



Overcoming challenges in using English in Higher Education: The Case of JNU

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Abstract:

To perform well in academics, students pursuing higher education need to apprehend and enunciate their ideas in English. It is still a *foreign* language for most students in India. The reading material circulated by faculty in higher education is usually in the English language. For students, the insurmountable barrier is to build knowledge in their respective disciplines, but in a language other than their native language. Deciphering the semantics and syntactical structures of complex sentences is a Herculean task for them. Writing academic assignments to express in a lesser-known language, further handicaps them. The proposed study investigates the challenges faced by students in transition (from the native or regional language) to English as a medium of instruction and in their pursuit to use English for academic purposes in higher education. This research suggests remedial measures after a thorough analysis of the data. (*The study is a part of Universities with Potential for Excellence (UPE-II) a Project funded by Jawaharlal Nehru University.*)

Key Words: Academic Writing, Higher Education, English for Academic Purposes, English Language Teaching, English as First Language, and English as a Foreign Language.

Introduction

Students pursuing higher education in India face several challenges when it comes to English. Despite holding sound knowledge in prominent areas of their disciplines, the language of expression in higher education, both verbal and written form is usually English, which blocks their capacity to comprehend and delve deeper into research. Students from across the country apply to premier institutions to pursue their research interests, and secure seats in such institutions based on their performance in the entrance examination and degrees earned from previous institutions. However, throughout their education from early years to graduation, little or no emphasis is laid on building English proficiency of the students. These learners are proficient in their native language, but have to struggle with English primarily



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because most disciplines share their literature in English to reach most scholars globally. At this juncture, the students who have had limited exposure to English, suddenly find themselves additionally struggling with the language, along with assimilating higher concepts of their respective domains. For most of these students, English is still a foreign language.

Moreover, some are the first-generation English language learners in their family, with practically no exposure to English for regular or academic work. First language is defined as “the language first acquired as a child (mother tongue, native language), or preferred in a +multilingual situation” (Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*). Later, Crystal demarcates the difference between the first language, second language and foreign language with an example in *Dictionary of Linguistics & Phonetics*, as “first language (sc. mother-tongue) is distinguishable from second language (a language other than one’s mother-tongue used for a special purpose, e.g. for education, government) distinguishable in turn from foreign language (where no such special status is implied) – though the distinction between the latter two is not universally recognized....” (Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics & Phonetics* 256). Such scholars face several challenges and try to overcome it themselves. What are these challenges, and how do learners cope with the situation? Universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) have special centres like Linguistic Empowerment Cell which continually work to address the academic needs of students who feel disadvantaged because of their inadequate hold on the English language. This work examines the challenges faced in English by students pursuing higher education in JNU. The research also suggests remedial measures to benefit students and Universities.

Methodology

To investigate the problems faced by scholars in the English language in higher education, a mixed-method approach was applied, integrating the qualitative and quantitative approach to research. The test instrument used for the current study consists of a questionnaire and an informal interview with the respondents. The test instrument was piloted, and after initial feedback, was modified to serve the purpose of this study.



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The test instrument consisted of a series of questions for the learners comprising of the detailed linguistic profile; the educational and professional background of their family members; English and other languages as a medium of instruction at various points in time; and outlook towards English and other languages. The second part of the research tool focussed on understanding the challenges in language usage by the participants in their higher education academic life and how they cope with them. This section covered a series of ten, one-to-one informal interview questions. The questions focused on the problems faced by learners in language, while attending lectures, reading academic literature suggested by respective professors, language preference for writing their semester examinations; the role and use of social media in enhancing English, and preference of English over other languages in expressing themselves on the social network. The purpose of the study was shared with each respondent. The data collected was treated with confidentiality, and each respondent was tagged with a unique case number to maintain anonymity. To maintain heterogeneity across disciplines, the data was collected from multiple schools and centres of the University, however, as the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies offers graduate courses to students, graduates who participated in the study belonged to this specific school. Further, the willingness to participate in the research was kept open before approaching the participants.

