

“A Study of Phonology Among Undergraduate Students of Nanded City”

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Abstract

Phonology is a fundamental component of language learning, particularly in the context of English as a second language in multilingual societies like India. Despite prolonged exposure to English at the school level, many undergraduate students continue to face serious challenges in achieving accurate pronunciation and intelligible speech. These difficulties largely stem from strong mother-tongue interference, limited exposure to models of standard English pronunciation, and the absence of systematic phonetic and phonological training at the undergraduate level.

The present study investigates the phonological competence of undergraduate students in Nanded city, with specific reference to their ability to produce English vowels, consonants, word stress, and intonation patterns. A descriptive research design was adopted, and primary data were collected from a sample of 100 undergraduate students using pronunciation tests and structured questionnaires. The collected data were analysed using percentage analysis and graphical representation to identify the major areas of phonological difficulty and their underlying causes.

The study's findings reveal that a significant proportion of students struggle with English phonology, with intonation and consonant sounds as the most problematic areas, followed by vowel pronunciation and word stress. The study also confirms that mother tongue influence and lack of phonetic instruction are the primary factors contributing to these difficulties. The research highlights the urgent need to integrate focused phonology instruction, practical pronunciation drills, and the effective use of language laboratories into undergraduate English curricula. The study concludes that strengthening phonological competence can significantly enhance students' communicative effectiveness, confidence, and overall proficiency in English.

Keywords: Phonology, Pronunciation, Undergraduate Students, English Language, Nanded

Introduction

English functions as a global language and serves as a medium of instruction in higher education across India. Despite years of formal learning, many undergraduate students struggle with spoken English, mainly due to weak phonological competence. Phonology deals with the sound system of a language, including pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation.

Students in Nanded city largely come from Marathi-medium educational backgrounds. As a result, English pronunciation is heavily influenced by their mother tongue. The absence of phonetic training at the undergraduate level further aggravates this problem. The present study attempts to analyse these phonological issues systematically.

Literature Review

Jones (1958) stressed that intelligible pronunciation is essential for effective communication.

Roach (2009) highlighted the role of phonology in improving listening and speaking skills.

Jenkins (2000) examined the influence of mother tongue on English pronunciation in non-native contexts.

Bansal (1990) analysed the distinctive features of Indian English phonology.

Nagendra (2016) observed that Indian classrooms often neglect phonetic instruction, resulting in persistent pronunciation errors.

These studies provide a theoretical foundation for the present research and indicate the need for localised phonological studies.

3. Research Methodology

a. Research Design

The study employs a descriptive-analytical research design.

b. Hypotheses

- H_0 : Undergraduate students do not face significant phonological problems in English.
- H_1 : Undergraduate students face significant phonological problems in English.

c. Sampling Method

Simple random sampling was used to select respondents from undergraduate colleges in Nanded city.

d. Procedure

A pronunciation test covering vowels, consonants, stress, and intonation was administered. A structured questionnaire was also used to collect data on causes of phonological difficulties.

e. Sample Size

The sample comprised 100 undergraduate students.

Primary Data Presentation

Table 1: Phonological Areas of Difficulty

| Area of Phonology | Students | Percentage |
|-------------------|----------|------------|
| Vowel Sounds | 65 | 65% |
| Consonant Sounds | 72 | 72% |
| Word Stress | 58 | 58% |
| Intonation | 80 | 80% |

Graph 1: Phonological Areas of Difficulty (Bar Graph)

The bar graph shows that intonation (80%) is the most difficult area, followed by consonant sounds (72%). Word stress is comparatively less problematic.

