

## **Know Your Audience before You Teach: A Study on the Students of NIST**

**By**

**Tripti Mund and Dr. Arun K Behera**

National Institute of Science and Technology,  
Berhampur (Odisha) , Dept of English  
Sri sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning,  
Whitefield, Bangalore

### **Abstract**

*In a country like India, with a wide variety of differences owing to culture, region and religion directly affects the English language skills, as the language needs of the students are varied owing to their different mother tongues, the medium of school and language(s) spoken at home. It comes as a challenge to the language teachers to cope up with their language needs and leaves them in a dubious situation of what to follow - the prescribed curriculum or the language needs. In the Indian scene following the curriculum broadly means to enable the students to take the board or university examinations. The situation is even more grievous when it comes to the Engineering curriculum where the same institute may have students from many different states with their own strengths and challenges of producing language. Such situations demand the analysis of the needs of the students and restructuring the teaching methodology and teaching material by the teachers to meet true problems of the students.*

### **Introduction**

Teaching can be done by anybody but effective teaching is a skill which is based on many factors including knowing your audience and for a teacher, his/her audience is but the learner. "Remember that lectures are not about "teaching" it's all about "student learning"<sup>[1]</sup>. True it is an art where the teacher communicates their knowledge across the learner in a way that they learn. This demands the teacher to first understand their learners and then plan their lessons or modulate their syllabus according to the language needs of the students. "In order to become a great teacher is knowing your students"<sup>[2]</sup>. For a language teacher knowing a student involves a lot of factors especially when it is in an Engineering classroom as the students are linguistically and regionally more heterogeneous which, directly effects their level of English.

To effectively choose teaching methods and help students learn, you must first know something about whom you are teaching. Your students will come from very different backgrounds and have various learning needs. You may have students that graduated from

high school when they were 16 and are still minors. Or you may have students that have been out of school for 20 or 30 years. Some students may have grown up in the college town, while others may be from across the globe and speak a completely different native language.<sup>[3]</sup>

For a language teacher it poses a greater challenge to know, understand and plan a new group of learners. I have heard teachers err after a class, blaming the entire batch to be an unresponsive or a dull batch. Given the formal curriculum by the university most teachers believe in being articulate in covering the prescribed topics than understanding the needs of the students and modifying the syllabus to cater to the needs of the students. Once the language is learnt, catering to the demands of the topics in a syllabus should be easy.

Learning the importance of knowing the students before teaching, I took an initiative to know my students before I could start teaching a new batch. I developed a questionnaire to analyze the existing language skills of the first semester students of National Institute of Science and Technology (NIST) under the Biju Pattnaik University of Technology (BPUT), Odisha. The BPUT has suggested English as a part of the curriculum of Engineering students in the first and the second semesters. The topics suggested in the syllabus may have been same but as a teacher I always found a new batch very different from the previous. Hence, the questionnaire was developed to help the teachers understand and analyze the varied language skills of the students owing to the different back grounds and region they came from. The analysis was done for the BTech students who had taken admission in 2010. The analysis aimed in helping the teachers:

1. In understanding their students' English language skills
2. In enabling them to adopt the most appropriate teaching methodology
3. In identify the students who need added training to develop language skills
4. In enabling them to be able to modulate the syllabus based on the student's needs

A questionnaire was given to the students in their first English Laboratory. I preferred to know my students in the language laboratory because the laboratory syllabus of the university did not demand an examination taken by the university. The questionnaire was divided into five parts- the first part included the identity details of the students and the second part focused on their place of birth, mother tongue, medium of school and languages spoken at home. I included these three areas as they widely affect the English language skills of the students. The medium of schooling and the language spoken at home contributes to the environment where the child has been brought up, resulting in the level of English language skill of the student. The third part included the languages known by the students in their spoken, written, reading and listening form. It also included the English Language skills the students are comfortable in. This was the section where the students had to think and analyze their English language skills. In the next section the students had to think and write down their strengths and weakness in the four skills of English Language- Speaking, Writing, Listening and Reading, their attitude towards language. The last section included their expectation from the language laboratory. For

this paper I have focused in detail on the second and the third sections only. I did consider the fourth section but not with the exact number of data collected.