Discussion

A total of 60 respondents participated in this study. All the participants who actively participated were JNU students. Out of these 60 participants, 22 were male, and 38 were female. Further, the program of study pursued by this sample comprised of 12 students pursuing their graduate studies, 31 students in post-graduation and 17 scholars pursuing MPhil and PhD degrees from JNU. Since students from various social backgrounds are given an equal opportunity in the University to pursue their academic courses, a category-wise percentage of the participants indicate that 27% chose not to share their social background, 30% were from general category, 43% from reserved categories. The category-wise quota is unique in the Indian educational system to make it an inclusive education for all.



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Further, as students come to pursue their higher education from different states across the country, the participants in the study belonged to 14 different states from India. Out of which 22% were from Bihar, 18% from Uttar Pradesh, and 18% from Delhi and Haryana. The heterogeneity of the sample distribution is reflected in the participation of the respondents from several states of India like Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Nagaland, Odisha, Uttarakhand, and Punjab. Also, the age distribution of the respondents reflects that nearly half of the respondents were 23 to 27 years old, and overall, the participants belong to the age group from 18 to 32 years of age. This suggests that the respondents were mature to share their reflections about language(s).

The occupational backgrounds of the respondents' families suggest that usually the males of the family are involved with work while the women are restricted as homemakers. The data shows that 97% of the parents of these respondents, especially the fathers employed in private sectors, followed by jobs in the government sector and agriculture, whereas, in contrast, only 12% of mothers were working.

The language identity of the sample reflects 52% of the participants considered Hindi as their native language alone, whereas for 6% Hindi with other languages like Urdu, Magadhi and Maithali were their native language. The additional 42% of respondents considered their regional language as a native language, which included 17 other languages (15 Indian and 2 foreign languages). Besides, 81% of the participants believed that English is a foreign language to them. In contrast, only 8% of participants considered English as a second language, and 11% described English as a 'working language' to them.

The information collected from one-to-one interviews reveals that 18 out of 60 participants reported that their classroom lectures were in the English language, whereas 19 reported that another language(s) along with English was used in classes to teach in their respective disciplines. Since the students find English to be a foreign language to them, 32 responded in the affirmative, stating that on several occasions they requested the faculty member to go slow or repeat specific points during the lectures, whereas 9 respondents never



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asked instructors out of hesitation. The informal one-to-one discussion reveals other intricate details about the challenges faced in English by students. A majority of the students reported that the medium of instruction followed by the professors in the classroom was primarily English. Still, they often shifted between English and Hindi as a medium of instruction. The respondents share “I never asked to Professor because all student understood except me, then it’s my problem, so I try to understand by myself. Sometimes feel difficult to understand word”, “Sometimes I’m not able to understand the whole sentence but I get it, the essence of the sentence”, “Yes asked many time, then Sir explain in Hindi those things”, “I completed my education in Hindi but when I came in JNU everything is in English so sometimes I never understand single word in the class, sometimes I feel lingual discrimination in the class.” Overall, 9 respondents accepted that they never asked the professors to repeat a point or go slow even if the concept was difficult for them, the language was difficult, however, on the contrary, 31 respondents reported that their professors had made attempts to use multiple languages or switch between language(s) in the classroom to ensure that the students understood the concept.

On being asked to share their initial experience while reading the suggested readings (additional reading material given by the faculty for students to build their knowledge in the discipline-specific concept), 11 reported that they faced difficulty in understanding the concepts, for them the ideas in the suggested readings were academically challenging. In contrast, 5 respondents said that initially, the recommended readings were tough to understand; however, once they started reading, they began to build an understanding of the concept. Some respondents share their plight, “difficult to understand the reading materials even sometimes feel how I survive in this fully English environment”, “something is not easy in my reading material like some handouts of English language was tough even not able to understand that material.”

Since the University has the provision to choose a language as a medium to write the final semester examinations, almost all students preferred to write their semester exams in the



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English language. However, a selected few chose to write their exams in Hindi over English, due to lack of command in English.

Today, social media is a platform where most students engage in expressing their opinions and sharing their views. They were asked for their language of preference both in reading and reverting to messages on social media. The study found that the maximum number of students used Facebook followed by WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram, Google and other social media as their preference for the language of interaction was only 'Hindi and English' followed by 'Only English'.

