Bridging the Communicative Gap: An Empirical Investigation into the English Speaking and Listening Vulnerabilities of Vernacular-Medium Students in the Bharatpur District

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Abstract:
This study examines the listening and speaking difficulties faced by vernacular-medium undergraduate and senior secondary students in the Bharatpur district of Eastern Rajasthan. Guided by the theories of Noam Chomsky, Stephen Krashen, and Dell Hymes, the research investigates the factors limiting communicative competence among rural learners. A stratified sample of 300 students from six Government Senior Secondary Schools in Rarah, Sewar, Chiksana, Bacchamadi, Peepla, and Jhagina was assessed through speech tests, oral interviews, listening exercises, phonetic analysis, and classroom observations. Three null hypotheses were formulated to examine the impact of medium of instruction, gender, and socioeconomic background on language performance.
The findings reject all three null hypotheses and identify the medium of instruction as the strongest factor affecting communicative ability. Students from vernacular backgrounds showed high language anxiety, weak listening discrimination, and dependence on first-language translation. Low parental income and limited home literacy support further restricted language development, while gender differences remained minimal within similar social settings. The study recommends a task-based communicative approach that reduces classroom anxiety, moves beyond grammar-translation methods, and promotes practical speaking and listening skills.

1. Introduction

In twenty-first-century India, English has evolved from a colonial legacy into a key tool for higher education, employment, research, and global communication. Fluency in English now functions as both academic and socioeconomic capital. Although the Indian educational system promotes multilingual learning through the Three-Language Formula, a major gap remains between urban institutions and rural or semi-urban schools, where English is often taught as an examination subject rather than a practical means of communication. This divide is clearly visible in the Bharatpur district of Eastern Rajasthan, where many students study in Hindi-medium government institutions. For these learners, Hindi and regional dialects such as Braj Bhasha form the first language foundation, while English is acquired as a second language. As a result, students must cope with unfamiliar grammar, pronunciation, and cultural contexts.
Noam Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance helps explain this challenge. Many students develop limited grammatical knowledge sufficient for written examinations, but struggle to use English effectively in real communication. Difficulties in speaking and understanding spoken English remain common despite years of formal instruction.

This study investigates the listening and speaking challenges faced by vernacular-medium students in Bharatpur. It examines how institutional background, parental literacy, household income, and gender influence oral language performance. The research aims to support a shift from grammar-translation methods toward interactive, low-anxiety, communicative teaching approaches that strengthen practical language skills.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Oral Communicative Competence

The definition of what it means to "know" a language shifted significantly during the late twentieth century as linguists moved beyond purely structural models. Dell Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of *Communicative Competence* as a critique of Chomsky's narrow focus on abstract grammatical rules. Hymes argued that linguistic knowledge must include not only grammatical accuracy but also sociolinguistic appropriateness—knowing when, where, and how to speak to different people in real-world contexts. Canale and Swain (1980) expanded this concept into a four-dimensional model, highlighting *strategic competence* (the ability to use verbal and non-verbal strategies to compensate for communication breakdowns) alongside grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse skills.

To understand why students struggle to develop this well-rounded competence, we can look to Stephen Krashen's Monitor Theory. Krashen distinguishes between *learning*—the conscious, formal study of grammatical rules—and *acquisition*—the subconscious process of internalizing a language through natural, meaningful exposure. Krashen emphasizes that a key requirement for successful acquisition is exposure to comprehensible input (i+1) in an environment with a low *affective filter*. The affective filter refers to psychological barriers like anxiety, self-doubt, and lack of motivation. When a student faces intense performance anxiety or fears peer ridicule, their affective filter rises, blocking the processing of language input and hindering natural speech delivery.

Furthermore, William Klein's models of guided versus spontaneous language learning explain how institutional settings shape language habits. Guided learning in a formal classroom depends heavily on explicit instruction and structural feedback. If this instruction relies entirely on the student's first language for translation, it can prevent the learner from developing authentic processing habits in the target language. John Schumann's Acculturation Theory adds a sociological perspective, suggesting that second language acquisition is directly influenced by the social and psychological distance between the learner's community and the target language culture. In rural districts like Bharatpur, this psychological distance is often wide, causing students to view English as an unfamiliar academic hurdle rather than a practical tool for personal development.

2.2 Empirical Research on Language Challenges in the Indian Context

A long line of empirical studies within the Indian educational landscape has analyzed how classroom environments, teaching methodologies, and socioeconomic factors interact to shape language outcomes.

