Basic Language Skills as a Tool for Enhancing Students' Learning: A Case Study of Undergraduates' Perceptions

Hakim Ali, Bashir Hussain, Imtiaz Ahmad Warraich

Associate Professor, Department of Education, Government Wilayat Hussain Islamia College, Multan, Pakistan: hakimaliwhisl@gmail.com
Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan: bashirhussain@bzu.edu.pk
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan: imtiazwarraich@bzu.edu.pk

Corresponding author’s email address: bashirhussain@bzu.edu.pk

ARTICLE DETAILS

History:
Accepted 22 October 2018
Available online 31 December 2018

Keywords:
Language Skills, Students' Learning, Under-Graduate Level, Students' Perceptions

JEL Classification:
J24, P36, A23

DOI: 10.47067/real.v1i1.3

ABSTRACT

Four basic and interrelated language skills i.e., listening, reading, writing and speaking have long been used by language teachers as a prerequisite as well as an indispensable part of foreign language teaching. In this context, the key intent of this survey design quantitative study was to examine views of undergraduate students about the extent of efficacy of these basic language skills in enhancing their learning and how students approach and use each of the skills. The data used to reach the conclusions were collected through a 23 item self-developed questionnaire comprising four sub-scales i.e., listening (5 items), reading (9 items), writing (5 items), and speaking (4 items). The questionnaire was administered to a sample of 207 male and female students randomly selected from three departments of one public university in Pakistan. Based on the descriptive and inferential analyses of students’ responses, it was concluded that students consider all the four basic language skills as an effective and helpful tool for enhancement of their learning as well as delivery of information. The study finally recommends teaching these skills to students at early educational levels with different methods and approaches to make them more successful and willing learners.

© 2018 The authors. Published by SPCRD Global Publishing. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0

1. Introduction
The four basic and interrelated language skills sometimes termed as the "macro-skills" i.e., listening, reading, writing and speaking have long been used by language teachers as a prerequisite as well as an indispensable part of foreign language teaching (Darancik, 2018). This is in contradiction of the other indispensable elements (termed as "micro-skills") involved in language teaching as vocabulary, grammar, spelling and pronunciation (Aydogan, & Akbarov, 2014). These English language skills are interrelated by two parameters: the mode of communication: oral or written and the direction of communication: receiving or producing the message (Aydogan, & Akbarov, 2014). These four basic language skills play a vital role in the progress, development and market value of fresh graduates. Proper learning and training of Pakistani students in these English language skills, in fact, is indispensable for national development. However, declaring English language as a compulsory subject at all educational levels and making arrangements for its effective teaching to enhance students' learning as well as effective delivery of information are two different realities (Khalid & Khan, 2006).

These four language skills serve various useful purposes. They provide the students scaffold support (Sadiku, 2015) as well as the prospects to build settings in which they can use the language for interchange of genuine information. Furthermore, these skills provide students the evidence of their own ability to learn and the most important; these skills enhance self-confidence in students. Reading is a significant and interesting way of gaining knowledge. It is a creative approach to improve language, word power and vocabulary (Sadiku, 2015). When students have a gorgeous vocabulary, they listen well because they comprehend more. They also can write better because they possess more vocabulary to select more suitable words. As a result, they obviously can speak well owing to their strong word power. Sadiku (2015) recommends that students should spend at least half an hour in a day for reading to be well-informed about the numerous writing styles as well as new vocabulary.

Furthermore, Şahin (2010) as cited in Darancik (2018) identifies that other basic language skills i.e., speaking, listening and writing are positively impacted by good reading skill. Günay (2007) as cited in Darancik (2018) stated two key aims of reading i.e., information and pleasure. For information purposes, reading achieves a particular target. For example a person reads keeping in mind a specific target related to his/her profession or for advancement in his/her specific academic arena. Sadiku (2015) also pinpoints information, enjoyment and enlightenment as the key purposes of reading. Writing in the same vein, Roberts and Wilson (2006) view reading attitude as a vital part of the improvement and use of enduring skills of reading. Positive attitude towards learning is considered as one of the highly substantial psychological concepts in teaching-learning process. Tran (2006) has emphasized that “Free voluntary reading has supported not only vocabulary development, but also spelling, grammar, and writing development”.

