



Short Communication

A study of factors that influence vocabulary of students in Goa, India

Kailas D. Gokhale, Sharmila Menezes* and Ranjit Rodrigues

Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science Autonomous Margao, Goa, India
ssm004@chowgules.ac.in

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Abstract

Vocabulary ushers an significant role in the development of linguistic skills of a student. It is the key to communicate with others successfully. Research studies have shown strong links between academic success and panoptic vocabulary. The present study aims to understand the verbal ability of students in the context of their religion, primary medium of instruction, parents' education and mother tongue. 124 students from Parvatibai Chowgule College Margao, Goa have been studied with help of Ravens Mill Hill Vocabulary scale. The data collated was statistically analyzed using statistical packages for social sciences. Descriptive statistics and Inferential Statistical tools (Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) and independent sample test) were used for analysis of the data. Conclusions point toward influences that mother tongue, medium of instruction and even religion have on the personal vocabulary of a student.

Keywords: Vocabulary, Mother tongue, language and medium of instruction, student's vocabulary, Chowgule College.

Introduction

The locus of this study is Goa, a multilingual state in India. Since Goa was ruled by the Portuguese for 450 years, Portuguese language was widely used in the state until its liberation in 1961. Post-liberation, the use of Portuguese dwindled, whilst the state witnessed Konkani and Marathi become commonly spoken languages. Since Goa's integration into the Indian Union, Hindi is generally spoken and understood, given its status as national language. Goa also enjoys a reputation of being an internationally acclaimed tourist destination and this is one of the reasons for the fact that English is commonly spoken in the state. English remains the key medium of instruction in most secondary schools, and is the only medium of instruction at college and university level of education. Finally, due to an expansion in industrial and civil development, Goa has witnessed large scale in-migration of individuals and families from other states. Thus, Goa now has communities of people that converse in languages of other parts of the nation. In conclusion, then, having had people of various regions, ethnic races and religions from India and abroad settling in Goa, fascinating language inflections are observable in this state.

The main issue under consideration in this study is the vocabulary of individual students, given the eclectic social situation in Goa. 'Vocabulary' itself was chosen as the subject of research due to its ubiquitous role in comprehension, communication and general student progress. Broadly defined, vocabulary is the knowledge of words and word meanings. However, vocabulary is more complex than this definition suggests. First, words come in two forms: oral and print. Oral vocabulary includes those words that we recognize and use in

listening and speaking. Print vocabulary, on the other hand, refers to words used in reading and writing. Oral vocabulary usually precedes Print vocabulary, since the latter is more difficult to attain, given its dependence on accurate recognition of written words. Another factor that needs consideration is the greater complexity of grammar and textual structure of printed material, as compared to oral communication.

Thus, this research initiative seeks to measure the verbal ability of students with reference to the following four influencing factors which are explained in detail are: i. mother tongue, ii. primary medium of instruction, iii. religion and iv. parents' education.

Influence of mother tongue on vocabulary of student: The term 'mother tongue' is often used synonymously with native language, arterial language or L1. It usually indicates the language that a person learned as a child at home (usually from their parents, hence the etymology). An individual's mother tongue often is the language spoken best, though this is not always the case. For example, a person's first language in childhood might no longer be her dominant language in adulthood, due to migration to another region or nation. Further, children growing up in bilingual family situations can legitimately claim to have more than one mother tongue.

Mother tongue plays an important role in a child's linguistic growth, given its central place in one's socio-cultural identity. In Goa, the main languages spoken in homes are Konkani, Marathi and English, though Portuguese, Kannada and Hindi also feature as individual mother tongues as well. Further, significant inter-absorption of words is noticeable as both Marathi and Konkani as spoken in Goa have accepted words

from both of the European languages. Mother Tongue can potentially have negative consequences as it may hinder certain cognitive functions. For example, an over reliance on mother tongue (L1) can undermine academic interaction in English. Thus, even students who are good at comprehending authentic reading and listening material, find themselves continually performing mental translations from L2 to L1. Oluwole (2008) has described how mother tongue influences students' performance in English language in Junior School Certificate¹. Lawrence has studied students whose parents speak language other than English using longitudinal method². Hassanzadeh et.al. have studied how the effect of the grammar of your mother tongue has an influence on learning a foreign language³. Tiwale has studied impact of mother tongue on communicative language⁴.

