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Exploring English Language Proficiency of High School ESL Learners

Abstract

In spite of the importance that English maintains for socio-economic mobility and access to academic resources, various studies suggest that the proficiency level of students in English is not satisfactory in spite of English being introduced in most schools as a subject from class one or as a medium of instruction. To assess where students stand in proficiency in English, the present study was conducted with 62 students from class IX of a government-run school in Telangana state of India. The students were administered a proficiency test developed by the CBSE. The findings reveal that most of the students have a moderate level of proficiency. The study also suggests that the gender of the students plays a significant role in language proficiency.

Keywords: English, Language Proficiency, Gender

Introduction

English in India is not only a language among the multitudes of languages spoken, written and understood at local, regional and official levels, but it is a language of opportunities, a language of social and economic aspiration (NCF-2005). It is a language that, to a great extent, facilitates socio-economic mobility and ensures greater access to resources, both academic and economic (Azam, Chin & Prakash, 2010). Proficiency in a language has been construed variously by different scholars and ELT practitioners. Language proficiency denotes the ability of a person to perform in a language (Harsch, 2017). This performance in the language is the outcome of 'the linguistic knowledge and skills that underlie L2 learners' successful comprehension and production of the target language' (Gaillard & Tremblay 2016). A modest proficiency in English not only enables the learners to perform in English but also perform in other content areas in a better way as the language of academics at higher level in India is accessible primarily through English. Hence, it is greatly required that in this English-driven world, the learners

do possess a certain level of proficiency in English, so that their studies at later stages happen without much of language hiccups.

In an English as a Second Language (ESL) setting, testing students' language proficiency gives an idea of how much and in which of the skill areas, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, students can perform a given task and where they stand in comparison with each other. Proficiency tests work as diagnostic as well as predictive tests: the scores tell us in which of the skills or aspects of the language a student is poor and needs help. Besides, they also predict whether a certain task can be performed by the student or not. Hence, proficiency tests help, to a great extent in producing materials and designing appropriate tasks for students in language classrooms to enhance their language capabilities.

Review of Related Literature

The English language proficiency of school students in India, however, is not very encouraging. Studies in this area, and reports from government and private organizations

show that despite the introduction of English in schools as early as at class I, students' proficiency in the language is not at par with their academic and cognitive level. Student performance has been constantly declining compared to their performances in earlier years (ASER, 2018). The report suggests that students' proficiency in English is below their cognitive level. When it comes to the proficiency level of the students studying in government schools and especially in rural areas, they lag behind their counterparts studying in urban areas whether in government or private schools (NCERT 2015). Prakash & Hooda (2016) in their study with 200 students studying in classes XI and X in Sirsa district of Haryana, report that the students studying in government schools located in rural areas had lower proficiency in English when compared to their counterparts studying in private schools in urban areas. Madhumati, Ramani, & Prema (2014) in their study on 60 students enrolled in B.Tech 1st Year in a private university in South India, report that the students' overall proficiency level in English was of Beginner level only even though they had received English instruction for at least ten years.

Gender and its association with language have formed a focal point of enquiry in many social science researches. Several studies have also been done in the area of gender and language development. The findings of research in this area point out that female students outperform male students in their proficiency in English. The studies conducted by the NCERT (2014) on students of class VIII, underscore that in most of the states of India, girls performed significantly better at reading comprehension compared to boys. However, the National Achievement Survey Reports for Class X conducted in the year 2015 reveal that except a few states like Kerala and Goa, there is no significant difference in the performance of girls and boys in English. Whereas, ASER (2018) reports that even in the rural set up, girls' performance on reading was better compared to boys in the age group of 14-16 in most

of the states of India. Besides the reports by NCERT and ASER, many individual studies conducted in India also affirm that girls tend to have better proficiency in English than boys. Ghosh (2017) in his study reveals that the gender is a determining factor in overall achievement in English. His study conducted with 300 students of class X of Murshidabad district, West Bengal, found out that the proficiency level of girls was significantly higher in English than boys.

These studies suggest that students whether at school level or undergraduate level are not very competent in English. Also, the proficiency level of students from rural background tends to be lower. The studies also suggest that girls and boys show different levels of competence in English. What remains to be seen is if such findings can be generalized everywhere in India or if there are schools and students even in a rural set up who show remarkable proficiency in English in spite of lacking basic exposure to the language.

Objectives

This study endeavours to assess the proficiency level of students studying in class IX of an English medium school run by the government of Telangana, India. The objectives of this research are:

- To assess the high school students' level of proficiency in English
- To explore the difference between boys and girls in proficiency in English

Research Procedure

The study was conducted in a government school in Karimnagar district of Telangana, India. The school caters to the educational needs of rural children. The medium of instruction in the school is English. The sample was drawn through Purposive sampling technique. The number of students who took part in this study was 62 where 32 were girls and 30 were boys. All the students were studying in class IX. The test was

conducted for two and half hours in a single day. The students' responses were sought on a multiple-choice question (MCQ) based English proficiency test.