- **Classroom Interaction Patterns:** Kothainayaki (1994) conducted a detailed analysis of teacher-student and student-student interactions in second-language classrooms. Her findings revealed that traditional classrooms are heavily teacher-dominated, relying almost entirely on one-way lectures. This structure offers students virtually no opportunities to practice speaking or listening, leading to low communicative confidence and frequent errors in the use of functional English markers like articles and prepositions.
- **Socioeconomic Stratification and Text Comprehension:** Karthiyayani (1995) investigated reading comprehension among higher secondary students. Her study demonstrated that while students can accurately retrieve explicit details directly from a text line, they struggle significantly with tasks that require drawing inferences across scattered passages. Crucially, her analysis showed that parental economic status and past

academic performance are powerful predictors of reading success, whereas gender and geographic location show little isolated impact within matching groups.

- **The Affective Filter and Transition Barriers:** Nisha (1995) examined the challenges faced by regional-medium students transitioning from rural schools to English-taught undergraduate curricula. Her research indicated that individual psychological traits, situational anxiety, and parental encouragement are the primary drivers of communicative performance. When faced with language limitations, students frequently rely on specific communication strategies—such as code-switching or topic avoidance—to navigate gaps in real-time conversation.
- **Orthographic and Phonological Transference:** Baskaran (1996) conducted an error analysis of written language skills among undergraduate learners, classifying spelling mistakes into distinct categories: additions, omissions, substitutions, and inversions. He traced many of these errors back to phonological interference from the students' first language (L1), demonstrating how native pronunciation habits can disrupt written accuracy in the target language. He recommended targeted spelling drills and systematic dictionary use to address these issues.
- **Textbook Complexity and Motivation:** Ravi (1998) explored motivation levels in second-language classrooms, finding that student motivation is directly tied to textbook vocabulary density and layout complexity. He observed that motivation levels tend to stabilize or drop in higher grades if the text is filled with abstract poetry or dense prose that feels irrelevant to the students' lives. This finding was supported by Rangasamy (1998), who evaluated higher secondary textbooks and recommended reducing abstract content in favor of prose written by regional Indian writers. He argued that language examinations should evaluate all four core skills comprehensively rather than focusing solely on rote syntax memorization.
- **Medium of Instruction and Oral Competence:** Chandran (1999) compared oral communication skills across different instructional mediums at the higher secondary level. His data showed that students from English-medium backgrounds achieved significantly higher oral proficiency than their peers in regional-medium schools, primarily due to greater daily exposure to the target language. He argued that syllabus designers must prioritize communicative activities to ensure sustainable language development.
- **Performance Anxiety and Avoidance Behavior:** Jayanthi (2002) observed undergraduate literature and language classrooms to identify factors that influence active participation. She found that classroom engagement is shaped by a complex mix of student confidence, social awareness, and past academic failures. Persistent performance anxiety often leads to avoidance behaviors, where students remain passive to escape potential errors.
- **Integrated Skill Assessments:** Subramanian (2002) conducted an evaluation of the four core language skills among graduate students. While testing all domains, his detailed analysis concentrated on writing skills, identifying recurring errors in phonological transference and syntax structure. He advocated for the use of group discussions, educational language games, and audiovisual tools to diversify language instruction. This approach aligns with Sobana (2003), whose research into written competence confirmed that explicit instructional quality and parental educational backgrounds have a direct, measurable impact on student achievement.

While these studies provide valuable insights into specific aspects of second language acquisition, there remains a gap in comprehensive research that examines how socioeconomic variables, geographic factors, and communicative skill development interact simultaneously among higher secondary and undergraduate students in the Bharatpur district. This study addresses that gap by providing an integrated empirical analysis of speaking and listening vulnerabilities within the region.

3. Methodology

3.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite decades of curriculum updates and educational investments, English communicative competence among vernacular-medium students in Bharatpur remains low. Students frequently complete their secondary and early undergraduate education with a basic understanding of grammar rules but limited ability to understand spoken English or express themselves clearly in speech. This creates a significant barrier when they encounter competitive oral interviews, professional higher education tracks, or globalized workplace requirements. It is therefore essential to analyze the structural, institutional, and socioeconomic factors that contribute to these oral communication vulnerabilities.