Graph 1: Phonological Areas of Difficulty

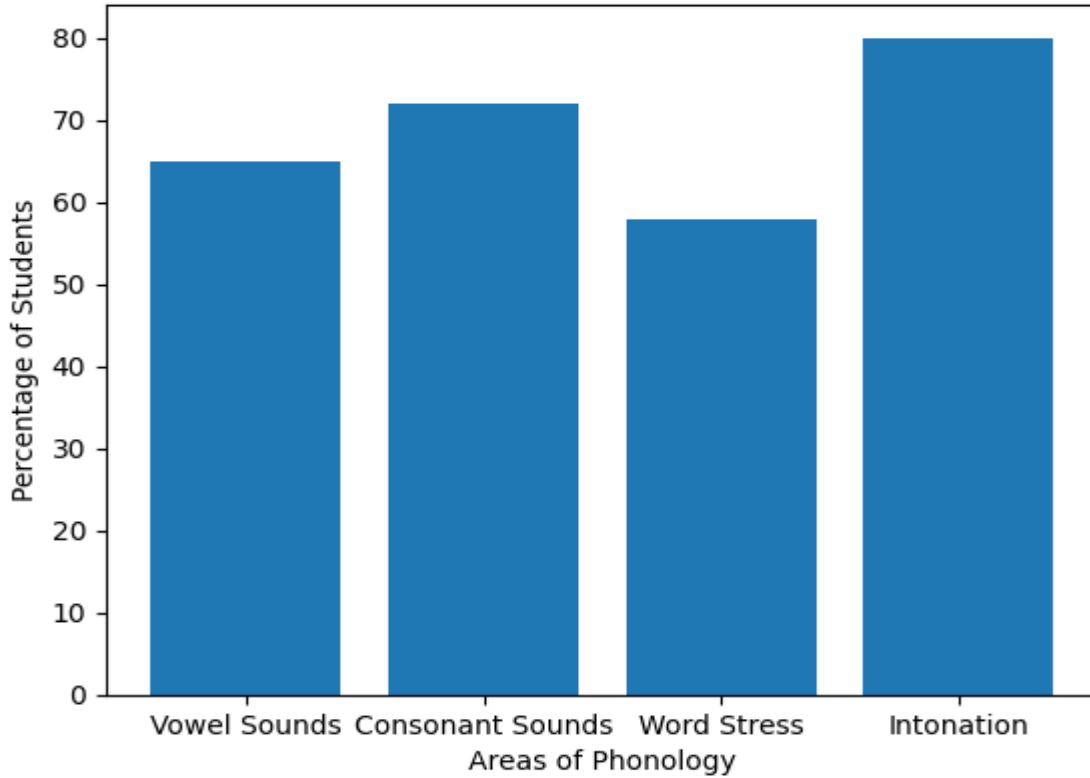


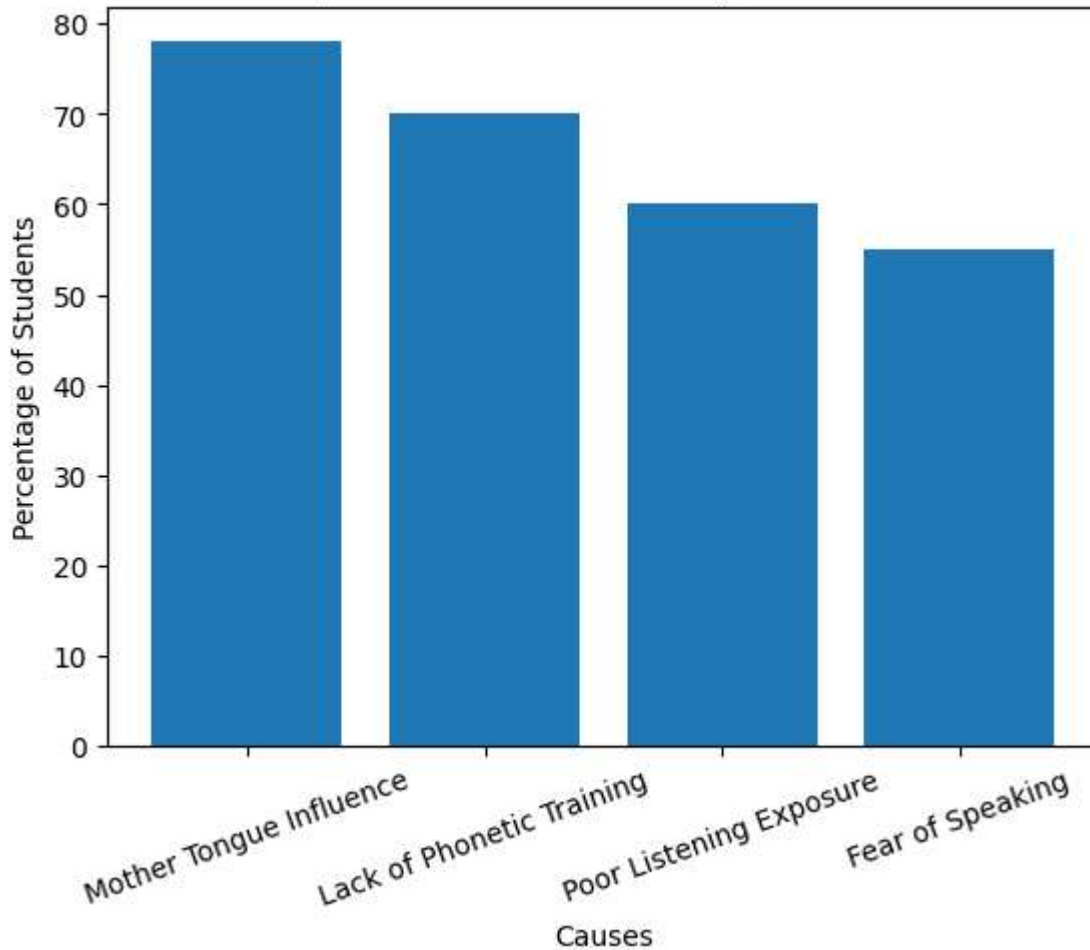
Table 2: Causes of Phonological Problems