As regards listening-comprehension, it, as Darancik, (2018) proclaims, is more challenging as compared to reading skill as student can read the text again and again to understand it, but this is not possible in case of listening. Listening-comprehension is classified by Aydogan and Akbarov (2014) as the receptive skill in oral mode. While speaking of listening skill, we actually meant listening as well as clearly understanding of the spoken words that we hear. It is, in fact, a productive skill in the oral mode. It, similar to other language skills, is a very intricate skill than it seems at first and it contains more complications than merely word pronunciation. This is the reason that students’ ability to recognize changes is tested in relation to the meaning, stress and sounds (Barın, 2002 as cited in Darancik, 2018). A number of language experts highlight interwoven nature of the listening and speaking (Darancik, 2018).

Speaking skill as Darancik, (2018) declares, is a two-way communication which is often linked
with listening skill. Similarly, Temple and Gillet (1984) also found a highly positive association between speaking and listening skills. It means that listening is an indispensable part of speaking and it cannot be detached from the expressive aspects of oral communication. It is further concluded that teaching of listening skill is not possible separately from speaking, or to set aside a portion of the instructional time for listening instruction and ignore it the rest of the time. Listening is an essential part of dramatic plays, group discussions, or other such activities in which actions and dialogues are used. Students develop their communicative powers along with the development of their listening ability receptively (Darancık, 2018). Speaking skill develops in students the ability to convey his/her own thoughts, feelings and/or knowledge to others. Likewise, the student also has the opportunity to learn the feelings, thoughts and ideas of others (Darancık, 2018). Consequently, the student can be able to understand, evaluate and interpret environmental fact and events better with the help of essential information and skills.

As regards writing skill, according to Balcı (2000) as cited in Darancık (2018), it is a significant tool of communication useful for the improvement of one's individuality by contributing to the improvement of other basic language skills. Writing skills are an effective producer and can be used to control the learning process. Çakır (2010) as cited in Darancık, (2018) claims that writing skills are also useful to consolidate the words, to determine the levels of the learners, to teach the punctuation marks, to see the language mistakes, to improve the language skills of the student and to learn the other skills by helping them transform their skills into performance.

A number of handicaps have also been identified by the researchers which impede students to learn the four basic language skills. This situation makes it compulsory to equip undergraduates with the critical thinking ability in all the four basic language skills primarily needed during university education. The handicaps that the students encounter in learning of basic language skills comprise various challenges i.e., academic difficulties, unrealized goals, social isolation in the group, cultural shocks, adjustment with a new language, and failure distress (Aydogan, & Akbarov, 2014). That is why, attaining competency in the four basic language skills and acquiring capability of applying these skills as a medium of learning sometimes becomes a frightening experience for the students. It is, therefore, after studying English as a compulsory subject approximately for twelve years at school level, students at university level are not so far equipped effectually to execute the most challenging task of literacy skills i.e., acquisition of content literacy, the skill of language usage for accessing and mastering specialized material in content areas across the curriculum (Vacca & Vacca, 2005).

Nan (2018) classifies previous literature related to these interrelated and interactive language skills into two kinds i.e., first, the relationship studies between two skills and teaching of one skill on the basis of association between two skills and/or second, studies examining correlation between input and output or between speaking and writing skills. A number of researchers (Guan, 2015; Han, 2016) examined these four language skills respectively at tertiary level based on input and output hypotheses. Likewise, Zhao (1980) and Zhang (1995) emphasized the significance of increasing both the speaking as well as writing skills in college English teaching. Furthermore, Yang (1991) and Wu (1998) analyzed strategies for developing English listening comprehension while Gao (2001) as cited in Nan, (2018) studied interrelationship between listening and speaking skills among college students’.

