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A Study on the Development of English Language Learning Abilities among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

English functions as a global medium of communication in education, research, technology, and employment. In multilingual contexts such as India, English is widely used as a second language in higher education institutions. Despite prolonged exposure at the school level, many undergraduate students enter college with varying levels of English language proficiency. This disparity affects academic performance, classroom participation, and employability outcomes. The present study investigates the development of English language learning abilities among undergraduate students, with a focus on the four fundamental skills—Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing (LSRW).

The study employs a descriptive research design using quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. A sample of 200 undergraduate students from arts, science, and engineering streams was selected through stratified random sampling. Tools such as proficiency tests, structured questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations were used to assess language development. Statistical techniques including percentage analysis, mean scores, and comparative analysis were applied.

The findings indicate that communicative teaching methods, exposure to digital tools, peer interaction, and continuous assessment significantly contribute to language skill development. However, factors such as medium of instruction, socio-economic background, rural–urban divide, and learner motivation influence progress levels. The study concludes with recommendations for curriculum reform, teacher training, and skill-based language enhancement programs at the undergraduate level.

Keywords: English language learning, undergraduate students, ESL, communicative competence, language proficiency, higher education



Introduction

Language is central to human interaction and academic growth. Among world languages, English has acquired a unique position as an international language. In higher education, English is not merely a subject but also the primary medium of instruction in professional courses such as engineering, medicine, and management.

Undergraduate education marks a critical transition phase where students are expected to demonstrate advanced academic communication skills. However, many students struggle with fluency, grammar accuracy, vocabulary usage, and confidence in public speaking. This gap between expected and actual proficiency levels necessitates systematic investigation.

The present study examines how English language abilities develop during undergraduate education and identifies factors that enhance or impede this development.

2. Theoretical Framework

Language acquisition theories provide a conceptual basis for understanding language learning.

2.1 Behaviorist Theory

This theory emphasizes repetition, imitation, and reinforcement. Language learning occurs through habit formation.

2.2 Cognitive Theory

Cognitive theorists argue that learners actively process linguistic input. Language learning involves memory, perception, and problem-solving abilities.

2.3 Input Hypothesis

Stephen Krashen proposed that learners acquire language when exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current level ($i+1$). This highlights the importance of meaningful communication.

2.4 Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence stresses the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts rather than merely mastering grammar rules.

These theories collectively emphasize learner-centered and interactive teaching methods for effective language development.

3. Review of Literature

Previous research highlights several determinants of English language development:

- Studies indicate that communicative language teaching improves speaking fluency.



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- Research shows that blended learning enhances vocabulary and listening comprehension.
- Peer interaction significantly boosts confidence levels.
- Students from English-medium backgrounds perform better in academic writing tasks.
- Anxiety and fear of making mistakes hinder speaking performance.

However, limited studies have comprehensively examined language development across all four skills during the undergraduate phase. This study addresses that research gap.

4. Objectives of the Study

1. To assess the baseline English proficiency of undergraduate students.
2. To analyze the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.
3. To identify factors influencing English language acquisition.
4. To suggest strategies for improving English language learning in higher education.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research Design

A descriptive and analytical research design was adopted.

5.2 Sample

The sample consisted of 200 undergraduate students from first, second, and third-year programs across multiple disciplines.

5.3 Tools Used

- Standardized English proficiency test
- Structured questionnaire (Likert scale)
- Classroom observation checklist
- Semi-structured interviews

5.4 Data Analysis Techniques

- Percentage analysis
- Mean and standard deviation
- Comparative analysis
- Thematic interpretation

6. Analysis of Language Skills

6.1 Listening Skills

Listening comprehension is foundational to language acquisition. The study found that students exposed to multimedia resources such as recorded lectures and podcasts performed better in comprehension tasks. Students from rural backgrounds showed moderate difficulty due to limited exposure to varied accents.



6.2 Speaking Skills

Speaking proficiency was identified as the weakest skill among participants. Major barriers included:

- Fear of grammatical errors
- Lack of vocabulary
- Anxiety in public speaking
- Limited classroom speaking opportunities

Interactive activities such as group discussions, presentations, and debates significantly improved fluency and confidence levels.

6.3 Reading Skills

Reading comprehension was comparatively stronger. Students regularly engaged with textbooks and online articles demonstrated better vocabulary acquisition. However, critical reading and analytical interpretation remained areas requiring improvement.

6.4 Writing Skills

Academic writing posed challenges in coherence, sentence structure, and grammatical accuracy. Students often translated thoughts from their mother tongue into English, affecting clarity. Continuous writing practice and feedback improved performance.

7. Factors Influencing Language Development

The study identified several influencing factors:

7.1 Medium of Instruction

Students from English-medium schools exhibited higher confidence levels.

7.2 Socio-Economic Background

Access to digital tools and private coaching influenced proficiency.

7.3 Motivation

Intrinsic motivation positively correlated with performance.

7.4 Teaching Methodology

Communicative and activity-based methods proved more effective than lecture-based approaches.

7.5 Peer Interaction

Collaborative learning enhanced speaking and listening skills.

8. Discussion

The findings support communicative and constructivist approaches to language teaching. Students actively involved in interactive learning environments showed measurable improvement. Technology integration, including language labs and mobile applications, strengthened listening and pronunciation skills.



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Traditional grammar-focused instruction alone was insufficient to develop communicative competence. Continuous formative assessment and constructive feedback were essential components of skill enhancement.

9. Educational Implications

Based on the findings, the following strategies are recommended:

1. Implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).
2. Establishment of well-equipped language laboratories.
3. Integration of blended learning platforms.
4. Regular speaking practice sessions.
5. Remedial coaching for slow learners.
6. Faculty development programs in ESL pedagogy.

10. Limitations of the Study

- Restricted to selected institutions.
- Limited duration of data collection.
- Self-reported data may contain bias.
- Cultural and regional differences were not extensively examined.

11. Recommendations for Future Research

- Longitudinal studies tracking students over three years.
- Comparative studies between rural and urban institutions.
- Experimental studies evaluating digital learning interventions.
- Investigation into psychological factors such as language anxiety.

12. Conclusion

The development of English language learning abilities among undergraduate students is a multifaceted process influenced by academic, social, and psychological variables. While students show gradual improvement during their undergraduate years, speaking and academic writing remain areas of concern.

Learner-centered teaching strategies, technological integration, and structured language enhancement programs significantly improve proficiency. Higher education institutions must prioritize comprehensive language development initiatives to equip students for global academic and professional environments.



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