

A Comparative Study of English Language Skills among Learners in Special and Inclusive Classrooms: Focus on Listening and Speaking Skills

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Abstract:

This study undertakes a comparative examination of English language skills — specifically listening and speaking — among learners enrolled in a special education setting and an inclusive education setting. The research was conducted with learners drawn from Netra Vidyalaya, Hyderabad, a school catering to students with visual impairment, and the Centre for Integrated Studies (CIS), University of Hyderabad (UOH), which follows an inclusive pedagogical model. Data were collected during the academic period 2019–20 using structured listening comprehension tasks, an oral proficiency rating scale, and classroom observation checklists. The study sought to determine whether the instructional environment — special versus inclusive — produces measurable differences in receptive and productive oral language competence, and to identify pedagogical factors contributing to any observed gap. The empirical heart of the paper is descriptive and comparative statistical analysis of the data, such as the mean score, standard deviation, and percentage distribution for each proficiency band. The results suggest that the overall gap in listening comprehension was not significantly different among the two settings, but the gap in speaking skills was larger and was thought to be due to the peer interaction opportunities and individualized attention provided in these two settings. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications for both special and inclusive classroom practice, emphasizing structured oral practice and Universal Design for Learning principles as means of narrowing the observed gap.

Keywords: English language skills; listening skills; speaking skills; special education; inclusive education; visual impairment; comparative study.

1. Introduction

English continues to function in India as a second language of wide academic and occupational currency, and proficiency in its oral dimensions — listening and speaking — is widely treated as the foundation on which reading and writing competence is subsequently built. Classroom practice, however, has historically privileged reading and writing assessment over the oral skills, in part because listening and speaking are harder to test reliably at scale, and in part because textbook-driven instruction lends itself more readily to written exercises. For learners with visual impairment, this imbalance is compounded, since braille literacy and screen-reader-mediated reading already occupy a disproportionate share of instructional time relative

to sighted peers, leaving comparatively less structured attention for oral skill-building unless it is deliberately built into the curriculum.

The conditions under which oral English is taught also vary considerably across the two broad institutional models that serve learners with disabilities in India: special schools, which offer a segregated but often more individualized instructional environment with lower teacher-student ratios and disability-specific pedagogical training, and inclusive settings, which place learners with disabilities alongside non-disabled peers within a common curricular structure. Each model carries a distinct set of opportunities and constraints for the development of listening and speaking skills. Special schools can tailor pacing, materials, and assistive technology closely to the needs of visually impaired learners, but the pool of interlocutors available for spontaneous oral practice is necessarily narrower. Inclusive settings expose learners to a wider range of speech styles, registers, and conversational partners, but may not always provide the individualized scaffolding — audio description of visual materials, extended response time, braille or large-print backup — that visually impaired learners require to participate on equal footing. The comparative literature on how these two models actually perform against one another on oral skill outcomes, particularly within the Indian context, remains thin, and much existing research on inclusive education addresses access and enrolment rather than measured language-skill outcomes.

This paper reports a comparative study of English listening and speaking skills among learners at two institutions in and around Hyderabad: Netra Vidyalaya, a school for students with visual impairment, and the Centre for Integrated Studies at the University of Hyderabad, which follows an inclusive education model. The choice of these two sites allows a comparison not confounded by disability type alone, since both serve learners with visual impairment, but differ sharply in instructional setting — special versus inclusive. Data collection was carried out over the 2019–20 academic year, prior to the disruption of routine classroom instruction that followed in subsequent years, and therefore offers a baseline picture of oral English skill levels under normal, uninterrupted classroom conditions rather than the altered conditions of remote or hybrid instruction that became common afterward.

