

## AN EVALUATIVE STUDY OF THE AURAL SKILLS OF UNDERGRADUATE AGRICULTURAL STUDENTS AT THEIR ENTRY LEVEL

*K. Thangaraj & M. Kalapana*

*Assistant Professors, Anbil Dharmalingam Agricultural College and Research Institute, Thiruchurapalli, Tamil Nadu, India*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Listening' stands first in the order of language learning, and about one third of our time is spent in listening during the process of communication. Aural skills, being a receptive skill, is rarely taught and learnt as an individual skill. In order to examine this little studied skill, a university sub-project was undertaken to test the aural skills of undergraduate agricultural students with interactive software at their entry level. The test was conducted at the Digital Language Laboratory with Digital Linguistic Mentor (DLM) software in Anbil Dharmalingam Agricultural College and Research Institute, Tiruchirappalli, one of the constituent colleges of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU), India. The lessons for evaluation were chosen from Cambridge IELTS Text, volume -6, presuming that it is the level meant for intermediate level. 16 boys and 72 girls, each in a batch of 20, representing from six different Indian states have participated in this study and the results are analysed and presented in this paper.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Aural Skills, Listening Skills, Language Laboratory, ESL*

### **INTRODUCTION**

'Listening' stands in the frontline of communication activity, and it is the first skill of any language learning. Better listening skills facilitate students to achieve academic accomplishments and acquire good prospects in their career. Listening is the only skill "being tested without being taught and it is a skill area that is often tested but rarely taught." (Field1997). Since listening is a receptive skill, its assessment is often conveniently ignored in most occasions. Buck notes that listening is "one of the least understood, least developed and yet one of the important areas of language testing and assessment" (Buck 2001). Further, he adds the reason for its laxity, "due to the practical complexities of providing spoken texts, it is neglected in many language learning situations" (Buck 2001). In the process of communication, listening is a major activity for which more than one third of time is spent in listening, yet, "we often comprehend and retain only one fourth of what we hear" (Dick Lee 1993). Still, due form of attention is not paid to listening. Better listening is the root of most 'soft skills', such as negotiation, problem solving and leadership.

### **Significance of the Study**

Listening stands first in the order of language learning; nevertheless it is "absolutely a neglected 'Cinderella skill', a prime language skill tested without teaching. It is high time that the language teachers should understand this vacuum in language teaching and testing as well" (Buck, 2001). Though receptive and productive skills are taught and tested together, listening skills are rarely taught or learnt as an individual accomplishment, and mostly tests to evaluate the communicative skills are

conducted by combining several skills together. Anne Lazaraton, trenchantly remarks, “testing of aural proficiency is the area arguably the most important of the traditional four skill areas. Unfortunately, it is also the most problematic to measure” Anne Lazaretto, 1990). In the combination of acquiring macro skills, listening is an inseparable part as “mimicry involves listening and speaking; dictations combine listening and writing; multiple choice can combine listening and reading; oral answers include listening or reading and speaking, to name a few combinations, (Gail King, 1981) and hence listening is the base skill for the rest of macro skills in language learning. Micro skills in prosodies like stress, intonation, volume, tone and pausing and other micro skills of phonemes, collocations and phrasal units share a major contribution in conveying the exact meaning to the listener.

### **Background of the Study**

Though professional students perform well in academic activities, mostly they are helpless while listening to native speakers in Standard English. This is because English language learners in India are, generally, less exposed to listening materials as compared to reading materials. Having felt the far-reaching significance of aural skills, which is the base for the rest of the macro skills in communication, a university project was undertaken to test the aural skills of undergraduate agricultural students at their entry level with interactive software. The purpose of this study was to suggest suitable remedial measures to improve their listening ability.

A primary survey was conducted to gather the factors influencing English language learning among ESL learning. All the respondents had learned English as secondary language till their higher secondary level and none of them had been educated abroad. Half of the students hailed from rural background and the rest were urban, semi-urban. 50% of the respondents were the first generation undergraduate students in their family.

Listening to English news is a good source to learn word and sentence stress, tone and rate of speech, which are important parts of understanding spoken English. Moreover, news also introduces the student to the world that the native speaker is used to talking about. News helps to understand the emotion and attitude of the native speaker and make it easier to comprehend the difference between a statement and an interrogation.

Though four out of five students had English as the medium of instruction at their school level, just one-third of the entire group reported that they listen to English news, regularly. Phonological awareness is a prerequisite for distinguishing sound variation. This is because, there is a similar speech sound in Tamil to differentiate the consonant pairs like /ð / and /θ/, /dʒ/ and /tʃ / and vowel pairs like /æ/ and /ə/. Of the students, who reported listening to English news regularly, one in five reported paying attentions to phonemes and phonetic transcription of sounds. Two-third of the respondents had had no opportunity to know the application of stress and intonation till they entered college and were introduced to it only during the first semester study of their English course. One-fourth of the students didn't pay attention to the phonetic transcription of the words; while referring to the dictionary and the thesaurus.