| Cause | Students | Percentage |
|---------------------------|----------|------------|
| Mother Tongue Influence | 78 | 78% |
| Lack of Phonetic Training | 70 | 70% |
| Poor Listening Exposure | 60 | 60% |
| Fear of Speaking | 55 | 55% |

Graph 2: Causes of Phonological Problems (Bar Graph)

The bar graph clearly indicates that mother tongue influence (78%) is the major cause of phonological errors, followed by lack of phonetic training.

Graph 2: Causes of Phonological Problems



Hypotheses Testing

Since a majority of students (more than 60%) face phonological difficulties, the Null Hypothesis (H_0) is rejected, and the Alternative Hypothesis (H_1) is accepted.

Findings

1. Undergraduate students face serious phonological difficulties in spoken English, which negatively affect their clarity, fluency, and communication confidence.
2. Among the various components of phonology, **intonation and consonant sounds** are the most problematic, indicating a lack of awareness of English rhythm and sound patterns.
3. **Mother tongue interference** is identified as the primary cause of pronunciation errors, as students tend to transfer phonological patterns from their native language into English.
4. Phonology and pronunciation are **inadequately emphasised in the undergraduate English curriculum**, with greater focus placed on reading and writing skills.
5. Students lack sufficient exposure to **standard English pronunciation models**, including native and neutral varieties, due to limited listening practice.
6. A majority of students are unfamiliar with **International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols**, which restricts their ability to understand and correct pronunciation errors independently.
7. The absence or underutilisation of **language laboratories** in colleges significantly hampers the development of students' pronunciation and listening skills.

8. Students exhibit **low confidence and fear of making mistakes** while speaking English, which further reinforces incorrect pronunciation habits.
9. Limited opportunities for **oral practice and interactive speaking activities** in classrooms contribute to the persistence of phonological errors.
10. Teachers often face **time constraints and a lack of specialised training** in phonetics, which affects effective pronunciation teaching.
11. Students from regional-medium backgrounds exhibit **greater phonological difficulty** than those with prior exposure to English-medium education.
12. Regular, structured pronunciation practice is **largely absent**, leading to the fossilisation of pronunciation errors over time.

Suggestions

1. Phonetics and phonology should be made compulsory in undergraduate syllabi.
2. Language laboratories should be used effectively.
3. Teachers should employ IPA symbols and audio-visual tools.
4. Students should be encouraged to practice listening and speaking daily.
5. Pronunciation drills and interactive speaking sessions should be conducted regularly.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that undergraduate students in Nanded city possess inadequate phonological competence in English, which significantly affects their spoken communication and overall language proficiency. Despite several years of formal English education, students continue to struggle with accurate pronunciation, appropriate stress patterns, and effective use of intonation. These difficulties are largely the result of mother tongue interference, limited exposure to standard English pronunciation, and the lack of systematic phonology instruction at the undergraduate level.

The findings clearly indicate that phonology has not received adequate pedagogical attention in classroom teaching, where greater emphasis is placed on reading and writing skills. As a result, students remain unaware of essential phonological features such as sound distinctions, rhythm, and intonation patterns, leading to persistent pronunciation errors and reduced communicative confidence. The absence of regular oral practice, underutilisation of language laboratories, and limited familiarity with phonetic symbols further contribute to the problem.

The study emphasises that strengthening phonology instruction through structured training, practical exposure, and innovative teaching methods can significantly enhance students' pronunciation skills and confidence in spoken English. Integrating phonetics and phonology into the undergraduate curriculum, promoting interactive speaking activities, and encouraging extensive listening practice can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical language use. Ultimately, improving phonological competence will not only enhance students' academic performance but also increase their employability and effectiveness in real-life communication.

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