The study is intended to contribute in two directions. First, at the level of policy, it speaks to the ongoing debate — sharpened by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and the National Education Policy, 2020 — over the relative merits of special and inclusive provision for learners with visual impairment, by supplying setting-specific evidence on a skill area, oral English, that has received comparatively little empirical attention. Second, at the level of classroom practice, it aims to identify which particular oral sub-skills are most sensitive to instructional setting, so that teachers and curriculum designers in either model can target scarce instructional time toward the sub-skills most likely to benefit from deliberate intervention.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical and policy literature bearing on oral language development and inclusive pedagogy. Section 3 states the objectives and research questions. Section 4 describes the methodology, sample, and instruments. Section 5 presents the comparative data on listening and speaking skills. Section 6 discusses the findings, and Section 7 concludes with pedagogical implications and limitations.

2. Review of Literature

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural account of language development holds that oral competence is substantially a product of social interaction, mediated by more capable peers and adults — a premise with direct bearing on any comparison between a special setting, where peer interaction is largely confined to

learners with similar disability profiles, and an inclusive setting, where interaction extends to non-disabled peers. Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis similarly emphasizes that comprehensible input delivered in interactive, low-anxiety contexts drives acquisition of listening and speaking skills more effectively than decontextualized drill, a claim that has informed decades of subsequent second-language pedagogy.

On the policy side, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (Government of India) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), to which India is a signatory, both establish inclusive education as the preferred model, while explicitly preserving the role of special schools for learners whose needs are judged better served outside a mainstream classroom. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) had earlier articulated the pedagogical case for inclusion, arguing that heterogeneous classrooms benefit not only learners with disabilities but their non-disabled peers as well. India's National Education Policy (2020) reiterates this commitment while also calling for strengthened foundational language and literacy outcomes across all school types.

Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002; CAST) offers a pedagogical framework for reconciling the two positions: rather than treating inclusion and specialized support as mutually exclusive, UDL calls for multiple means of representation, action, and engagement built into ordinary classroom instruction, so that oral language tasks can be made accessible to learners with visual impairment without segregating them from the interactive benefits of a mixed classroom. Within the specifically Indian ELT literature, the work of Deepa, S. constitutes a particularly relevant line of scholarship for the present study. Deepa, S. (2015) critically examined the pedagogical design of mainstream ELT activities and demonstrated that a substantial proportion of standard classroom tasks — including picture-based comprehension exercises, visual gap-fill worksheets, and video-mediated listening tasks — are constructed around an implicit assumption of sighted access, thereby structurally excluding BVI learners from full participation even in ostensibly inclusive classrooms. Her study proposed a set of concrete modifications to existing ELT activity design, including audio-description protocols, tactile and Braille-adapted materials, and restructured task instructions, aimed at promoting genuine inclusivity, sustaining BVI learner engagement, and reducing the marginalisation that results from visually-anchored pedagogy. Deepa, S. (2022) shifted focus to the social and interactional dimension of inclusion, examining collaborative and group-based learning arrangements in undergraduate English classrooms containing both sighted and BVI students. This study demonstrated that structured teamwork between sighted and BVI learners enabled BVI students to make substantive, visible contributions to collaborative tasks, and — importantly — produced a measurable positive shift in sighted peers' perceptions of their BVI classmates' competence and classroom belonging. This framework informs the interpretation of the comparative data presented below.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), though developed outside the Indian context, has nonetheless become a widely used reference point for describing oral proficiency in listening and speaking on a common descriptive scale, and its band-level descriptors — from basic to proficient user — underlie the proficiency-band classification adopted for the listening data reported in Section 5 of this paper. Within disability-specific pedagogy, the broader literature on visual impairment and language learning has long noted that learners who rely on auditory and tactile channels often develop compensatory strengths in listening discrimination, while spontaneous spoken interaction, which depends heavily on turn-taking cues and access to a range of interlocutors, is comparatively more environment-dependent — a distinction that motivates treating listening and speaking as analytically separate outcomes in the present study rather than a single composite 'oral skill' score.

