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Difficulties Faced by B.Sc. Agriculture Students in Learning and Use of English

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The present study investigates the English language difficulties faced by B.Sc. Agriculture students studying at State Agricultural Universities (SAUs) in Maharashtra State. The difficulties of the first year students of the Faculty of Agriculture at the SAUs have particularly been considered for the present study. All the four agricultural universities in Maharashtra follow common English language syllabus for all the degree courses which predominantly teaches the general communication skills. In the syllabus the main emphasis is given on writing skills right from paragraph writing to technical report writing but, less importance is given to other three skills of language i.e. reading, speaking and listening comprehension. The students admitted to the same degree course are mainly from rural area. The standard of the students in English proficiency is unsatisfactory because of the deprived situation of English language teaching at rural and even, urban settings. Therefore, the present study attempts to explore the difficulties of these students because at the degree level the medium of instruction is English and students have to be proficient at the English use a great deal.

Introduction

The fact cannot be denied that English has become the language of science and technology in the global scenario for teaching the same. Taking into consideration the worldwide scenario, a large number of students today are taking admission to professional scientific courses than in the past. Hence, it is quite necessary to find out the difficulties of these students in English usage for ascertaining their excellence in today's education system. In India also, English is extensively used in the field of science and technology. This is also true for agricultural education. In our country agricultural education is getting more and more importance as agriculture is considered as the backbone of the Country, and hence, the present study is important one.

Taking into consideration the importance of use of English the study was conducted with following specific objectives.

1. To study the educational background of the students,

2. To examine the attitude of the students towards present English language course, and
3. To ascertain the constraints faced by the students in learning English.

Methodology

The study was conducted at the eight agricultural colleges under all the four SAUs. From each university two colleges, one constituent and one private affiliated, were chosen. From each college fifty students were selected randomly. The questionnaire was the major instrument used in collecting data of this study. It is employed to collect information from the perspectives of the students regarding issues undertaken. The analytical process of the questionnaire device was reckoned under four main headings.

- Background of the students,
- Students' English education prior to undergraduate level,
- Difficulties faced by the students in English at their degree programme.
- Suggestions sought from the students on the current English language teaching.

Interpretation of the data obtained

Background of the students

Section one of the questionnaire is an introductory phase; it encouraged the informants to provide some personal information about themselves and previous education received. "In the investigation of a certain issue, it is very important to constitute a wide picture about the background of the subjects of such research" (Evans, 1984).

The table below illustrates the distribution of the candidates according to sections, gender and background of previous education.

Table (1): Distribution of the informants of the study

No. of Respondents	Gender		Background	
	Male	Female	Rural	Urban
400	226	174	315	85
Percentage	56.50	43.50	78.75	21.25

The student informants of the current questionnaire instrument were 400. The sample was comprised of 56.50 per cent male and 43.50 per cent female students. Majority of them were from rural background. As a matter of fact, there is a great correspondence among the responses of the informants regarding the evaluation of the agriculture English materials and learners' needs. Therefore, the comparative process between genders was avoided, because there is a slight difference, which does not need a group-wise procedure.

The vast number of students (78.75 per cent) were from rural area, whereas a small number (21.25 per cent) from urban settings. Most of the students finished their higher secondary education in the academic years 2011-12 and 2012-13.

The age of the respondents ranged between 17 to 22 years. Maximum number of the students were of the age of 19 (38.00 per cent) followed by the age of 18 (24.50 per cent) and 20 (23.00 per cent). 10.50 per cent of the students were of the age 21. The students of the age

of 17 and 22 were 03.00 per cent and 02.00 per cent, respectively. Hence, the respondents of the present work under study were matured youths, so such learners definitely perceive their precise needs.

They studied English ranging from 7 to 14 years. This is because the respondents are from different situations. The students from English medium school studied English language subject for 12 or 14 years. The students from regional language medium (Marathi, Hindi, Urdu, Telugu) studied English for 7 to 8 years; the introduction of English language course varies from state to state. In some states it was introduced in 5th standard, while in other it was introduced in 6th standard.

The following three tables give information on the medium of instruction at primary, secondary and higher secondary education of the respondent students.

Table (2): Language-wise distribution of students at primary school level

Sl. No.	Language	No. of students	Percentage
1.	English	56	14.00
2.	Marathi	320	80.00
3.	Hindi	16	04.00
4.	Urdu	4	01.00
5.	Telugu	4	01.00
	Total	400	100.00

Table (3): Language-wise distribution of students at secondary school level

Sl. No.	Language	No. of students	Percentage
1.	English	158	39.50
2.	Marathi	194	48.50
3.	Semi-English	30	07.50
4.	Hindi	10	02.50
5.	Urdu	4	01.00
6.	Telugu	4	01.00
	Total	400	100.00

Table (4): Language-wise distribution of students at higher secondary level

S. No.	Language	No. of students	Percentage
1.	English	382	95.50
2.	Hindi	18	04.50
	Total	400	100.00

The percentage of the students in the English subject at the higher secondary level ranged from 45.00 per cent to 95.00 per cent, while at secondary level it ranged from 44.00 per cent to 96.00 per cent.