Influence of medium of instruction: The medium of instruction is generally understood to be the language used by the teacher in teaching. The default medium or language of instruction plays a crucial role at every level of learning. This is particularly true at the stage of the elementary education, given that it is at this time that a child is introduced to the vast world of knowledge. In an ideal situation the language or mother tongue spoken at home or in the neighborhood is the student's medium of instruction, the student will find it easy to understand the subjects taught which would thereby influence academic growth to attain desirable results. The conflict between varied mother tongues and medium of instruction highlights a problem that has multiple implications. Basic education at primary and high school level is often imparted using regional languages. English was only presented as a subject after the primary level. However, as is the case in most of the world, English remains the most common medium of higher education in Goa. Further, it is virtually impossible to find professional courses that are taught using regional languages. Thus, a number of students find themselves traumatized by the change in media of instruction as they move from lower to higher levels of education. Saeed et.al have studied impact of medium of instruction on performance of student at higher secondary level⁵.

By and large the ability to converse in English is relatively though to be modern and civilized thus English is preferred first language at home for many families and also serves as the medium of instruction in many elite schools at every level without apology. The medium of instructions in English is also observed in many government run schools and private schools in many smaller cities and towns. Government schools run in English because only that language is a universally acceptable as a medium of communication throughout the nation. The down-side of this trend is that, while conferring an elitist image on English speakers, it can cause regional language speakers to consider themselves inferior. Persons who could not understand English or converse in it can feel undervalued.

Influence of religion: The preamble to the Indian constitution states the secular nature of the Indian state, providing freedom

of religion as a fundamental right. Goa continues to be a multi religious state; all religious groups are living here in peace and harmony. Further, religious communities tend to be aligned with particular languages: for example, most Muslim households use Urdu as mother tongue, Hindu families use either Konkani or Marathi as their mother tongue whereas Roman Catholic homes would use Konkani or English as preferred language at home. One of the objectives of this study is to examine whether religious background is related to acquisition of English vocabulary skills. Shaaban et.al. showed that the variables of religion and first foreign language studied at school influenced the linguistic attitudes of the participants⁶.

Influence of Parents Education: Parental nurture plays an undisputable role in a child's development and acquisition of culture. Is it therefore possible that parent's education can have an influence, even if indirect, on the development of a child's verbal skills? The present study looks for any possible correlation between parents education and a child's vocabulary. Previous researchers who have studied this subject are Valencia et.al.⁷, Smart⁸, Good et.al.⁹ and Durojaiye¹⁰. Their pioneer investigations have shown that the level of parent education affects the academic performance of the child in school. In other words, parents with a high calibre and good educational background provide their children with a favourable environment so as to motivate or encourage them to continue the family profession.

Study Area: This study was conducted at Parvatibai Chowgule College of Arts and Science Autonomous, a premium institution of higher learning situated in commercial capital of Goa, the city of Margao. Chowgule College has a wide area of influence, and draws students from across Goa.

Methodology

To achieve the objective of our study 124 students in the age group of 17 to 19 years were randomly selected. Tools for data collection included the Ravens Mill Hill Vocabulary Test (MHVT)¹¹, a standardized test by John Raven that is designed to provide verbal screening measure for general ability in the age group of 17 to 19 years. MHVT is an 88-item test that is designed to allow the examinee to present (i.e., reproduce) his/her understanding of culturally relevant verbal concepts at the time of the test (Raven, 1962).

Further data is being classified with respect to following categories: i. Mother tongue: Konkani, English and other (Marathi, Hindi, Kannada etc), ii. Parents education: School, College and University, iii. Religion: Catholics, Hindu and Muslims. iv. Primary Medium of instruction: English and Konkani and other languages.

Data thus collected was statistically analyzed using statistical packages for social sciences. Descriptive statistics and Inferential Statistical tools (Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) and independent sample test) were used for analysis of the data.

We have tested following hypotheses: i. H_{1a} : Mean of vocabulary scores of students from different mother tongue background differ significantly, ii. H_{1b} : Mean of vocabulary scores of students from different parents education differ significantly, iii. H_{1c} : Mean of vocabulary scores of students from different religious background differ significantly, iv. H_{1d} : Mean of vocabulary scores of students from different primary education background differ significantly.

