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Spoken English Needs of Agriculture Students in Maharashtra: A Comparative ESP Perspective

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Abstract

The ability to communicate effectively in English has become an essential requirement for students pursuing higher education in professional disciplines such as agriculture. In the Indian context, particularly within State Agricultural Universities (SAUs), students come from diverse linguistic and socio-educational backgrounds, which significantly influence their English language proficiency. The present study examines the spoken English needs of First-Year B.Sc. (Agriculture) students in Maharashtra, with a comparative focus on urban and semi-urban institutions. Using classroom observations, focus group discussions, and learner perceptions, the study identifies psychological, pedagogical, and institutional factors affecting spoken English development. The findings reveal that semi-urban students face greater challenges due to limited exposure, higher language anxiety, traditional teaching practices, and inadequate infrastructural support. The study underscores the need for curriculum reform, ESP-oriented instruction, and communicative pedagogy to enhance oral proficiency among agriculture students.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, Spoken English, Agriculture Students, Semi-Urban Learners, Communicative Competence.

Introduction

English has assumed a pivotal role as the language of higher education, research dissemination and professional communication across disciplines. In agricultural education, English proficiency is increasingly required for academic presentations, extension services, field documentation, professional training, and interaction with national and international agencies. As a result, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has gained prominence as a pedagogical framework that aligns language instruction with learners' disciplinary and professional needs.

Despite this growing importance, many students enrolled in State Agricultural Universities (SAUs) in Maharashtra struggle to develop adequate spoken English proficiency. These challenges are particularly pronounced among students from semi-urban backgrounds, where exposure to English remains limited. The present study aims to analyse the spoken English needs of First-Year B.Sc. (Agriculture) students and to compare the linguistic experiences of urban and semi-urban learners within the ESP framework.

Psychological Barriers to Spoken English

Affective variables play a crucial role in second language acquisition, particularly in oral communication. The study reveals that semi-urban learners experience significantly

higher psychological barriers than their urban counterparts.

Fear of making mistakes emerges as a dominant factor inhibiting participation. Many students perceive spoken English as a high-risk activity, where errors invite ridicule or negative evaluation. This fear discourages experimentation with language and leads to prolonged silence in classrooms. Closely related to this is low self-confidence, which stems from limited exposure to English outside formal educational settings.

Language anxiety further compounds these difficulties. Semi-urban students frequently report nervousness during oral assessments, hesitation while responding to teachers, and avoidance of presentations. Although urban students also experience anxiety, regular exposure to English through schooling, digital media, and peer interaction enables them to overcome these inhibitions more effectively. Negative self-perceptions—such as viewing English as a language meant only for urban or elite learners—further reduce motivation and impede progress among semi-urban students.

Pedagogical and Institutional Factors

Instructional practices and institutional resources significantly influence the development of spoken English skills. Urban institutions generally employ communicative language teaching (CLT) strategies, incorporating group discussions,

presentations, and interactive tasks that promote authentic language use. In contrast, semi-urban institutions continue to rely heavily on teacher-centred approaches, grammar-translation methods, and extensive use of the mother tongue. Such practices limit learners' opportunities for oral interaction and meaningful communication.

Institutional infrastructure also varies considerably. Urban campuses often provide access to language laboratories, audio-visual aids, and co-curricular platforms such as English clubs, which enhance exposure and practice. Semi-urban institutions frequently lack these facilities, along with adequately trained faculty specialising in spoken English or ESP instruction.

The curriculum presents another major constraint. A uniform syllabus across institutions prioritises reading and writing skills, leaving speaking and listening largely underdeveloped. Furthermore, the absence of agriculture-specific communicative tasks limits the relevance of English instruction for professional contexts.

Insights from Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) provided qualitative insights into learners' experiences and expectations. Semi-urban students expressed a strong desire for supportive classroom environments, increased speaking opportunities, and constructive feedback rather than corrective criticism. Urban students highlighted the role of continuous practice and informal exposure through social media in improving fluency. Students across both contexts emphasised the need for practical communication-oriented activities, including peer interaction, pronunciation training, and real-life speaking tasks. These insights indicate a clear mismatch between learner expectations and existing instructional practices.

Comparative Analysis of Urban and Semi-Urban Learners

The comparative analysis reveals substantial disparities between urban and semi-urban learners. Urban students demonstrate higher levels of exposure, confidence, technological support, and oral proficiency, typically ranging from intermediate to advanced levels. Semi-urban learners, despite showing willingness to improve, remain constrained by limited exposure, beginner-level proficiency, and inadequate institutional support. These differences highlight the role of socio-educational context in shaping spoken English competence.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations further validate the findings. Urban classrooms are characterised by consistent use of English, student-initiated responses, and communicative activities such as role-plays and debates. Semi-urban classrooms, however, show frequent code-switching, minimal student participation, and limited oral tasks. While attendance remains high, learner engagement in spoken English activities is comparatively low.

Major Findings and Discussion

The study establishes that spoken English proficiency among semi-urban agriculture students is significantly lower than that of urban students. Psychological barriers, limited exposure, traditional teaching practices, and curriculum inadequacies collectively hinder oral skill development. These findings align with ESP literature emphasising the need for context-sensitive, learner-centred language instruction.

Conclusion and Implications

The study highlights the urgent need to reconceptualise English language teaching in agricultural universities through an ESP-oriented, communicative framework. Curriculum restructuring, teacher training, enhanced infrastructural support, and increased opportunities for spoken interaction are essential to address existing gaps. By focusing on discipline-specific communicative needs, agricultural institutions can better equip students for academic and professional success.

Implications for Practice

- Integration of ESP-based speaking modules.
- Adoption of communicative and task-based pedagogy.
- Teacher training in spoken English and ESP.
- Curriculum emphasis on oral communication.
- Creation of supportive, low-anxiety learning environments.

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