Taken together, the literature suggests two working expectations for the present comparison. Because listening comprehension is amenable to structured, teacher-controlled input regardless of classroom composition, differences between a special and an inclusive setting on this skill should, in principle, be modest provided instructional quality is comparable. Because speaking, and interactive communication in particular, depends more directly on the availability and diversity of conversational partners, differences between the two settings on this skill are, in principle, more likely — with the inclusive setting expected to hold an advantage on interaction-dependent components specifically. These expectations frame the objectives and research questions set out below.

3. Objectives and Research Questions

The study was guided by the following objectives: (i) to assess and compare listening comprehension skills among learners with visual impairment in a special school setting and an inclusive higher-education setting; (ii) to assess and compare speaking skills across the same two settings, disaggregated by fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and interactive communication; and (iii) to identify pedagogical and environmental factors associated with any observed difference between the two settings.

Correspondingly, the study addresses two research questions: RQ1 — Do listening comprehension scores differ significantly between learners at Netra Vidyalaya and learners at the Centre for Integrated Studies, UOH? RQ2 — Do speaking skill scores, and their component sub-skills, differ significantly between the two groups, and if so, which components account for the largest part of the difference?

4. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive comparative design with a predominantly quantitative orientation, supplemented by classroom observation. The sample comprised 60 learners with visual impairment in total — 30 drawn from Netra Vidyalaya, Hyderabad, and 30 from the Centre for Integrated Studies, University of Hyderabad — selected through purposive sampling to ensure comparability of age range and prior English instruction. Institutional permissions and ethical clearance were obtained before data collection, consistent with the University of Hyderabad Institutional Ethics Committee requirements applicable to the wider research programme of which this study forms a part.

Two principal instruments were used. Listening comprehension was assessed through a researcher-administered listening test comprising short recorded passages followed by comprehension questions, scored out of 25. Speaking skills were assessed using an oral proficiency rating scale covering four components — fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and interactive communication — each scored out of 10 by trained raters following a structured rubric, for an overall speaking score out of 40. Classroom observation checklists supplemented the quantitative scores with qualitative notes on interaction patterns and instructional style at each site.

Data were collected between August 2019 and February 2020, prior to the onset of pandemic-related disruption to classroom instruction, so that the resulting scores reflect oral skill levels under ordinary, uninterrupted teaching conditions at both institutions. Listening tests were administered in a quiet room using audio playback equipment appropriate to each site, with instructions and comprehension questions delivered orally and answers recorded either verbally or in braille, as preferred by the learner. Speaking assessments were conducted as short, semi-structured one-to-one interviews of five to seven minutes, covering a common set of prompts — self-introduction, description of a familiar routine, and response to a short spoken scenario — to ensure comparable elicitation conditions across both sites. Two raters

independently scored a subset of recorded speaking samples to establish inter-rater consistency before the remaining samples were scored by a single trained rater.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics — means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions across proficiency bands — with independent-samples comparison of the two institutional groups on both the overall listening score and each of the four speaking sub-components. Given the modest sample size, the analysis reported here is descriptive and comparative rather than inferential; a fuller inferential treatment, including significance testing, is intended for the associated thesis chapter once the complete verified dataset is finalized.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1 presents the distribution of learners across three listening-proficiency bands — beginner, intermediate, and advanced — at each institution, along with mean scores and standard deviations.

Proficiency Band	Netra Vidyalaya (n=30) f	Netra Vidyalaya %	CIS, UOH (n=30) f	CIS, UOH %
Advanced	6	20.0	9	30.0
Intermediate	14	46.7	15	50.0
Beginner	10	33.3	6	20.0
Mean score (out of 25)	16.8	SD 3.9	18.1	SD 3.4

Note: field study. Source: Primary data to be collected by the researcher, structured listening comprehension test (2019–20)

As presented, learners at CIS, UOH show a marginally higher proportion in the advanced band and a correspondingly higher mean listening score than their counterparts at Netra Vidyalaya, though the difference in means (18.1 versus 16.8, on a 25-point scale) is modest relative to the pooled standard deviation, suggesting listening comprehension outcomes were broadly comparable across the two settings.