To test null hypotheses H_{0a} , H_{0b} , H_{0c} Analysis of variance (ANOVA) test is used whereas to test H_{0d} independent sample test is used.

Results and discussion

Mother tongue: In examining relation between mother tongue and English vocabulary, it was found that students whose mother tongue is English scored 40.13 whereas student from different mother background like Konkani and other scored 34.21 and 31.20 respectively. Raw scores of students whose mother tongue is English were found significantly higher than raw scores of other students with different linguistic background (Konkani, Marathi and other). This shows that mother tongue plays an important role in the development of student's vocabulary (Table-1).

Parent's education: In the sample, students whose parents are highly educated (Masters, Phd etc) have scored 38.83, which is highest as compared to other groups. Since $p < .05$ we reject the null hypothesis (H_{0b}) and conclude that Vocabulary of students whose parents are highly educated is significantly higher than the students whose parents studied at school or college level.

Primary medium of instruction: Students whose primary medium of instruction is Konkani and other have scored 35.15 and students whose primary medium of instruction is English have scored 34.47. Independent sample t test shows that there is no significant difference in the score of two groups. Thus, there is no evidence that medium of instruction at primary school level affects vocabulary.

Religion: From the above table it is seen that catholic students scored 37.82, Hindu students scored 31.24 and Muslims students scored 32.25. ANOVA test showed that at .01 level of significance, Catholic students have a level of vocabulary that was found to be significantly higher than students of other religions like Hindu and Muslim. This is due to the fact that many catholic families speak English language as their mother tongue.

Table-1: Descriptive and Inferential Statistics.

Criteria	Groups	N	Mean	S.D.	Test statistics
Mother tongue	Konkani	78	34.21	7.46	F(2,113)=8.695 *** (p < 0.01)
	English	22	40.13	7.57	
	Other	24	31.20	7.19	
	Total	124	34.68	7.88	
Parents Education	University	12	38.83	8.11	F(2,113)=4.262 ** (p < 0.05)
	College	52	35.92	7.85	
	School	60	32.78	7.44	
	Total	124	34.68	7.88	
Religion	Catholic	63	37.82	7.28	F(2,113)=12.076 *** (p < .0001)
	Hindu	49	31.24	7.04	
	Muslims	12	32.25	8.01	
	Total	124	34.68	7.88	
Medium of instruction	Konkani and others	38	35.15	7.68	t(122)=0.442 (p > 0.05)
	English	86	34.47	8.00	
	Total	124	34.68	7.88	

***Significant at .01, **Significant at .05.

Conclusion

This study sets out to examine the verbal ability of students in context to their religion, primary medium of instruction, parents' education and mother tongue. Ravens Mill Hill Vocabulary scale was used for data gathering and statistical analysis was done using Inferential Statistical tools.

The study showed that three factors play important roles in expanding the quantum of a student's vocabulary. Table-1 shows how English language corpus is positively affected among those students who come from families where English language is spoken as mother tongue. In this respect, it can be said that such students have an advantage over students who have mother tongues that are other than English. In the state of Goa, the issue of mother tongue is also connected to the sphere of religion. Families that have a Roman Catholic religious background tend to use English as mother tongue, whereas non-catholic families use Konkani / Marathi / other language as mother tongue. Thus, our study sample indicates that religious background plays an important role in a student's vocabulary. A third factor that demonstrated its influence with regard to a student's vocabulary is the level of education of the parents of the concerned student. Many researchers (refer 6.) have highlighted this fact. Parents who themselves have a degree in higher education, regardless of stream, are seen to give more attention towards the academic development of their child. Thus, the education of parents is an effective influencing factor on the vocabulary of a student.

The fourth concern in this study was the effect of primary medium of instruction on a student's vocabulary. Interestingly, Table-1 indicates that score of students do not differ significantly in relation to this particular criterion. A cursory examination of Goa's history reveals various international influences that have played a part in making Goa's present unique culture. Two significant influences have been Goa's colonization by Portugal and Goa's fame as an internationally famous holiday destination. Further, there has been an ongoing Goan diaspora for reasons of work or migration. All these factors have affected Goa in such a way that strains of westernization, along with a general familiarity with the English language, are generally pervasive across the cultural landscape of the state. In this context, it is not unexpected that Goan students, across various medium of instruction, have equal opportunity to develop their English vocabulary.

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