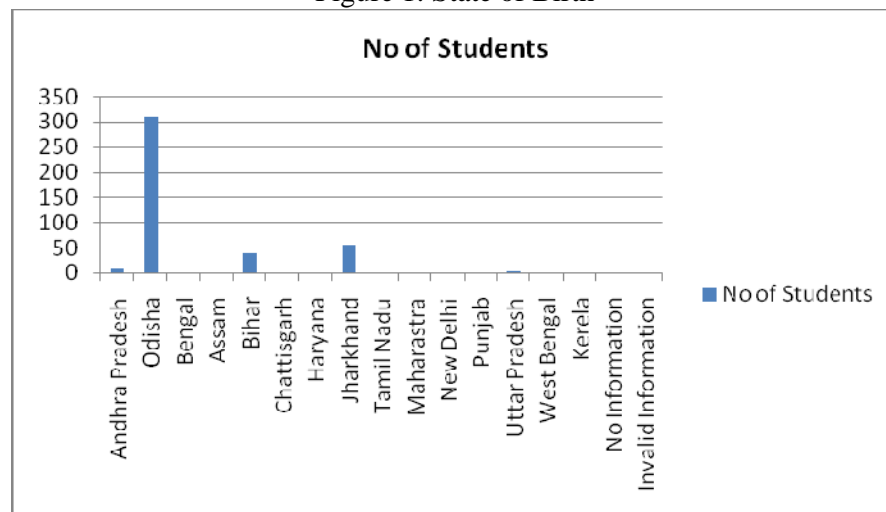
The data was intended to be collected from 450 students but only 432 students were present from whom the data could be collected.

## Results:

### State of Birth:

309 students were born in Odisha which is 71.52% and they make the majority. 97 students were born in Jharkhand and Bihar. In total there were students born in 15 different states. The state of birth may not always be the mother tongue of the learner. But it may influence the English language as a child tends to acquire the local language along with the mother tongue, as a result that their local language need may be different from their mother tongue. “Young children will become bilingual when there is a real need to communicate in two languages...”<sup>[4]</sup>. This bilingual regional tongue developed as a child could influence English at a later stage. Hence, I felt the need to analyze the state of birth too. Thus, the major environments here are Odiya as it is widely spoken in the state of Odisha and Hindi as its dialects are spoken in Bihar and Jharkhand,

Figure 1: State of Birth



### Mother Tongue:

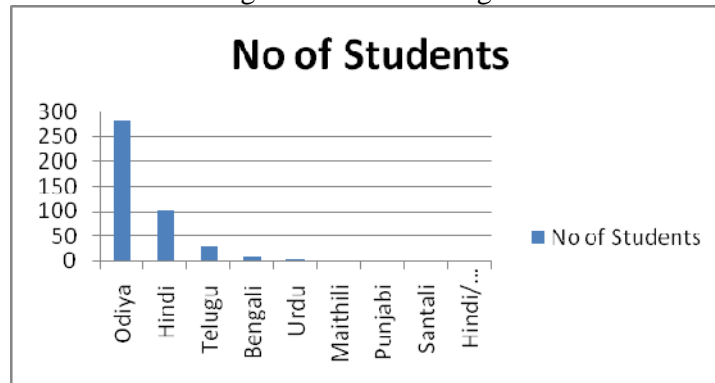
Mother tongue interferes in the learning of a foreign or second language. It kangaroos in the second language. We could observe that most learners of the target language assume that many grammatical and lexical rules of their native tongue are similar

to the foreign language; therefore, they often transfer unconsciously those rules into structures of the foreign language.<sup>[5]</sup>

Hence it comes as a necessity for the language teacher to understand the variety of mother tongues spoken by their learners. It would give a scope to the teachers in choosing their materials and adopting the right teaching methodology.

The data collected showed that 282 students i.e. 65.28% of the students had their mother tongue Odiya, 103 students i.e. 23.84% students had their mother tongue as Hindi, 29 students i.e. 6.71% had their mother tongue as Telugu. Only 9 students i.e. 2.9 % had Bengali as their mother tongue. In the remaining 9 students 4 had their mother tongue as Urdu, 2 Maithili and 1 each for Punjabi and Santali, where Santali is a dialect but here I have considered it as a language because of its variety in syntax. There was one student who had the mother tongue as both Hindi and Bengali. The graph gives the detail. 27 students born in Odisha were not Odiya, but their local language for communication could be Odiya. Thus, Oriya, Hindi and Telugu make the major mother tongues.