Study Tools

To examine students' proficiency in English, a proficiency test developed by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) was administered. The proficiency test aims to assess students' skills in reading, writing and vocabulary. It has five sections - Reading, Vocabulary, Writing, Grammar and Cloze test. The Reading section assesses students' comprehension of the given texts based on factual, inferential and evaluative questions. The vocabulary section intends to examine students' range of knowledge of words. The writing section assesses students' awareness of the various genres and formats of writing, namely letter, paragraph organization etc. The Grammar section aims to examine students' knowledge and usage of grammar at sentence level. The Cloze test aims to test students' ability to use language in context. The test consists of 100 Multiple Choice items for 100 marks and the distribution of marks for each component is as follows:

Reading: 30 marks

Vocabulary: 20 marks

Writing: 20 marks

Grammar: 15 marks

Cloze Test: 15 marks

Based on the students' performance on each component, the students' overall proficiency is categorised in five levels:

1. Good user -80 % and above;
2. Competent user -60%-79%
3. Modest user- 40%-59%
4. Limited user- 20%-39% and
5. Very limited user- below 0-19%

The test was conducted in the classroom and students were given two and half hours to complete the test. Later, the scores of the students were collected, processed and analysed quantitatively. For the quantitative analysis, their proficiency was categorised into five levels as per the guidelines of the CBSE and were tested through non-Parametric statistical procedure.

Data Analysis and Findings

Students' performance on English proficiency test was analysed quantitatively. Students' scores were analysed component wise as well as cumulatively.

The Proficiency Level of Students in English

The analysis of students' scores on Proficiency test shows that the students, contrary to the other findings in this area, were not extremely limited in their proficiency. However, none of the students were found to be exceptionally proficient in the language.

Table 1: Distribution of Boys & Girls' Proficiency in English

			Proficiency					Total
			Very Limited User	Limited User	Modest User	Competent User	Good User	
Gender	Boys	Count	0	22	8	0	0	30
		% within Gender	0	73.3%	26.7%	0.0%	0	100.0%
	Girls	Count	0	13	17	2	0	32
		% within Gender	0	40.6%	53.1%	6.3%	0	100.0%
Total	Count		0	35	25	2	0	62
	% within Gender			56.5%	40.3%	3.2%	0	100.0%
	% of Total			56.5%	40.3%	3.2%		100.0%

From the Table 1 given above, it can be observed that out of 62 students, 56.5 % of the students were limited users of the language while 40.3 % of them were modest users; whereas only 3.2 % of them were

competent users of the language. However, none of the students were in either of the extreme levels-very limited user and good user.

Table 2: English Proficiency (Component-Wise)

		Reading (20 Marks)	Vocabulary (20 Marks)	Grammar (15 Marks)	Writing (20 marks)	Cloze Test (15 marks)	Total Profi- ciency (100 marks)
N	Valid	62	62	62	62	62	62
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		10.3065	11.0645	4.4677	4.3226	7.6452	38.7581
Std. Deviation		2.60258	2.75128	2.21558	1.67698	2.49653	8.16567
Min.		7.00	6.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	24.00
Max.		17.00	17.00	12.00	8.00	13.00	62.00

The analysis of students' performance on each component reveals that the students performed better on reading and vocabulary compared to grammar and writing. Further, many of the students could demonstrate their understanding of language in context since their performance in Cloze test was better than their performance on other language elements. As it can be observed from the above table, the mean score of the students was highest in Cloze test. The students got 7.64 out of 15 with standard deviation of 2.49. The students' performance was equally appreciable in vocabulary and reading where their mean score was 11.06 out of 20 with standard deviation of 2.75 and 10.30 out of 30 and standard deviation of 2.60 respectively. The lowest performance of the students was observed in writing and grammar, where their mean score could go up to 4.32 out of 20 with S.D. 1.67 and 4.46 out of 15 with S.D. 2.21 respectively. It can be observed that the performance of the students on reading, vocabulary and cloze test was comparatively better than their performance on writing and grammar.

The above statistical details imply that the students have more interest in reading and as a result their vocabulary and their knowledge of language use in context as observed in their performance on cloze test, are also improved. However, their

performance in writing and grammar, which is below the average, indicates that the classroom teaching focuses less on writing activities and as a result their knowledge of English grammar is also very limited. It is because when the students are engaged in writing tasks, they consciously imbibe the grammar of a language.

Gender and Proficiency in English

As discussed earlier, gender is one of the most central variables being explored in the studies related to language learning. Gender while it includes male, female, transgender and queers, for this study, gender denotes to male and female only. The students' proficiency test results were also analysed to find any association between gender and English language proficiency. The performance of the students shows that there was a significant difference between boys and girls in terms of their proficiency in English. From the Table.1, it can be noticed that out of 32 girls, 40.6 % of the girls and out of 30 boys, 73.3% of the boys were limited users of English. Further, 53.1% of the total girls and 26.7% of the total boys fell in the modest user category. Out of 32 girls, only 6.3% girls were found to be competent users, but no boy was found in this category.

The difference between boys' and girls' level of proficiency in English was quite palpable.