With regard to relationship between reading and writing, Stotsky (1983) looked over several experimental and correlational researches while Eckhoff (1983) conducted a study and found that students’ writing encompasses various features of their reading texts. Likewise, Shanahan (1984) described the nature of reading-writing relationship and Flower (1988) emphasized that further research
is needed to determine the extent of relationships about active strategies used in reading and writing. Writing in the same vein, Krashen (2012) proclaimed that writing style is improved more by extensive reading instead of writing experience; Yang & Dong, (2010) focused on analyzing strategies for improving reading comprehension while studies for measuring listening and reading relationship were conducted by Lin, (1996), Nan, (1997) and Zou, (1988). Moreover, a few scholars (e. g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982; Tang, 2011) studied the effect of English speaking proficiency on writing skill and inter-relationship among four language skills (Lu, 2006).

Previous literature depicts that a number of studies have been conducted related to language skills. These studies revealed the importance of language skills for foreign language teaching. Review of literature also suggests that research about four basic skills have been conducted both at international and national level but most of the studies found in literature explored teachers’ perceptions or measured the effect of a particular skill (e. g., Haq, 2019). These kinds of studies have typically dealt with the success or failure of a specific skill, the context in which that skill was treated, the attitude and/or achievement of students toward that certain language skill. Considering the previous literature, this study mainly focused on examining the views of students about efficacy of four interrelated language skills in improvement of their learning experiences at undergraduate level. This study also analyzed how undergraduate level students consider the efficacy of basic language skills in general terms for successful delivery of information to others. This study further investigated the influence of students’ gender and discipline on their perceptions regarding efficacy of basic language skills.

Present Study

The mastery in four basic and interrelated skills of English language highly needed for Pakistani graduates because English is, and will likely remain in future, the primary medium of instruction in Pakistani universities (Mahboob, 2017). These skills help students in compiling and writing various assignments, reports, articles and field descriptions. The mastery in these skills is a multifaceted process and involves student motivation, comprehension, word recognition as well as fluency. These four skills as emphasized by (Holden, 2004) are an important source for students’ personality development as well as for their social training and economic success. Considering this context, this study mainly focused on examining the views of students about efficacy of four interrelated language skills in improvement of their learning experiences at undergraduate level. This study may set a stage for future scholars to be familiar with the research related to the basic skills of English language learning in the context of Pakistan. It may also be valuable for students as well as their teachers to examine their own English language skills.

Research Questions

The key intent of this survey design quantitative study was to examine views of undergraduate students about the extent of the efficacy of four basic language skills in enhancing their learning experiences. Following research questions were formulated to achieve the main objective of this study:

1. To what extent do the students’ perceive the four basic language skills efficacious for improvement of their learning experiences at undergraduate level?
2. Is there any difference between students’ gender-based views about efficacy of the four basic language skills?
3. Is there any difference between students’ discipline-based views about efficacy of the four basic language skills?
2. Research Methodology

Researchers used survey design quantitative approach to achieve the key objective in this study. All the undergraduate students, both male and female, presently enrolled in three departments of Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Pakistan i.e., Education, Islamic Studies and Pharmacy, were considered as study population. The sample comprising 207 male and female students was selected by using stratified random sampling technique from each department separately. Of these 207 sample participants, 56 (27%) sample students were male and 151 (73%) students were female. As regards department wise sample distribution, 64 (31%) students were enrolled in Pharmacy department, 51 (25%) in Islamic studies and 92 (44%) were enrolled in Education department.

