Developing Communicative Competence: A Study of LSRW Skills at the Undergraduate Level

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Abstract

Language skills are foundational for academic achievement and employability. The four core skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing (LSRW)—form the basis of communicative competence. This research paper explores the proficiency levels, challenges, and influencing factors in the development of LSRW skills among undergraduate (UG) students. Using a mixed-method approach, the study aims to understand the gaps between expected and actual performance and to suggest effective strategies to enhance these skills in an ESL (English as a Second Language) context.

Keywords: Language skills, Communicative Competence, Mixed-Method Approach, ESL (English as a Second Language).

Introduction

There are four basic language skills, listening, reading, speaking and writing in foreign language education and training (Bağçeci & Yaşar, 2007, p. 16; Barın, 1997) and they are indispensable parts of language teaching. In language teaching, these are divided into two; the ability to understand and read, and the ability to speak which are also regarded as speech and writing. On the other hand, the other indispensable elements in foreign language teaching are grammar and vocabulary (Balcı, 2015). For successful and effective education and training in foreign language courses, these four basic language skills need to be developed and reinforced in accordance with the level and needs of the learners.

English has become the global lingua franca, essential not only for academic purposes but also for personal and professional development. In India, despite years of formal instruction in English, a considerable number of undergraduate students still struggle with basic language proficiency. Language learning is a skill-based process that involves four core competencies—Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. Mastery over these skills ensures the overall development of communication abilities. However, various factors like regional language dominance, lack of exposure, inadequate teaching methods, and limited resources hinder the development of these skills. This study investigates the current status of LSRW skills among UG students, especially those from semi-urban or rural colleges affiliated with state universities.

Review of Literature

Language acquisition theories emphasize the importance of integrating LSRW skills for balanced development. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), language is acquired through comprehensible input—emphasizing listening and reading. Swain (1985) later argued for the importance of "comprehensible output", focusing on speaking and writing as productive skills. Together, these frameworks form the foundation for modern communicative language teaching.

Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence highlighted grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies, all of which require integration of LSRW. A number of Indian studies (Kumar, 2017; Deshmukh, 2019) have highlighted the challenges faced by UG students in rural areas due to limited English exposure and ineffective pedagogy. Most studies recommend learner-centric methods, activity-based learning, and ICT integration to improve language proficiency.

Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the proficiency levels of UG students in Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing.
2. To identify common difficulties faced by students in developing each of the four skills.

3. To examine the impact of factors such as medium of instruction, environment, and prior exposure.
4. To suggest pedagogical strategies for effective skill development.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach using both quantitative and qualitative tools. A survey and structured skill-based tests were conducted to evaluate the LSRW competencies of UG students.

Data Collection : Sample

The sample comprised 40 undergraduate students from the Mahatma Gandhi Vidyamandir's Loknete Vyankatrao Hiray Arts, Science and Commerce College, Nashik Maharashtra, India, drawn from Arts, Commerce, and Science streams. 100% of the students were from vernacular medium backgrounds.

Data Collection Tools

Listening Test: Audio passages with comprehension questions.

To evaluate the listening skills of undergraduate students, carefully selected audio recordings were played in the classroom. These recordings included short conversations, announcements, and narrative passages delivered in standard English. Students were asked to listen attentively and answer a set of comprehension questions based on the audio content. These questions tested various sub-skills such as: identifying the main idea, understanding specific details, and inferring the speaker's intent or emotion. The audio clips were chosen from everyday contexts like travel announcements, radio programs, or academic lectures to simulate real-life listening experiences. The test aimed to evaluate the learners' concentration, auditory discrimination, and capacity to comprehend spoken English.

Speaking Test: Extempore and interview sessions.

Students were given familiar or abstract topics such as 'My Favourite book', 'Use of Mobile', etc., and were asked to speak for 1–2 minutes without prior preparation. This tested their ability to think and articulate ideas spontaneously using appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure. Semi-structured interviews were conducted where students answered questions about their background, interests, and opinions. The interviewer also posed follow-up questions to observe how students handled interactive conversation.

Reading Test: Passages with inference and vocabulary-based questions.

The reading test involved presenting students with 1–2 passages from a variety of genres such as narratives, expository texts, or news articles. After reading the texts, students were asked to respond to questions designed to assess different levels of reading comprehension: Literal comprehension (e.g., who, what, when, where), Inferential comprehension (e.g., drawing conclusions, reading between the lines), Vocabulary-in-context questions (understanding word meanings based on the surrounding context), Critical analysis (interpreting tone, purpose, or bias in the passage).

This test helped determine the students' reading speed, comprehension ability, analytical thinking, and vocabulary range.

Writing Test: Essay writing and letter drafting.