Though more than five-fourths of the students are from English-medium schools, and more than four out of five students had scored above 80% in English in their higher secondary examinations, it was observed that minimum number of students (8.8%) demonstrated their aural skills nearing with international standards.

Smart phones, because of its portability and easy accessibility allow language learners to learn the right pronunciation in no time. Mobile applications help to extend the possibilities to listen and learn authentic pronunciation in

English language learning outside the classroom. A study indicates that smart-phone apps are effective in improving the listening skills of the learners (Kim, 2013). Our survey showed that two out of five students were not using any mobile applications and four out of five were not using the internet to improve their communication skills, though everyone had been given access to internet connectivity in the hostel, where all the respondents stay. Two thirds of the students neither made any special effort to improve their communication skills nor approached their mentors for suggestions to improve. Under this condition, the present study gains importance as an assessment the current status of the aural skills of the students, and an attempt to recommend for further improvement as these students will spend more than three years in the campus.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The language laboratory enables students to listen to and practice the pre-installed audio and video recordings, and the students can keenly observe the lip movement of the speakers and imitate the stress and intonation pattern of the native speakers. This technological tool is accurate for the process of assessment and ensures that the students can learn with the right accuracy and fluency. A test was administered in the digital language laboratory to a total of 88 ESL students, which comprised 16 boys and 72 girls at the intermediate level. The students were divided into batches of 20 and were called for testing. Their answers were recorded in a single sitting. The students represented six different states of India. Among the 88 students who were tested, 72 were taught in English medium and 16 in Tamil medium at their school. Though the medium of instruction of about one-third of the students was English, half of them were from rural background and they had had little access to listen to material by native English speakers.

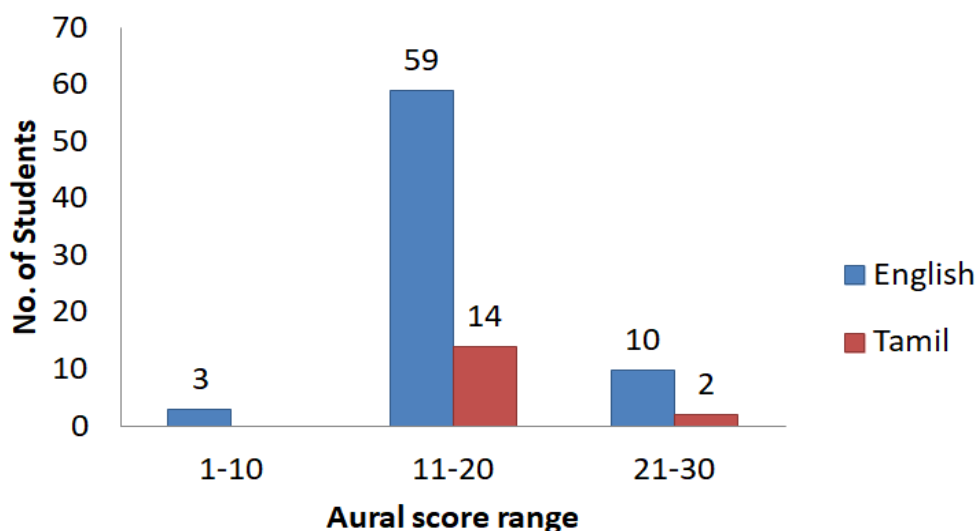
The administered listening test consisted of four sections with each section comprising ten questions. Each question carried one mark for the right answer. The first part in the first section was in the form of a 90-second conversation, followed by four questions. The students were given no time to think and write the answer, as it usually happens in any listening activity. Every student was given a sheet to record the answer. While the audio narration was playing, students had to read the questions on the screen and simultaneously answer. When each part or section of the test was over, 30 seconds of time was given to verify the answer and to take a look at the questions of the next part. During the conduct of the test, the teacher did not interfere with the students, since all the instructions were clearly given in the recorded audio.

The second section was a dialogue about college admission by narrative English-language speakers. Two minutes of the recorded audio was played and during a pause of one minute six questions had to be answered, following which the audio was continued to play to answer the rest of the questions.