3.2 Research Hypotheses

To systematically isolate the factors influencing listening and speaking proficiency, this research tests three central null hypotheses:

- **H_{01} :** The institutional medium of instruction (vernacular Hindi-medium vs. English-medium tracks) has no statistically significant impact on the listening and speaking diagnostic scores of students.
- **H_{02}:** Socio-demographic variables—specifically gender profiles, localized household income tiers, and parental literacy levels—play no significant role in shaping oral language performance.
- **H_{03}**: Performance levels across listening comprehension and oral speaking tasks are entirely separate and domain-segregated, showing no statistical correlation during active language processing.

3.3 Sampling Frame and Informant Distribution

The study focused on the Bharatpur district of Eastern Rajasthan, evaluating students at both the senior secondary (Grades XI and XII) and early undergraduate levels. A randomized sample of N=300 students was selected from six representative educational institutions to ensure a broad cross-section of the regional student population:

1. *Government Senior Secondary School , Rarah, Bharatpur* (n=50 Undergraduate Students)
2. *Government Senior Secondary School, Sewar, Bharatpur* (n=50 Senior Secondary Students)
3. *Z.P. Secondary School, Chiksana, Bharatpur* (n=50 Secondary/Senior Secondary Students)
4. *Government Senior Secondary School, Bacchamadi, Bharatpur* (n=50 Senior Secondary Students)
5. *Government Senior Secondary School, Peepla, Bharatpur* (n=50 Senior Secondary Students)
6. *Government Senior Secondary School, Jhagina, Bharatpur* (n=50 Senior Secondary Students)

3.4 Data Collection Instruments and Field Procedures

Data collection combined formal testing instruments with qualitative field observations over a coordinated administration cycle:

- **Oral Speaking Assessment (Productive Domain):** Speaking skills were measured using structured, tape-recorded interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes per student group. Informants were asked to respond to everyday prompts, participate in role-play scenarios, or describe simple illustrations. These recorded sessions were transcribed phonetically and syntactically to analyze speech delivery, pauses, and grammatical adjustments.
- **Listening Comprehension Assessment (Receptive Domain):** Listening skills were evaluated by playing pre-recorded audio tracks or delivering structured readings featuring numbers, telephone directories, dates, and short narratives. Students then completed independent diagnostic answer sheets to measure their ability to decode sounds, recall information, and understand spoken sentences.
- **Qualitative Classroom Ethnography:** These active testing measures were supplemented by ongoing classroom observations. These observations focused on tracking teacher-student discourse patterns, the use

of regional languages (Hindi and Braj Bhasha) during English lessons, and student participation rates during oral exercises.

- **Socioeconomic Personal Data Sheets:** Each participant completed a comprehensive personal profile to capture relevant background data, including family income tiers, parental literacy levels, and the availability of English media or reading materials at home.

3.5 Operational Variable Definitions

The research framework categorizes operational variables across five main areas:

- **Instructional Medium:** Classified into Vernacular (Hindi-medium) and Non-Vernacular (English-medium/bilingual tracks) cohorts.
- **Gender Identity:** Categorized into Male and Female groups to evaluate demographic variance.
- **Household Income Brackets:** Stratified into low-income tiers (Below Poverty Line/Marginalized), middle-income groups, and higher-income groups.
- **Parental Literacy Status:** Classified into Literate and Illiterate cohorts based on formal educational attainment.

3.6 Analytical Scoring Framework

Language performance scores across the listening and speaking domains were standardized into percentage metrics using the following foundational formula:

$$SSP = (Mi/S_{max}) \times 100$$

SSP= Standardized Score Percentage ,
Mi= Empirical Marks Obtained by Individual Informant,
S_{max}= Maximum Attainable Score per Diagnostic Dimension

The collected corpus was processed using specialized linguistic error analysis frameworks. Audio transcriptions were categorized by communication strategy, written scripts were analyzed for structural syntax errors, and reading and listening responses were classified into clear comprehension categories.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Evaluation of Institutional Medium of Instruction (H_{01})

The empirical data requires a decisive rejection of **H_{01}**. The institutional medium of instruction emerged as the single most powerful predictor of communicative competence. Students enrolled in vernacular Hindi-medium tracks scored consistently lower on both listening and speaking tests compared to students who had access to English-medium tracks or bilingual resources.

This performance gap is closely linked to the complete absence of a target-language environment in vernacular schools. In these institutions, English is taught predominantly as an abstract academic subject using traditional grammar-translation methods. Teachers spend the majority of class time translating English texts line-by-line into Hindi or regional dialects, explaining grammar rules on the blackboard without providing any practical listening or speaking practice. Consequently, while vernacular-medium students can often memorize explicit grammatical rules, they face significant barriers when attempting to understand natural spoken English or express themselves in conversation.

