the research. It was also explained to them that their participation in this research would be voluntary and honorary. Consent was also obtained from them before eliciting the data.

Sample and Sampling Techniques

The sample for the present study was taken from five different colleges of Srinagar: Government College for Women, M.A Road, Sri Pratap College, Amar Singh College, Gandhi Memorial College and Islamia College of Science and Commerce. The sample consisted of 148 students selected through random sampling method from the Ist Semester of the undergraduate course. Out of 148 students 77 were male and 71 were female students. The students were taken from all the streams: Arts, Science and Commerce. Those students who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study were taken as the sample. Permission for data collection was also obtained from each principal of the college.

Analysis and Discussion

A total of 148 undergraduate students were taken from 5 different colleges of Srinagar. The marks obtained by the students (out of 90) on the speaking test were scored according to the 9 band scale adopted from IELTS. The band scale is as follows:

Band Score	Skill Level	Description
Band 9	Expert User	The candidate has a full operational command of the language use of English is appropriate, accurate and fluent and shows complete understanding.
Band 8	Very Good User	The candidate has a fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriate usage. The candidate may misunderstand something in unfamiliar situations. He handles complex detailed argumentation well.
Band 7	Good User	The candidate has an operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings in some situations. You handle complex language well and understand detailed reasoning.
Band 6	Competent User	The candidate has an effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings. You can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
Band 5	Modest User	The candidate has a partial command of the language, and copes up with overall meaning in most situations, although they are likely to make many mistakes.
Band 4	Limited User	The basic competence is limited to familiar situations. They frequently show problems in understanding and expression. They are not able to use complex language.
Band 3	Extremely Limited User	The candidate conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. There are frequent breakdowns in communication.
Band 2	Intermittent User	The candidates have great difficulty in understanding spoken and written English.
Band 1	Non-user	The candidate doesn't have the ability to use the language except a few isolated words.
Band 0	Did not attempt the test	The candidate did not answer the question.

Variables

A list of 8 variables was included in this study. They are as follows:

1. Gender
2. Educational Institution attended
3. Family Income

4. Proficiency of parents and siblings in English
5. Use of English at home and outside home
6. Stream (Arts, Science, Commerce)
7. Attitude towards English Language
8. Motivation to learn English Language

Analysis and Findings

After analyzing the data, it was found that the average speaking skills of students from all the colleges were not satisfactory. The mean score of students from all the colleges on the 9 Band Score is represented by the graph below:

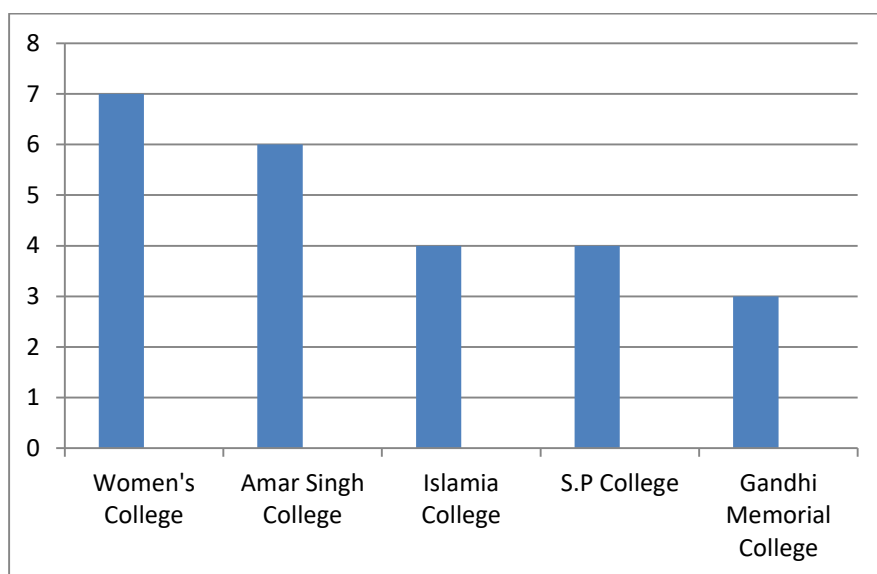


Figure 1: Mean Score of Students from all the Colleges on the 9 Band Score.

On the basis of Figure 1, it can be concluded that the highest mean score of speaking skill on the 9 Band Scale was obtained by Women's College (7), followed by Amar Singh College (6), Islamia College (4), S.P College (4) and Gandhi Memorial College (3).

The mean score of the students from Women's College and Amar Singh College is highest among all the colleges. The analysis of the data revealed that students from these two colleges had completed their schooling from Christian missionaries and good private institutions. Their family income, proficiency of parents and siblings in English was also better than the students from other colleges. Besides, their use of English in home and other domains was found to be more frequent than the students from other colleges. The students from Islamia

College and S.P College had come from good or not so good private institutions. It was also found that most of the students from Gandhi Memorial College had their schooling from Government schools and this can be the reason for their poor performance of speaking skills.