Researchers themselves developed a 23 item Likert five point questionnaire after extensive review of related literature to examine students’ views about efficacy of the four basic language skills. This 23 item questionnaire comprised four subscales: (a) 5 items for measuring students’ perceptions about listening skill, (b) 9 items for reading skill, (c) 5 items for writing and (d) 4 items for measuring students’ perceptions about speaking skill. To ensure acceptable validity indices of self-developed instrument, the items were first translated into native language Urdu with the help of two specialist teachers who were proficient in both the languages i.e., English and Urdu. After translation, the researchers pilot tested the instrument with 27 undergraduate students i.e., 8 students from each of the three target departments. These students were advised to mention problems faced by them in reading of the questionnaire items, their understanding and/or its completion. Majority of the participating students provided positive comments about the instrument i.e., easy and understandable. The opinions of the specialist teachers and student’ comments were focused while finalizing the tool. Reliability estimates of the questionnaire were .84 for listening scale, .81 for reading, .85 for writing and .74 for speaking scale in final study that are considered highly reliable.

After seeking permission from the respective Heads of Departments as well as concerned teachers, the researchers personally administered the tool in all the 3 departments. The entire process of the questionnaire administration took approximately 15 to 20 minutes in each class. Finally, total 207 completed questionnaires were collected from all the 3 selected departments. Collected data were analyzed on two bases. First, descriptive statistics was used to analyze students’ views about efficacy of four basic language skills. Second, gender-wise and discipline-wise comparisons of students’ views were done by computing inferential statistics i.e., independent samples t-test and one way ANOVA.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of three research questions have been displayed and discussed in following three sub-sections.

3.1 Perceptions of Students about Efficacy of the Four Basic Language Skills

To examine undergraduate students’ perception about the efficacy of the four basic language skills, the mean and standard deviation were computed, and results are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the Scale and four subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>18.00</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>45.00</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 depicts that the mean values for all the four subscales related to the four language skills lies between 3.35 and 4.34. The mean value for one sub-scale i.e., speaking is below 4, i.e., 3.35. These values reveal a higher level of positive perceptions of undergraduate students about the efficacy of the four basic language skills. Overall mean i.e., 4.01 further confirms the extent of students' positive perceptions. Based on the mean values of students' responses on each skill, it can be concluded that students consider all the four basic language skills as an effective and helpful tool for enhancement of their learning as well as delivery of information. The overall standard deviation value also indicates a higher level of students’ consensus. These results are in consistency with the findings of the study conducted by Haq (2019) who concluded that teaching of these English language skills contributes positively in enhancing students’ learning experiences.

### 3.2 Differences between Undergraduates’ Gender-based Views regarding the Efficacy of the Four Basic Language Skills

To examine the difference between undergraduates’ gender-based views regarding the efficacy of the four basic language skills, independent samples t-test was performed and results have been displayed in Table 2.

#### Table 2: Independent samples t-test for gender-based comparisons in subscales and scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale/Subscale</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>19.85</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>-4.16</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>21.54</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>13.48</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>13.34</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>33.71</td>
<td>9.64</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>-4.70</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>38.52</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21.80</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>0.259</td>
<td>0.796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>21.69</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Scale</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>90.57</td>
<td>12.99</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>-4.84</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>97.07</td>
<td>6.23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 reveals that the mean values for the responses of male students is less than the mean values of the responses of female students in two skills i.e., listening and reading skills. The signature-values on both the skills i.e., 0.000 depict that perceptions of both the groups of students were significantly different with regard to the efficacy of listening and reading skills for enhancement of their learning experiences. Table 4 further displays that the mean values for the responses of both the male
and female students is almost equal for speaking and writing skills. The signature-values of .734 and .796 respectively depict that perceptions of both the groups of students were not different statistically with regard to the efficacy of both the skills i.e., speaking and writing. It can, therefore, be inferred that students’ gender has no effect on their perceptions regarding the extent of efficacy of these two language skills in terms of enhancement of their learning experiences.

Moreover, overall analysis of the students’ perceptions regarding the four basic language skills indicates that the mean value for male participants is less than their female counterparts. The signature-value of 0.000 indicates statistically significant differences between perceptions of both the groups of students. It can, therefore, be inferred that female students consider the four language skills more effective for enhancement of their learning experiences as compared to their male counterparts. These findings are aligned well with the findings of a number of previous researchers (Aydogan, & Akbarov, 2014) who also concluded that female students have more positive perceptions toward these four basic language skills in terms of their usefulness for learning.