The third section was 135-second dialogue about an enquiry in a parcel office and this was also voiced by native English-language speakers. These questions appeared in an integrative form where the test takers had to fill up the data and match the right answers. The last section of the activity involved a narration of social history. The first seven questions of this section appeared in a sequential order, where students had to fill up the data, and the rest of the questions involved choosing the right answer from a given set of choices.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The general conception among the teaching community and students is that underprivileged students who have been through Tamil medium have limited vocabulary and little exposure to English language. And that their aural and oral skills are limited compared to the students studied in English medium. They would have had no opportunity to communicate with others in English as all the teachers in their school, except English teachers, would have spoken in Tamil. Though the medium of instruction has a direct influence on communication skills, 87% of the students from Tamil medium schools scored between the range of 11 to 20 and the remaining 13% scored in the range of 21 to 30 and none of them fall in the range of 1 to 10. None of the students scored in the range of 30 to 40. All students from English medium background secured scores in the lower range of 1 to 10. Out of the 12 students who performed better than the rest, two were from Tamil medium. The score of the students who studied in Tamil medium were matched with those from English medium and this is presented in Fig. 1.



**Figure 1: Medium of Instruction at School.**

Usage of mobile applications helps the students learn English during their spare time. Because of the easy accessibility, anytime-anywhere portability and size of mobile phones, improving listening skills through applications has become a fun and motivated activity. Mobile applications such as *BBC learning English*, *English6mins*, *English listening and speaking* and *English speaking practice* help students improve their listening skills. These applications help them distinguish between consonant and diphthong sounds in English language. A study indicates that “repeated listening practice with authentic and meaningful learning resources through the smart phone apps can be effective to improve listening skill” (Kim, 2013). Further, online language learning sites like *manythings.org* and *ello.org* serve learners improve their aural skills. It was noted that top scorers in the test mentioned above made use of at least one mobile application for language learning in the recent past, and it directly reflects in their listening competency. Among those who performed average, 64% reported using mobile phones to enhance their aural efficiency (Fig. 2).

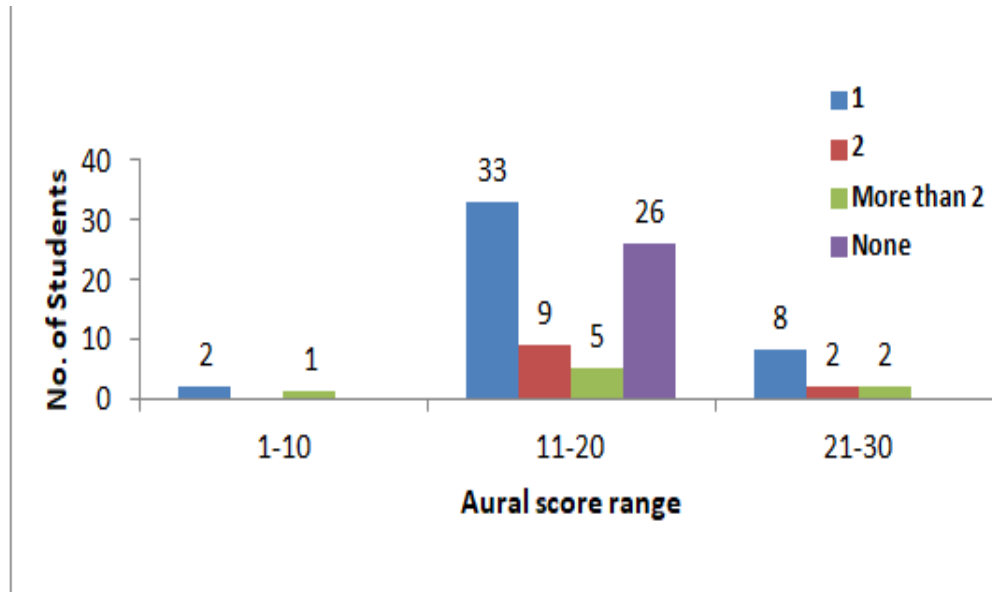


Figure 2: Usages of Mobile Apps for English Language Learning.

Listening to news in English frequently on the television and radio helps the listener to imbibe the grammatical structure, new words and expressions, extend their vocabulary, and learn proper stress and the right intonation. Moreover, it is also a good approach to train the mind to concentrate. Until students become familiar with the accent of the native speakers, the sounds of the native speakers may seem ‘strange and fast’. Besides improving the current affairs and general knowledge, studies show that “listening to the news on the radio has a positive impact on improving listening comprehension skills” (Budyana, 2018). Students who scored in the lower range reported listening to news either once in a week or rarely, and more than half of the students reported that they rarely listened to news in English (Fig.3).