Further, in situations where the students wanted to express themselves in English, only 11 reported that they tried to talk in English especially by thinking over what they would be speaking on and mentally rehearsing it in their native language beforehand and then converting it into English. Others preferred their native language or a mix of Hindi and English (Hinglish) to converse. Often, while expressing themselves in English in a particular situation, the respondents felt inadequate, faced difficulty while putting words together while focusing on the language, speaking slowly, using simple lexis; due to their limited capacity in expressing in the English language. The respondents shared, "I try to speak in English as much as possible but whenever I could not find myself comfortable to speak more, stop in conversation because feel fear to speak wrong sentences among the friends and colleagues", "feel very hesitant in time of speaking in English. I can read and write English but face problem while I try to speak", "sometime it happened because English is not my mother tongue. Feel uncomfortable among them and tried to keep quiet and listen to things, try to explain my thought in simple language make sentence in my mind and then start to talk", "I feel inferiority among the people if people are more fluent in English, I talk in Hindi", "I can't speak in English so feel very shy to speak English among the people sometimes I try to speak in English slowly slowly", "mistakes happened but it's okay because English is not my first language, its foreign language so I think without any mistakes you can never learn any language", "it happened many times I feel hesitation that's why I quit that place but if I am



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familiar with people I start conversing with them and were not able to express myself asked them how to say this sentence.”

Most of the respondents shared some of the factors which played a significant role in improving their English and the strategies employed by them. Seventeen respondents give credit to their schooling while 16 reported that reading English books, novels, and stories help them in improving their command in English. The respondents share “Reading English book and communicate in English in JNU most of the people speak in English so the surrounding also give me a space to communicate more and more”, “when I was in Gurukul, I made a strategy that I speak Sanskrit in the morning and English in the evening time”, “continuous speaking and learning tense helped me a lot to make sentences and speak in English”, “yes made strategy in form of watching American dramas for this purpose only”, “JNUSU [JNU student union] and JNUTA [JNU teacher association] lectures [talks] and reading materials of JNU after reading I have learnt so many words and sentences of English language”. Out of 60 respondents, 23 laid emphases on reading books, newspapers, articles and text to improve their English. Sixteen believed that frequent short interactions in English, communication with a friend or a foreigner or conversation with seniors from different cultural backgrounds helped in improving English; and 13 believed that listening to the news, speeches, in English helped them. In contrast, others felt that learning English grammar was crucial in helping them to gain command over the English language.

To improve English language skills, 50% of respondents feel that their centres in their respective schools of the University can introduce various language empowerment programmes. In contrast, the other 50 % were ignorant of any such classes being conducted in the University. This indicates that such courses need to be propagated among the students so that they can benefit from these classes, which are exclusively designed and run for their English academic writing needs.

Conclusion



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The importance of Academic English at the University level gives an account of the challenges faced in usage of Academic English by scholars pursuing their higher education. The study finds that to deal with the situation scholars put in extra hours and exceptional efforts to understand their discipline specific concepts in the English language. During the lectures, these respondents abstain from asking questions in English, out of hesitation. Keeping up with the pace of the lecture is another issue for them as it becomes difficult for them to decipher the lecture in English and keep with the pace, both at the same time. Despite the problems faced, the respondents acknowledge the efforts of their professors for using multiple languages in the classroom to ensure that they can reach out to each student. It was also found that readings or supporting reading material circulated by the professors was in English and the respondents feel academically challenged. These readings are discipline specific and cater to a specific audience in the field. Further, the respondents share their inability or lack of confidence in taking their semester exams in English. Some of the notable factors in improving command over English shared by the respondents was the need to interact in English on social platforms, communicate with friends, actively participate in interactive activities like discussions; watch English movies, videos, TV channels; and listen to songs and radio in English.

Academic English classes for scholars, while entering universities to pursue their higher education is essentially required. These courses should be introduced as a core course to equip all scholars entering higher education with basic proficiency in English, especially academic English.

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