Figure 2: Mother Tongue

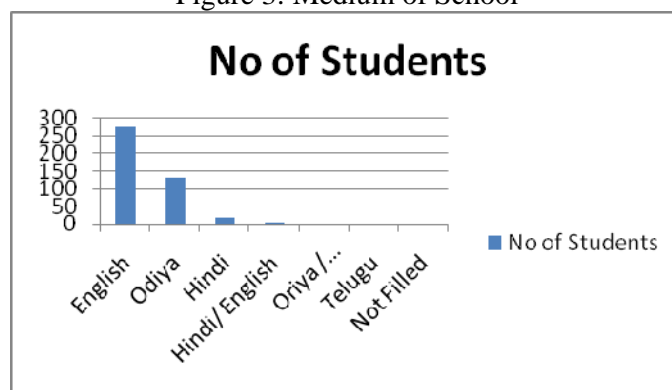


**Medium of School:**

Medium of school plays a vital role in the English language skills. It is quite expected that unlike a student who has studied in a language medium school, a student coming into an Engineering college who studied in an English medium is expected to understand and produce English language with a greater proficiency.

Students were from nine different mother tongues had attended 5 different mediums of school. Here 277 students i.e. 64.12% students have visited English Medium school. 149 i.e. 35.3% students studied in language medium schools that includes Odiya, Hindi and Telugu medium. There were 5 students who shifted from Hindi to English and Oriya to English medium. A comparison of figure 2 and figure 3 shows that even though there were no students having their mother tongue as English they studied in English medium school. Thus, English, Odiya and Hindi make the major modes of formal learning.

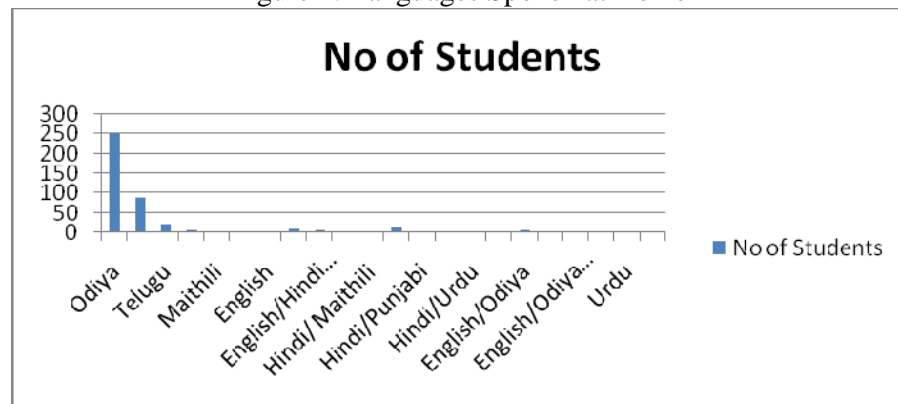
Figure 3: Medium of School



**Languages Spoken at Home:**

Odiya being the mother tongue of 282 students, it is spoken in 250 homes. But Odiya or Odiya with Hindi, English and Telugu spoken at home is amazingly in 282 houses. In contrast with only 103 students with their mother tongue being Hindi and 21 students visiting Hindi medium school at some point 125 students i.e. 28.94% students can speak in Hindi. Only two students speak only English at home, but 31 of them i.e. 7.18% spoke English along with their mother tongue or a regional language. Thus, English is spoken in very few houses and the mother tongue along with Hindi is spoken in the majority of houses, making Odiya and Telugu the major tongue at home. A comparison of figure 2, figure 3 and figure 4 shows that there is some effect of the medium of school but the mother tongue interferes a lot on the language spoken at home.