Students were provided with general topics such as "The Importance of Education" or "Social Media and Youth" and were asked to write a short essay (250–300 words). This assessed: Content development and organization, Coherence and cohesion, Grammatical range and accuracy, Vocabulary usage, Punctuation and spelling The teacher also assigned both formal and informal letter-writing tasks. For example: Writing a letter to the principal requesting leave (formal) and writing a letter to a friend describing a recent trip (informal)

These tasks evaluated the students' ability to apply correct format, tone, and style, while demonstrating control over language conventions in writing.

Data Analysis

The results were statistically analyzed using percentage analysis and thematic interpretation of qualitative responses.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

a) Listening Skills

Only 35% of students could correctly answer comprehension questions based on audio input. All students from Marathi medium backgrounds performed with low confidence. Poor concentration and unfamiliarity with accent and pace were cited as major issues.

b) Speaking Skills

About 28% of students could engage in a basic conversation with correct sentence structure and fluency. Most students hesitated due to fear of making mistakes and lack of vocabulary. Code-switching with the mother tongue was frequent.

c) Reading Skills

Reading comprehension showed better results. Nearly 60% could understand the gist and answer factual questions. However, inferential and analytical questions were more challenging. Students showed a lack of reading habit beyond textbooks.

d) Writing Skills

Only 40% were able to construct grammatically correct and coherent essays. Common errors included subject-verb agreement, tense misuse, and poor organization. Formal letter writing was relatively better, possibly due to memorization.

Major Findings

Uneven Skill Development: Reading and writing skills were relatively better than listening and speaking, indicating a traditional, text-heavy approach in teaching.

Influence of Background: Students from Marathi-medium schools performed well in all four skills. First-generation learners from rural backgrounds struggled more.

Low Exposure: Lack of real-time English usage in everyday contexts limited fluency, especially in speaking and listening.

Fear of Judgment: Many students lacked confidence and avoided speaking due to the fear of making grammatical errors.

Teacher-Centric Methods: Classrooms were dominated by grammar-translation and rote memorization rather than interactive or communicative techniques.

Discussion

The findings align with previous studies emphasizing the need for a shift from traditional grammar-focused methods to communicative language teaching. LSRW skills are interdependent and should be developed in an integrated manner. Despite 10+ years of English instruction, UG students lack functional proficiency, which affects their academic and career prospects. In an ESL context like India, meaningful exposure, task-based activities, and ICT tools (like podcasts, YouTube, and language apps) can supplement classroom learning. Teacher training is also crucial to equip educators with modern techniques that encourage interaction and learner autonomy.

Recommendations

To improve the language proficiency of undergraduate students, a skill-integrated curriculum is essential. Undergraduate syllabi should be thoughtfully redesigned to ensure a balanced focus on all four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—through the integration of interactive tasks, student presentations, and the use of language laboratories. Such an approach promotes active learning and ensures that learners develop both receptive and productive skills cohesively.

Listening and speaking practice should become a regular part of classroom instruction. This can be achieved by incorporating listening labs with diverse audio materials, organizing role plays and simulations, and conducting activities like debates and group discussions. These methods help students overcome hesitation, build confidence, and improve pronunciation and fluency in spoken English. To cultivate better reading habits, students should be encouraged to read for pleasure beyond academic texts. The introduction of graded readers, digital libraries, book clubs, and access to online reading platforms can foster a culture of voluntary reading. This not only enhances vocabulary and comprehension but also stimulates critical thinking and imagination.

In the area of writing, workshops and writing labs should be implemented where students practice sentence construction, paragraph organization, and writing style. Emphasis should be placed on the process of

writing through brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing. Incorporating peer reviews and instructor feedback will enable learners to reflect on their writing and gradually improve both accuracy and expression. The use of technology can significantly enhance language learning outcomes. Mobile apps for vocabulary building, pronunciation tools, online grammar games, and platforms for digital storytelling or blogging offer engaging, learner-centered experiences. Integrating these tools into the curriculum makes learning more accessible and aligned with students' digital habits.

Furthermore, there is a need to move beyond traditional, summative assessments. Instead, continuous and formative evaluation methods—such as project-based tasks, portfolios, presentations, and classroom participation—should be adopted. These not only provide a more comprehensive view of students' progress but also reduce exam-related stress and encourage sustained effort. Lastly, teacher development plays a critical role in the successful implementation of these strategies. Regular training sessions and workshops on innovative ELT (English Language Teaching) methodologies should be organized for college faculty. Exposure to current pedagogical trends, digital tools, and classroom management strategies will empower teachers to create more dynamic and responsive learning environments.

Conclusion

Developing language proficiency is a complex but essential goal for undergraduate education. This study confirms that while UG students have some foundation in reading and writing, they are significantly underprepared in listening and speaking. A holistic, learner-centric, and skill-oriented approach is required to bridge this gap. Institutions must foster an English-rich environment and adopt innovative pedagogies to enhance the employability and global readiness of their students.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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