The majority of the students of Women's College and Amar Singh College belonged to economically higher sections of the society. The students from S.P College and Islamia College were from middle class families and those studying in Gandhi Memorial College belonged to economically weaker sections of the society. It was also observed that the standard of teaching/education in Women's College and Amar Singh College was comparatively higher and their medium of instruction was English.

Thus, educational institution, family income, proficiency of parents and siblings in English, frequency of using English language at home and other domains, had an impact on the speaking skills of the students.

The students from all the five colleges were found to have positive attitudes and motivation towards learning English language. The stream (arts, science and commerce) of the students was found to have no impact on the speaking skills of the students.

Parameters for Analysis of Speaking Skills

The speaking skills of the students were assessed on the basis of the following parameters (Brown, 2004).

1. **Grammar:** The ability to produce grammatically accurate and appropriate constructions and the ability to avoid grammatical errors while speaking.
2. **Vocabulary:** The use of features of vocabulary including the range and correctness of words.
3. **Comprehension:** The ability to understand the questions and give appropriate responses.
4. **Ability to Read Aloud with Meaning:** It is the ability to demonstrate meaning embedded in the text through appropriate intonation, expression and attention to punctuation.
5. **Fluency:** The ability to use language with flow, accuracy, automaticity, speed and coherence. It includes responding to questions without any hesitation in the selection of words.
6. **Pronunciation:** Producing speech sounds including articulation, stress, intonation with reference to some standard correctness.
7. **Context:** Relevance and consistency in terms of arguments.

Performance of Students along Various Parameters of Speaking

The average percentage performance of students from all the colleges along the above discussed parameters is represented in the graph below:

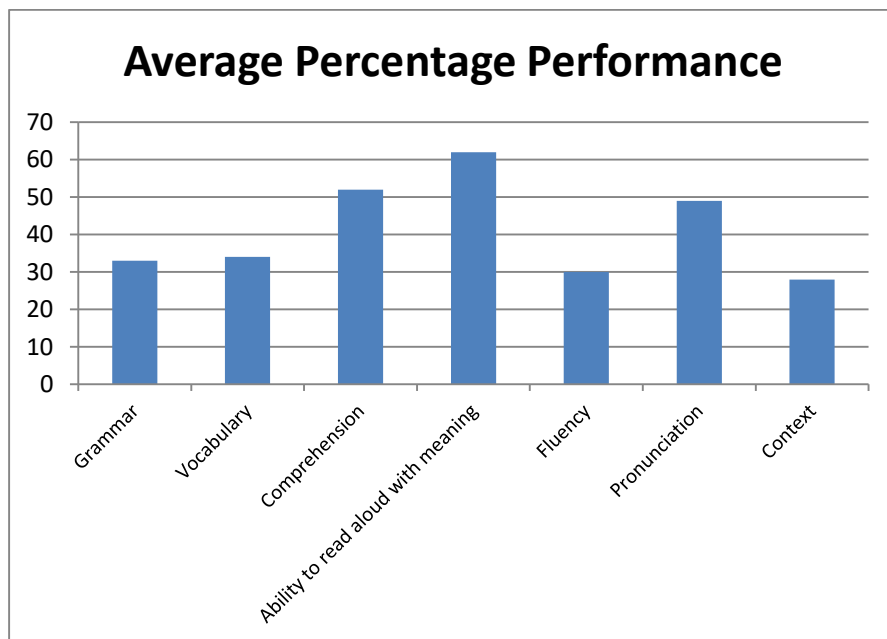


Figure 2: Average Percentage Performance of Students from all the Colleges along Various Parameters of Speaking

On an average, the communication skills of the students were found to be marginal. The graph above reveals that the level of competency to speak in English was not satisfactory. Only 33% of the students from all the colleges were able to produce grammatically appropriate constructions. 34% of the students were able to use a correct range of vocabulary. 52% of the students were able to comprehend the questions and give appropriate answers. 62% of the students were able to read aloud (a piece of text) with meaning. Only 30% of the students were able to speak in English with flow, speed, coherence and without hesitation. 49% of the students could pronounce the words with correct articulation, stress and intonation. 28% of the students could respond with relevant answers and were consistent in their arguments.

The reason for the weak performance of speaking skills among the students may be that the students have not been exposed to the teaching material that provide context relevant to the communicative situation. The students scored comparatively low on two parameters i.e. 'Fluency' and 'Context'. This may be due to the fact that they have been exposed to types of educational institutions (schools) where English was taught by Grammar Translation Method. The students might have learned the grammatical rules of English, but don't have authentic experience of using it in practical/ actual situations.

Although the performance along two parameters, 'Comprehension' and 'Ability to read aloud with meaning' was comparatively better but there are many aspects that need to be improved.