The results show that more boys compared to girls fell below the average proficiency level. Since the overall performance of the students on proficiency test demonstrated a difference in the proficiency level of boys and girls, the Mann-Whitney- U test was employed to get a clearer picture of the differences in their performance. Mann-Whitney-U test is a Non-parametrical test which compares the differences between two independent groups. Here, the Mann-Whitney-U test was adopted because the distribution of the variable was found not to be normal.

For statistical procedures, following hypothesis was framed:

H_1 : There is significant difference between boys and girls in terms of their proficiency in English.

To test it, the above hypothesis was converted into the following null form:

H_0 : There is no significant difference between boys and girls in terms of their proficiency in English.

Following results were obtained from the statistical analysis:

Table 3: Mann-Whitney-U Test Results of Proficiency in English

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Proficiency	Boys	30	26.00	780.00
	Girls	32	36.66	1173.00
	Total	62		

Table 4: Mann-Whitney-U Test Results of Proficiency in English (Component wise)

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Reading	Boys	30	28.63	859.00
	Girls	32	34.19	1094.00
Vocabulary	Boys	30	27.62	828.50
	Girls	32	35.14	1124.50
Grammar	Boys	30	28.93	868.00
	Girls	32	33.91	1085.00
Writing	Boys	30	26.70	801.00
	Girls	32	36.00	1152.00
Cloze test	Boys	30	26.83	805.00
	Girls	32	35.88	1148.00

	Proficiency
Mann-Whitney U	315.000
Wilcoxon W	780.000
Z	-2.675
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.007

The results observed from the above table show that the mean rank of boys is 26 and for girls it is 36.66 in Proficiency in English. From the Mann-Whitney U statistical analysis, it is found that the U value is 315 and the Z score is -2.675 and the p value is 0.007. The p value is a measure of the strength of the evidence of data against null hypothesis. The smaller the p value, the stronger the sample evidence for rejecting the null hypothesis. The p value indicates that there is 0.07 % of chance that the null hypothesis is true. Hence, sample results are not consistent with a null hypothesis that is true. Since the p value is small, it is concluded that the sample is so incompatible with the null hypothesis that one can reject the null for the entire population. Hence, it can be inferred that the boys and girls differ significantly with respect to their proficiency in English. In other words, based on the strong evidence (p value < 0.05, i.e. 0.007), the null hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, it is concluded that the difference between boys and girls with respect to their proficiency is statistically significant.

	Reading	Vocabulary	Grammar	Writing	Cloze Test
Mann-Whitney U	394.000	363.500	403.000	336.000	340.000
Wilcoxon W	859.000	828.500	868.000	801.000	805.000
Z	-1.673	-1.810	-1.202	-2.331	-2.128
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.094	.070	.229	.020	.033

Further, if the difference between the boys' and girls' performance on each of the test components is analysed, we find that the boys' mean rank is lower than the girls' mean rank on each of the components. However, this difference between both the genders- boys and girls- is only significant for writing (p value <0.05 , i.e. 0.020) and cloze test (p value <0.05 , i.e. 0.033). Boys and girls do not differ significantly in terms of their reading (p value >0.05 , i.e. 0.094), vocabulary (p value >0.05 , i.e. 0.070) and grammar (p value >0.05 , i.e. .229). In other words, reading, vocabulary and grammatical knowledge of English are not gender dependent and any difference observed in the performance of boys and girls on these aspects are not statistically significant. However, boys and girls do significantly differ in their writing skills and their use of English in context. Although at discrete skills level, out of the five components, only on two components boys and girls differed significantly and on three components the difference in their performance was not statistically significant, yet at the overall proficiency level in English, it can be observed that these small differences between boys and girls in terms of their reading, vocabulary and grammar, have certainly compounded to a significant difference. What this analysis seems to suggest is that even if the difference might be statistically insignificant yet attending to these little differences may help in building the overall proficiency level of the students and can bridge the gender gap in proficiency level of the students.

Discussion and Conclusion

Students' proficiency in English, as suggested by various studies and reports by national and international agencies, is not very

remarkable in Indian context. The present study found that although the students were not extremely limited in their proficiency in English, none of them were very competent in the language as well. Especially, the proficiency level of most of the boys was in the Limited User category itself and a very few boys were modest users when compared to girls who were mostly modest users of English. Analysis of data also reveals that the girls performed significantly better than the boys in English which reaffirms the results of various studies done in national and international context, i.e. girls are better at language compared to boys (Heinzmann, 2009; Główka, 2014; NCERT, 2014,; Ghosh, 2017; ASER 2019). This finding certainly points out that the implementation of English as a medium of instruction is not enough to make learners proficient in the language. While the medium of instruction can make learners communicate in the classroom, it does not, however, guarantee overall proficiency. The findings of this study also corroborate it further: the students could be found responding in English to the teacher (Researcher), but when it came to writing and grammar, their performance was below the average. This underscores the fact that all the basic skills, namely Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing are not getting sufficient attention in the English class.

Hence, there is a need to do a systematic assessment of learners' English language proficiency at the institutional level. Based on students' performance on each component, the tasks, activities and instructions should be customised for learners. Such a step would bring a positive change in students' proficiency in English and would also bring boys and girls at par with each other in terms of their proficiency in English.

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