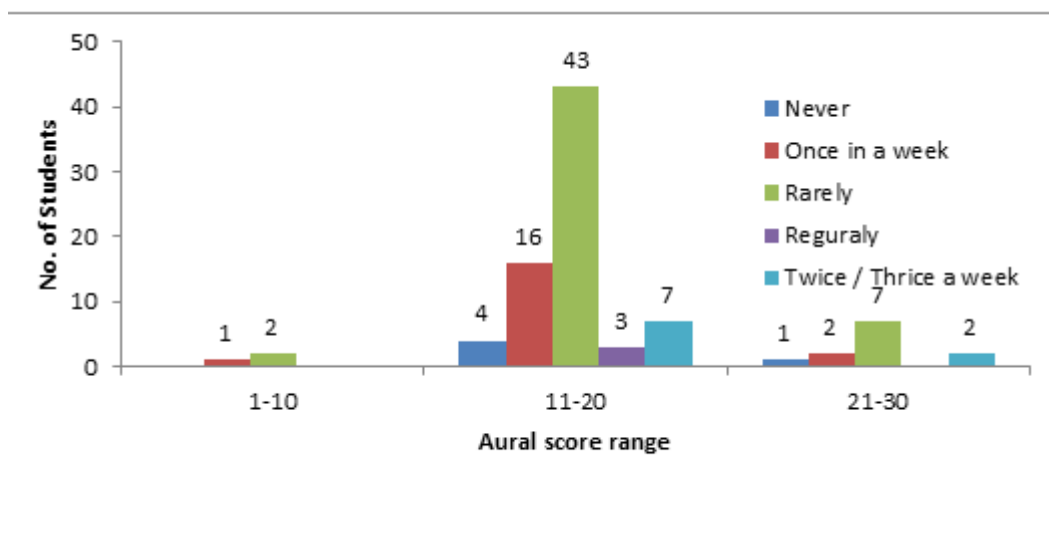
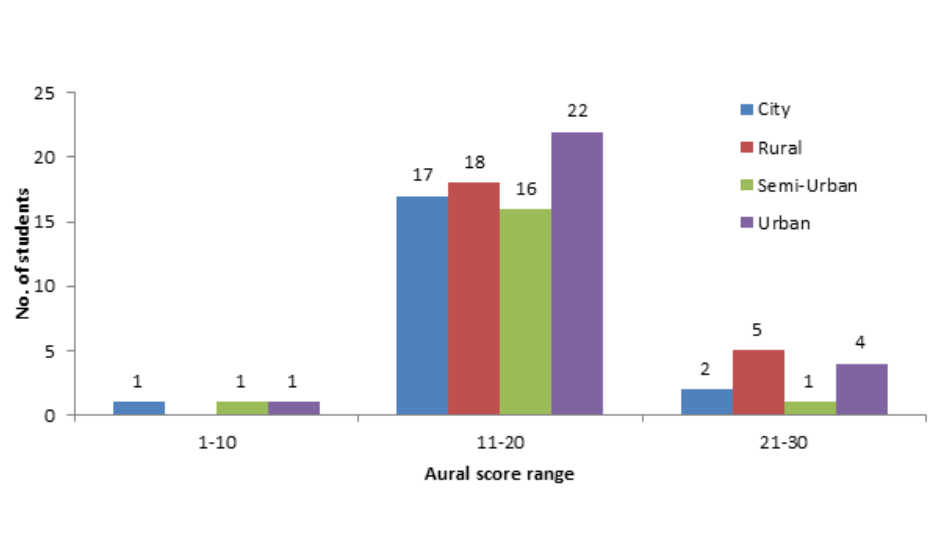


Figure 3: Listening to English News.

Though aural proficiency is said to have a direct relationship with the location of the school, the present study indicates that none of the rural students got placed in the lower score category. City-based (1.5%) and urban (3%) students were surpassed by students who had been schooled in a rural area (4.4%) in the high-score band. Rural students performed equally in the next level as well (19%). This study disproves the notion that city-based and urban students perform better in terms of aural skills (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4: Place of Study.**

## CONCLUSIONS

Since the sample population for this study included students in early entry to college level and most of them have not been trained in language laboratory earlier, the experience would have been strange for them. Moreover, the students have not been serious with the test as the marks of this test were not considered for academic grade. Since the test was taken through listening to a recorded audio, active listening which involves listening for non-verbal communication, which contributes to about half of the communication may not have happened. The International Listening Association (ILA 2012) emphasises that listening is the combination of both verbal and nonverbal, “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.” Finally, students were not allowed to seek clarification, or retake or pause during the test. Given these drawbacks, the study still seems important in drawing our attention to the need to develop aural skills among students. It is recommended that the teachers prior to moving to the language laboratory can give a model loud reading of the complete text, if it is a short passage. For a long text, they can go for a loud reading of the select passage after giving its summary. This language reading should be repeated by the students as well. The students may be encouraged to go for choir reading before taking up listening. The activity should focus on the phonological aspect like right articulation of the sounds and the right application of stress and intonation. In this context, it becomes mandatory to practice with listening activities by regularly visiting to language laboratory and listening to native speakers through mobile applications and online resources.

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