Score of Boys v/s Girls on the 9 Band Score

The average score of Boys v/s Girls on the 9 Band Score, adopted from International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is represented in the graph below:

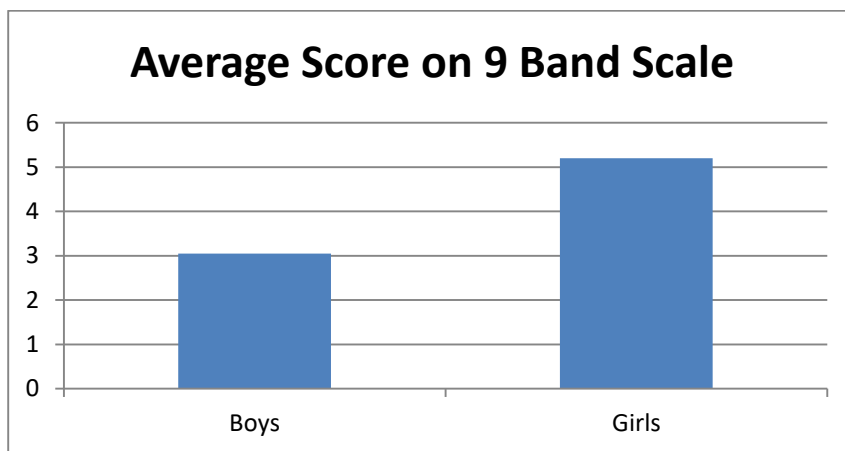


Figure 3: Score of Boys v/s Girls on Speaking Test

From the above graph, it is clear that girls outperformed boys in speaking English. Girls were found to be more skilled in communicating than boys. This can be attributed to the fact that girls were found to be more motivated and had positive attitudes towards learning English. Their attitudes and motivation to learn and speak English were found to be comparatively stronger than the boys.

Besides, girls have comparatively better language abilities than boys (Xin Xiong, 2010). This can be the main reason for the difference in performance of boys and girls.

Discussion

The students faced both linguistic and non-linguistic problems while speaking in English. The linguistic problems included lack of vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, pronunciation, and inconsistency of their arguments, difficulty in expressing ideas into words. The non-linguistic difficulties were: fear of making erroneous speech, lack of confidence to speak in English, shyness and nervousness.

The common mistake among the students was the inappropriate use of tense. Some students wanted to express ideas in present tense but instead spoke in past

tense and vice versa. They also used grammatically ill-formed constructions. A few examples of ill-formed words and sentences from the data are as follows:

Table 1: Few examples of Ill-formed Constructions from the Data

'Teeths' instead of 'teeth'
'Regretted' instead of 'regret'
'Peoples' instead of 'people'
'I like to be watching' instead of 'I like to watch'
'When I fails' instead of 'when I fail'
'I makes my family happy' instead of 'I make my family happy'
'Poor people are not relevant to us' instead of 'Poverty should come to an end'
'Someone are' instead of 'someone is'
'Nobody listen of' instead of 'nobody listens to'
'When I fails' instead of 'when I fail'
'A tea' instead of 'tea'
'Help to mom' instead of 'help my mom'
'There are not pressure' instead of 'there is no pressure'
'Cooking wooking' instead of 'cooking'
'Little little' instead of 'small/little'
'Junk food not' instead of 'junk food should be avoided'
'A man was sleep' instead of 'A man is sleeping'
'A dog sit on a bed' instead of 'A dog is sitting on the bed'
'I will give the exam of MBA' instead of 'I will go for MBA or I will appear in the entrance of MBA'

The students also had problems with vocabulary; they were not able to express their ideas in English. Girls switched to Urdu to overcome the inability to use appropriate words while boys switched to Kashmiri. However, all the students performed significantly better in 'Reading aloud with meaning' and 'Comprehension'. Almost half of the student's pronunciation was found to be better.

A few students had mother tongue interference; they used reduplication and echo formation in English. Majority of students were not able to elaborate and justify their answers. Speech of some of the students was found to be telegraphic and many students gave one word responses to many questions. Some students found it difficult to initiate the speech in English. They were not able to transform their ideas into English language. An important observation in the speech of a few girls was hypercorrection. They tried to pronounce words in the ways that are associated with high prestige varieties of English.

On the other hand, the performance of students, in particular, the girls from Women's College and Amar College performed very well along all the parameters of speaking. They showed good proficiency in English language. Their use of English was appropriate, accurate, grammatical and fluent. They were able to elaborate and justify their answers coherently. They also showed a complete understanding of the English language.

Conclusion:

The overall speaking skills of the undergraduate students were found to be marginal. Majority of the aspects of oral proficiency are not up to the expectations of potential employers. The variables: Educational institution, Family income. Proficiency of parents and siblings in English, Frequency of using English language at home and other domains had an impact on the speaking skills of the students. The performance of girls was found to be better than the boys.

The reason for the weak performance of speaking skills among the students may be that the students have not been exposed to the teaching materials that provide context relevant to the communicative situation. The colleges should provide opportunities to the students so that they equip themselves with the necessary speaking skills. They must provide as much opportunities as possible to improve the communication skills of the students. The students also need to work on their skills. They must actively participate in the activities that will enhance their speaking skills.

Implications

The result from this study will be beneficial to the teachers for remedial measures. It will provide feedback to the students about their progress in English language. It can also motivate them to practice by speaking English correctly.

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