Table (5): Skill wise difficulties faced by the students in English as the medium of instruction

Sl. No.	Category (Difficulties)	Respondents (n= 154)	
		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Reading	22	14.28
2.	Writing	16	10.38
3.	Speaking	94	61.01
4.	Listening	22	14.28
	Total	154	100.00

The above table shows that the students had major difficulty in speaking (61.01 per cent) followed by reading, listening and writing (14.28 per cent), (14.28 per cent) and (10.38 per cent), respectively.

The next question in the questionnaire device was related to the language of reference books for agricultural studies. All the students unanimously told that the reference books were in English.

The next question asked to the students was to express their difficulties in English usages, which were the hindrance in their English communication. This question is based on Allwright's Deficiency Analysis (1983), which suggests the eliciting the learners' difficulties as a source for establishing the learners' language needs. In this respect, the students were asked whether they regularly use English in the classroom. Their answer was as under.

- a. Yes (178) 44.50%
- b. No (222) 55.50%

In this context, the adverb of frequency 'regularly' means the opposite of 'rarely'. The respondents of this study are the learners of English as a second language to which they have limited exposure to practice it, hence just less than half responded negatively. The negative answers were anticipated, therefore, they were asked to state reasons for the deficiency in proper sequence from the most important to the least as in the following by giving scores 5 to 1 i.e. in descending order according to the importance of the reason in the brackets provided.

- A. I don't have adequate knowledge of general English that's why I am not fluent at English.
- B. I don't have adequate knowledge of agricultural English, which may help me to interact in agricultural context.
- C. My pronunciation is not clear enough that others may not understand me.
- D. I am very shy at making mistakes.
- E. Other reasons

The table given hereafter shows the scores regarding the above mentioned difficulties ranging from the most important constraint to the least one.

Table (6): Distribution of scores among the constraints of the English implementation.

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	%
	-X5	-X4	-X3	-X2	-X1		
A	40/200	32/128	38/114	22/44	56/56	542	27.1
B	8/40	28/112	50/150	42/84	30/30	416	20.8
C	14/70	26/104	40/120	50/100	36/36	430	21.5
D	8/40	58/232	20/60	38/72	38/38	382	19.1
E	20/100	24/96	22/66	20/40	24/24	326	16.3

There is a difference between reasons A “General English” and No. B “Agricultural English”. The former got the highest score average (27.10 per cent).

As shown in the above table, the need to require competency in general English proficiency seems to be most important in order to use English effectively even in specialized disciplines such as agricultural stream. Also, the lack of agricultural English language is another constraint that hinders the agriculture learners to use English in agricultural context. This is ascribed to the learners who are in their first year and at this stage they have not gained sufficient agricultural vocabulary to enable them to either properly comprehend or use agricultural terminology.

Subject specific language enables students to express linguistic elements and activities relevant to specific specialization (Dudley – Evans and Johns, 1991).

There is a correlation between the two language aspects, i.e. general English phase and agricultural English phase. They seem to be of, by and large, equal importance for the learners of agriculture studies.

Some respondents gave other reasons such as “very few individuals to communicate with”, “other students speak in local language”, “teachers were not skilled to teach properly”, “other students don’t understand English.” Some also said that teachers were using high level English that they could not understand. These constraints place students in a passive position of interactive English communication.

As regards difficulties, the students were asked whether the application of the mother tongue might help the learners to understand agriculture lectures, seminars and discussions in the practical field. They had given some options by using the adverbs of frequency, which would determine the extent of the use of mother tongue. It was explained to the questionnaire respondents that ‘Always’ refer to the wide use the mother tongue, ‘occasionally’ demonstrate little use of the mother tongue, ‘rarely’ is used to express the application of the mother tongue to a very limited extent.

It was pointed out that the students who have serious difficulties in understanding the lectures and discussions in the agricultural context would select the opinion ‘Always’ whereas those, whose English proficiency was fair, would prefer to choose ‘never’.

Table (7) illustrates the result of performance for using the English in the teaching learning process or discussion in the fieldwork in seminars.

Table (7): Application of the English in teaching learning process as opined by the students

Always	50.00%
Sometimes	34.50%
Occasionally	10.50%
Rarely	03.00%
Never	02.00%

From table 7 it is seen that exactly half (50.00 per cent) of the student informants opined teachers to prefer use of English always in the classroom, while more than one-third (34.50 per cent) to use English sometimes and nearly one-tenth (10.50 per cent) teachers to use English occasionally in the classroom. A very less number of students expected teachers to use students' mother tongue very rarely and never.

The learners of the agriculture discipline need great access to English in order to keep up with the fresh developments in the agricultural field as English is accepted internationally as the language of science.

The next section of questions is related with attitude and motivation. When a learner is motivated by the language course, it indicates that the programme meets learners' needs, and if the learner is not motivated by the language course; it can be regarded as evidence that such programme does not match the accurate needs of the candidates.