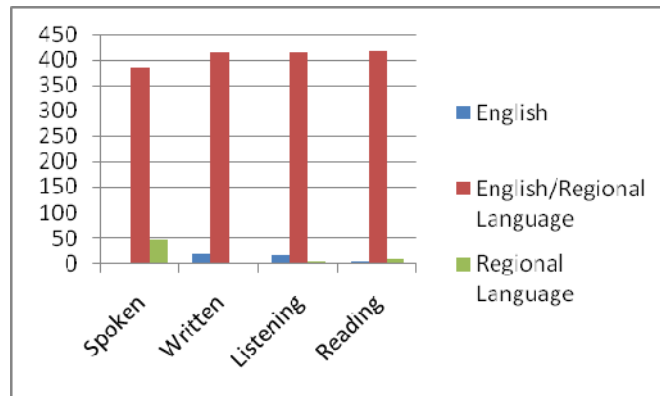
Figure 4: Languages Spoken at Home



### Languages Known:

The world knows that Indians are multilinguals. The graph in Figure 5 shows it. The number of students who can speak in English along with their regional language is 385 students, which is lower than the 414 students with the ability to write and listen in English and 420 students who can read the English language. 47 students spoke only in the regional language, but none of them use only English. When it came to writing, only one student can write only in the regional language. Thus, both in the formal environment of school and the informal and semi formal environments English is used along with a regional language. It can be very much presumed that there is either code mixing or code switching of the regional tongue with the English language.

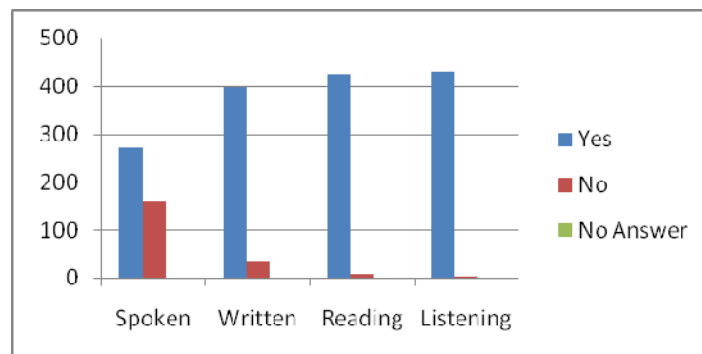
Figure 5: Languages Known



### Comfort in Expressing English Language:

The students had to think and analyse their English language proficiency to fill this up. Despite all the above factors viz. place of birth mother tongue, language spoken at home and medium of school 271 students i.e. 62.73 % students felt that they can speak in English, 379 students i.e. 91.9 % were comfortable writing in English, 425 students i.e. 98.38% could read in English, 429 students i.e. 99.31% could Listen and understand English language. When more than 90% of the students are able to read, write and listen in English it paves way to the question, why only 62.73% can speak?

Figure 6: Comfort in Expressing English Language



### Strength and Challenges on LSRW skills in English:

This was the section where the students wrote on the strengths and challenges they face when they communicate in English. The students came up with varied answers. I randomly picked 50 questionnaires and noted the most common strengths and weakness as projected by the students.

#### 1. Spoken:

Strengths:

- Confident while speaking in English
- Can speak loud
- Can speak fluently
- Clear and good pronunciation
- When prepared can speak well
- Can speak correct English

Weakness:

- Fear of crowd
- Nervousness
- Stage Fright
- Pronunciation
- Lack of words
- Grammatical Errors
- Shy of public
- Conscious about negative feedback
- Have to translate from mother tongue to English
- Problem in pronunciation

2. Written:

Strengths:

- Can write but with mistakes
- Good handwriting
- Can write simple English
- Can write but with mistakes
- Correct Spelling, grammar
- Correct use of words
- Can write good English
- Can write quickly

Weaknesses:

- Poor handwriting
- Spelling mistakes
- Grammatical Errors
- Can write very slowly
- Lack of coherence
- Poor vocabulary

3. Listening:

Strengths:

- Can understand well
- Can listen and understand well



**Weaknesses:**

- Cannot understand word meanings
- Indian accent is ok but not the native English accent
- Comfortable only with the regional English accent
- Cannot understand if spoken with a greater pace
- Can listen but cannot reproduce later

**4. Reading:****Strengths:**

- Can read well
- Can read and understand
- Can read only those written by Indian writers

**Weaknesses:**

- Cannot understand word meanings and phrases
- Difficulty in understanding the entire phrase
- Lack quick reading
- Can read only simple English
- If it is loud reading they are not fluent and have poor pronunciation
- Find difficult to understand the language