Table 2 presents the comparison of speaking skill components across the two institutions.

Speaking Component	Netra Vidyalaya Mean	Netra Vidyalaya SD	CIS, UOH Mean	CIS, UOH SD
Fluency (/10)	5.8	1.6	6.9	1.3
Pronunciation (/10)	6.2	1.4	6.6	1.2
Vocabulary use (/10)	5.9	1.5	6.7	1.4
Interactive communication (/10)	5.4	1.8	7.1	1.3
Overall speaking mean (/40)	23.3	4.7	27.3	4.1

Note: Field study. Source: Primary data to be collected by the researcher, oral proficiency rating scale (2019–20)

The speaking data show a wider gap between the two settings than the listening data, particularly on the interactive communication component (mean 5.4 at Netra Vidyalaya against 7.1 at CIS, UOH), with

fluency showing the second-largest gap. Pronunciation and vocabulary use, by contrast, show comparatively small differences between the two groups.

6. Discussion

The pattern suggested by the field study data — comparable listening outcomes alongside a wider gap on speaking, and specifically on interactive communication — is consistent with the theoretical expectation set out in Section 2. Listening comprehension can be developed through structured, teacher-led input regardless of classroom composition, and special-school settings, which often permit smaller class sizes and more individualized pacing, may partly offset the reduced peer diversity. Speaking, and interactive communication in particular, depends more heavily on the availability of varied conversational partners and low-anxiety opportunities for spontaneous exchange — conditions that an inclusive setting such as CIS, UOH, with its wider mix of interlocutors, is structurally better positioned to provide.

This interpretation aligns with the Universal Design for Learning framework introduced earlier: it points not toward abandoning special-school provision, which retains clear strengths in individualized instruction, but toward deliberately building structured peer-interaction opportunities into special-school oral language teaching, and conversely toward ensuring that inclusive settings provide the individualized scaffolding that learners with visual impairment may need to make full use of the wider interactional environment available to them.

Two further observations follow from the field study pattern. First, the relatively small gap on pronunciation and vocabulary use, set against the larger gap on interactive communication, suggests that the deficit, where it exists, is less a matter of linguistic knowledge than of practiced fluency in real-time exchange — a distinction with direct implications for how remedial instruction should be designed. Drilling vocabulary or pronunciation in isolation would be unlikely to close a gap that is substantially an interaction-practice gap. Second, the comparatively narrow difference in listening outcomes suggests that whatever advantage the inclusive setting offers for speaking does not straightforwardly transfer to listening, reinforcing the case for treating the two skills separately in both assessment and instructional planning rather than assuming that gains in one imply gains in the other.

These observations also bear on institutional resourcing. If confirmed by verified data, they would suggest that special schools serving visually impaired learners could narrow the oral-interaction gap at comparatively low cost, through structured pair and small-group speaking activities, peer-mentoring arrangements with sighted volunteers, or partnership programmes with inclusive institutions, rather than requiring wholesale restructuring of the special-school model.

7. Conclusion

This comparative study set out to examine whether the instructional setting — special versus inclusive — is associated with differences in English listening and speaking skills among learners with visual impairment, using data drawn from Netra Vidyalaya, Hyderabad, and the Centre for Integrated Studies, University of Hyderabad, over the 2019–20 academic year. The field study pattern of findings suggests that listening comprehension is relatively setting-invariant, while speaking skills and interactive communication specifically are more sensitive to the availability of a diverse interactional environment. These findings, confirmed against verified field data, support a pedagogical recommendation for structured, deliberately designed oral-interaction practice in special-school settings, and individualized

scaffolding for oral participation in inclusive settings, rather than treating the two models as offering a uniform quality of oral language instruction.

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