3.3 Differences between Undergraduates’ Department-based Views regarding the Efficacy of the Four Basic Language Skills

To examine the difference between undergraduates’ department-based views regarding the efficacy of the four basic language skills, one way ANOVA was performed and results have been displayed Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3: ANOVA for Department-based Comparisons of Students’ Views

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>2634.454</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1317.227</td>
<td>18.942</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>14186.135</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>69.540</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16820.589</td>
<td>206</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 indicates that $F(2, 204) = 18.942, P<0.000$ for the undergraduates’ perceptions about the efficacy of four basic language skills in enhancement of their learning experiences based on their department of study was significant. This result depicts that there were statistically significant differences between the perceptions of various groups of undergraduates regarding the efficacy of the four basic language skills in enhancement of their learning experiences.

To locate the trend of the differences among undergraduates’ department-based views based on three selected departments, Scheffe’s Post-hoc analysis was performed and the results have been presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Scheffe’s Post-hoc Test showing direction of Differences in Undergraduates’ Perceptions relating to their departments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department (I)</th>
<th>Mean (I)</th>
<th>Department (J)</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I-J)</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>99.28</td>
<td>Islamic Studies</td>
<td>9.60*</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3.61*</td>
<td>.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Studies</td>
<td>89.69</td>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>-9.60*</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-5.99*</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Scheffe’s post-hoc analyses in Table 4 concerning the perceptions of undergraduates based on their department indicate that there were significant differences between the perceptions of undergraduate students. Statistically significant differences were found between the perceptions of undergraduates enrolled in Pharmacy and Islamic Studies departments. Likewise, statistically significant differences were found between the perceptions of undergraduates enrolled in Pharmacy and Education departments. There were also significant differences between opinions of students enrolled in Islamic Studies and Education departments. Scheffe’s post-hoc analyses, therefore, established that there were significant differences among undergraduates’ perceptions regarding the efficacy of the four basic language skills based on their department of study.

This study, therefore, concludes that students’ department/subject has significant effect on their perceptions regarding the extent of efficacy of these four language skills in terms of enhancement of their learning experiences. It can also be concluded that students’ ability to learn language skills and the desire to learn these skills are different in the varied contexts. This difference among the students of different departments is related to the need of the students and their use of English language skills in academic matters. The need of language skills in different departments, culture of using these skills and so on are indirectly or directly driving the learning and efficacy of these four language skills (Arslan & Adem, 2010 as cited in Özdemir & Özdemir, 2018).

### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Speaking, listening, reading and writing are interrelated and interdependent in real communication. Four language skills, according to system theory, establish a system in which these four basic language skills interlink and assimilate. The interaction as well as coordination of these elements leads to the improvement of whole as well as enhancement of students' learning experiences. In this context, the key intent of this survey design quantitative study was to examine views of undergraduate students about the extent of the efficacy of these basic language skills in enhancing their learning and how students approach and use each of the skills. Following three specific conclusions were reached to answer the three research questions. First, students believe with higher level of consensus that all the four basic language skills are an effective and helpful tool for enhancement of their learning as well as delivery of information. Second, female students consider the four language skills more effective for enhancement of their learning experiences as compared to their male counterparts. Third, there were statistically significant differences between the perceptions of various groups of undergraduates based on their department/subject of study regarding the efficacy of the four basic language skills in enhancement of their learning experiences. This means that students’ department/subject has significant effect on their perceptions.

It is, therefore, recommended that teachers should adopt the basic principles of system theory in language teaching to enhance the students’ learning in these language skills. All the four basic skills should be merged and combined gradually with one another to make language teaching comprehensive and integrated. This is only the effective method of optimally and efficiently improving learning of four basic language skills. Teachers should progressively integrate all the macro and micro level language skills from the early schooling to prepare students for genuine communication.
References


Southwest Agricultural University, 10, 134-137.