4.2 Impact of Socioeconomic Stratification and Family Background (H_{02})

The data presents a nuanced picture regarding **H_{02}**, leading to a partial rejection of the null hypothesis. The effects of the variables are detailed below:

[Socioeconomic & Demographic Predictors of Oral Achievement]
- ├── Economic Status (Low-Income Tiers) ──► High Impact (Lack of learning tools, high anxiety)
- ├── Parental Literacy Status ──► High Impact (Absence of home literacy guidance)
- └── Gender Identity (Male vs. Female) ──► Minimal Isolated Variance (Equal classroom exposure)

- **Socioeconomic Position and Parental Literacy:** Household income levels and parental education emerged as significant factors shaping language outcomes. Performance on oral and listening tasks was consistently lower among students from low-income backgrounds and households with illiterate parents. This trend stems from a lack of supportive educational materials at home, minimal exposure to English media outside school hours, and elevated affective filters driven by socioeconomic stress. These findings align with Krashen's and Schumann's theories, which state that external socioeconomic pressures can create a psychological barrier that slows down language assimilation.
- **Gender Identity Variance:** In contrast to socioeconomic factors, gender divisions showed minimal isolated variance. When controlling for household income and institutional type, male and female cohorts achieved comparable mean scores across both the receptive listening and productive speaking domains. This indicates that within identical socio-geographic environments, classroom exposure and instructional quality remain the primary drivers of language development, regardless of gender.

4.3 Analysis of Cross-Domain Skill Interdependencies (H_{03})

The experimental results reject the independence assumed by **H_{03}**, demonstrating that listening comprehension and oral speaking proficiency are deeply interconnected parts of a student's broader language processing system.

Linguistic error analysis revealed that a student's speaking difficulties are frequently rooted in listening and decoding challenges. For example, during the listening comprehension tests, many vernacular-medium students struggled to distinguish between acoustically similar word pairs (such as *sip/ship*, *fourteen/forty*, or *was/wash*). This lack of sound discrimination led directly to errors in written recall and speech production. When students cannot accurately perceive the phonetic boundaries of the target language, they are unable to reproduce those sounds correctly in speech. Rather than advancing along separate tracks, receptive and productive oral skills develop through continuous interaction, where challenges in acoustic discrimination create immediate bottlenecks in spoken delivery and conversational interaction.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This empirical study demonstrates that the English listening and speaking challenges faced by vernacular-medium students in the Bharatpur district are shaped by a combination of institutional practices, socioeconomic factors, and underlying cognitive processes. The evidence shows that low oral proficiency is not caused by individual learning limitations. Rather, it is driven by systemic issues: an over-reliance on teacher-centered, translation-heavy instruction, a lack of immersive language environments, and the economic challenges faced by students in rural Rajasthan.

The dominance of regional-medium translation methods often leaves students with a passive understanding of grammar rules but limited functional communication skills. Additionally, deep-seated socioeconomic factors, such as low household income and limited parental literacy, elevate psychological barriers and restrict access to language materials outside the classroom. Finally, the clear connections found between acoustic

discrimination and speech production show that errors in speaking are often rooted in phonological challenges during listening. To improve language outcomes, educational strategies must move away from rigid, exam-focused memorization frameworks toward comprehensive, interactive approaches that treat language learning as an active communicative process.

5.2 Policy and Pedagogical Recommendations

To address these oral communication vulnerabilities, the study proposes the following targeted interventions:

- **Transition to Task-Based, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT):** Schools must move away from traditional grammar-translation methods in favor of interactive language practices. Classrooms should routinely incorporate structured group discussions, role-plays, and communicative language games that encourage active student participation and reduce speaking anxiety.
- **Implementation of Systematic Acoustic Discrimination Training:** To address widespread listening challenges, curriculum designs should include regular ear-training exercises using simple audio tools. Focused practice with minimal pairs (such as *fourteen/forty* or *sip/ship*) can help students build precise phonetic boundaries, improving both listening comprehension and spoken accuracy.
- **Lowering the Affective Filter Through Formative Grading:** Language assessments should prioritize meaning transmission and conversational flow over rigid grammatical perfection during oral tasks. Creating a supportive, low-anxiety classroom environment helps students overcome the fear of making mistakes, encouraging active speech production.
- **Targeted Support for Economically Disadvantaged Cohorts:** Educational institutions should offer focused remedial programs and oral workshops for students from low-income and first-generation literate households. Providing low-anxiety, resource-rich language spaces within school hours can help bridge the gap created by limited resources at home.

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