Moreover there is a link between motivation and learning. Without motivation learning is not likely to take place. Casual relationship between motivation and learning is reciprocal (Mugglestone, 1977). In the history of experimental psychology, the problem of motivation and the problem of learning have been intimately linked. Motivation is highest when is seen to be great usefulness to the learners (Kadha, 2000).

Accordingly students' attitude and motivation should be investigated in relation to learning and needs. In this respect, the questionnaire instrument included three items.

Here students were asked whether they like to attend all the English classes. The information on which is given in the following table.

- a. Yes (372) 93.00%
- b. No (28) 07.00%

The following table illustrates the negative response of the students and the reasons thereof.

Table (8): perception of the students towards English classes

English taught in the class is very difficult	02.50%
English classes are boring	04.50%
English classes are not obligatory	02.50%
English course is a non-credit course	02.00%
English taught is not useful to me	00.50%
English course is unnecessary at this stage of learning	00.00%
Other	03.50%

From the above table, it is observed that negligible number of students don't like to attend English classes. This demonstrates that the students were interested in learning the English material in use.

Responding to other reasons, students said, "difficulty to understand higher level English", "no regular classes were held and the teacher didn't teach", "teachers were not competent," etc.

The following table (9) describes the students' motivation towards English language course in use.

The students were asked to state how much they like the English course in comparison to the subjects of specialization. Their response is given in the table below.

Table (9): Motivation towards the current English course

Sl. No.	Category (Score)	Respondents (n= 400)	
		Frequency	Percentage
1.	The most (3)	058	14.50
2.	Same as others (2)	286	71.50
3.	Least of all (1)	056	14.00
	Average: 2.00 Total	400	100.00

The above table shows that more than two-third of the learners (71.50 per cent) rated English same as the other courses. More than one-tenth (14.50 per cent) liked this course most in comparison to other courses of specialization. While, more than one-tenth (14.00 per cent) liked it least of all. The average score came to 2.00. This clearly indicates usefulness of the course is high for agriculture students.

The next question in this aspect was about the time allotted for the English course. The following table shows the views of the learners in this regard.

Table (10): Views of the students on time allotted to English course

Sl. No.	Category (score)	Respondents (n= 400)	
		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Increase in the time allotted (3)	162	40.50
2.	Retaining the time (2)	208	52.00
3.	Decrease in the time (1)	030	07.50
	Average: 2.33 Total	400	100.00

Table 10 shows that more than two-fifth (40.50 per cent) students were in favour of increasing the time allotted to the English language course. While, just more than half (52.00 per cent) learners said to retain the time and negligible (07.50 per cent) number of students said to decrease the time. The average score found to be 2.33 indicating proper time allotment.

As shown above, there is an agreement among the responses of the above three items , which establishes high constancy and the accuracy of the data obtained.

The next question asked to the learners regarding the usefulness of the course for them. In response, a large majority of the students said the course was useful to them.

- a. Yes (380) 95.00%
b. No (20) 5.00%

Considering some difficult contents in the syllabus like technical report writing, the learners were asked whether they found some contents difficult to understand at this level of learning i.e. during the first semester. The responses were given below

- a. Yes (182) 45.50%
b. No (218) 54.50%

They further given options to come out of this difficulty. The following table gives information in this regard.

Table (11): Views of learners regarding difficult contents in the syllabus

Sl. No.	Category	Respondents (n= 182)	
		Frequency	Percentage
1.	Remove the difficult contents	44	24.17
2.	Retain all the contents because they are useful	80	43.97
3.	Shift the course to the higher semester	58	31.86
	Total	182	100.00

Table 11 shows that students had varied views regarding the difficult contents in the course. Less than one-fourth (24.17 per cent) of the students expressed desire to remove the difficult contents and less than one-third (31.86 percent) to shift the course to the higher semester of the degree course. More than two-fifth (43.97 per cent) said to retain the contents as they are useful. Less than two-third of the respondents (54.50 per cent) had no difficulties in understanding even the difficult contents in the course.

Conclusions

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the students of agriculture faculty face fair difficulties in learning English as they were not taught and learnt English seriously during their primary, secondary and higher secondary education. Hence, a considerable number of students didn't use English regularly in the classroom at degree level, which is expected from them as the medium of instruction at the degree level is English. The learners need to acquire competency in general and agricultural English for better studies and to cope with the fresh developments in agricultural sciences all over the world. The students expressed major concern about their spoken English; they faced difficulties in written English also. Though, they are motivated by the English language course at their degree level, there is a scope of improving it according to their needs.

Recommendations/Implications

1. Fundamentals of the English language being taught to the students should be made more comprehensible at primary stage of education and then in future it should be revitalized by implementing appropriate teaching-learning process.

2. Policy makers may think of introducing English improvement programmes in the present educational system for improving the overall English proficiency of the students at the primary, secondary and higher secondary level of learning.
3. The present English language course should be modified in order to improve students' English language skills.
4. The SAUs may consider introducing the structural course to the very first semester of the degree programme as the students are in the want of learning basics of English language.

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