**Conclusion:**

- Figures 1, 2 and 4 indicate that the teachers should expect Odiya, Telugu and Hindi in its Bihari accent are the major languages that could interfere in the student's English Language.
- Figure 3 projects that English, Odiya and Hindi are the major tongue in formal learning. Hence the students are expected to be able to read, write and speak in these languages based on their medium of school.
- It can also be concluded from figure 4 that among these students social and informal communication is mostly in Odiya and Hindi.
- The conclusion drawn from figure 5 is that spoken English should be given more focus as compared to reading, writing and listening. Here again the interference of regional tongue is expected.
- Schools make a major environment where a student can learn the English language. English is a compulsory subject in all the state boards of India. So, the teachers expected the students knew English along with their regional language or their medium of school, which is also evident from figure 3.
- The number of students who are able to listen, read and write in English is almost the same, the students who could speak in English is much lower compared to the other three skills viz. figure 5 and 6. Reading and listening does not involve an receiver where as writing and speaking does. Speaking involves direct face to face communication and there is scope for

immediate feedback, which frightens the students. Writing involves the receiver but there is no face to face communication. Hence, the students are a little better here. This demanded to concentrate on the spoken skills of the students. Again responses like, 'stage fright', 'fear of crowd', 'nervousness', 'shy of public', alerted us to work on building the confidence in students, rather the confidence of speaking in English.

- After analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the students in their LSRW skills of English language it was observed that the students have noted fear, nervousness, shyness from public and consciousness only in the spoken section as their drawbacks. In the other three skills they have not noted these factors. Hence, the spoken skills had to be focused.
- In the other three skills the students are concerned about their vocabulary, grammar, sentence coherence and pronunciation.

### **Implementation:**

This analysis helped me and the other English teachers of National Institute of Science & Technology to develop a language laboratory module that first took care in overcoming the fear of speaking and pronunciation. This has helped the students improve upon their language skills through the semester. Based on this data the institute also felt the urgency and designed a new course focused on the needs of its audiences' needs of vocabulary enhancement, grammar and overcoming stage fright.

The first objective of this project is to promote oral communication in English by reducing the language anxiety and nervousness in the classroom created by the insecurity of being teased for making mistakes.<sup>[6]</sup>

I too as a teacher of ESP believe that once the fear of producing English language is reduced the confidence of learning the language is increased.

The success of the module and the new course is based on the analysis of the students' level of English. Knowing the students enabled me and my colleagues to strategize not only a better language laboratory module but also a better classroom teaching plan by the individual teachers and in developing a new course that could cater to these needs.

### **References**

Banerjee, Rohini and Smita Polite. (24 May 2011) 'Effective Teaching in the Classroom'. Edutech for Leaders in Higher Education. < <http://www.edu-leaders.com/content/effective-teaching-classroom>>

Morgan, Mary. (February 15, 2010) 'The importance of knowing your students'. Journal of Classroom Teaching & Learning. Brookville, New York. <<http://joctl.blogspot.com/2010/02/importance-of-knowing-your-students.html>>

Addressing Students' Needs: Importance of Knowing Your Students. (Adapted with permission from "Science Teaching Reconsidered: A Handbook" (©1997) by the National Academy of Sciences, courtesy of the National Academies Press, Washington, DC.) CIRT Network <<http://www.cirtl.net/node/2543>>

Clark, Beverly A. First- and Second-Language Acquisition in Early Childhood <<http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/pubs/katzsym/clark-b.pdf>>

Palacios, Beatríz Vintimilla and Alberto Chacho Orellana. (2009) 'Native Language Interference In Learning English As A Foreign Language: An Analysis Of Written Material Produced By Spanish Speaking Students In Senior High School Classes'. Centro Universitario Cuenca <http://www.pdfhound.com/view-pdf/native-language-interference-in-learning-english-as-a-foreign.html>

Tinjacá, Rocío Amparo Buitrago and Ruth Ayala Contreras. (2008) 'Overcoming Fear of Speaking in English through Meaningful Activities: A Study with Teenagers'. Profile Issues in Teachers' Professional Development. No.9. <<http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/1692/169213804003.pdf>>