

Where do We Stand on CEFR? An Analytical Study on ESL Learners' Language Proficiency

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Abstract

English is a widely accepted *lingua franca* which makes the people understand one another and connects them together. English has become a language of opportunities in the liberalized economic world. Considering its significance in the developing economies like India, there have been several efforts to impart quality learning of English language at various levels of formal education system. But there is a dearth in the uniform assessment of English language proficiency of our learners at various levels. The information about English language proficiency level of the learners helps the teachers to design the educational programmes systematically to fulfil their social, academic and employment needs. This paper tries to bring out an analytical study of the English language proficiency of the tertiary level students as per the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The four language skills (LSRW) of the learners are assessed by conducting a Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET).

Keywords: English Language Proficiency, CEFR, Tertiary Level, Language Skills, PET.

1. Introduction

English, a language spoken during middle ages by the people living in what is now called England, has undergone several influences over centuries and emerged as one of the world's main languages of international trade, communication, education and science. During colonisation, the British carried and spread English almost all over the world. They introduced English language education in their colonies and trained the local people to communicate in English so as the local people helped them in administration of colonies. This English language in turn helped the local people to get access to the other territories in the multilingual countries like India and united the people to revolt against the British. English has become *lingua franca* of the world and acted as a link language between the people who speak thousands of vernacular languages. It served as a unifying tool for the people of multilingual countries and led them towards getting independence. Though the British retreated from the colonies but their language could not be withdrawn. Instead it has become an essential link language between the people of the world.

There are a large number of people using English in their social, educational and professional needs. While classifying the speakers of English all over the world, Braj Kachru (1985) proposed 'three circles' view. According to him, the inner circle comprises of the native speakers from the countries like the USA, the UK, Australia etc. where English is the national language. The countries like India and Singapore fall in outer circle in which English speaking has got a long history and English is being used as a second language besides their mother tongue. In the third circle English is

a dominant foreign language and it is an expanding circle. The countries like China, Turkey, Sweden etc. fall under this category. He has predicted that the non-native speakers outnumber the native speakers of English by the year 2000. According to the estimations of Graddol (2006) the ratio of native and non-native speakers of English is 1:5 by 2040 and there will be three billion 'functional users' of English in the world by then.

2. English Language Proficiency Tests

English has become an official language in many countries of the world even though it is not the native language of those people. English is being learnt as a second language in those countries. When the international students seek admission in the higher educational institutions in the USA, the UK or Australia, they are required to take an English proficiency test. Possessing strong English language skills is also essential for immigration to English speaking countries or for working in multinational professional organisations. Certain level of English language proficiency has become essential for the non-native speakers of English to avail the opportunities of organised sectors of the world. Particularly in the modern world, the students who seek educational and employment opportunities in the overseas need to appear for various proficiency tests and prove their level of English language proficiency suitable for academic, professional and real-life requirements of those nations. There are a number of English language proficiency tests accepted by institutions and organisations across the world. IELTS is one of the most widely accepted exam throughout the UK, Ireland, Canada and New Zealand. TOEFL is another widely used exam in Northern American Universities. Recently PTE is also accepted in a number of countries. Among all, The Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR) is most commonly used reference to indicate the levels of language proficiency throughout the world. Cambridge ESOL examinations has designed a number of tests at various levels for general, academic and business purposes.

There has been a rapid growth in the demand for English language learning and assessment of the language proficiency for the last twenty to thirty years. Recognising the significant role of English language in providing the better opportunities academically, socially and economically, many people in India aspire for 'anglicising' their children from the initial levels of their education. There have been many reforms in the educational systems and language policies of various central and state boards of the country to impart quality learning of English as a second language. Even after learning English as a second language for more than twelve to fourteen years, it is often observed that many of our students are unable to use English in their real-life contexts. There has been little effort in assessing the quality of English language learnt at various stages of a student's educational career. There is no uniform scale in our country to assess the level of language proficiency of our students learning English in different geographical and social contexts. Professor Rama Mathew expressed in the third policy dialogue (2009), as quoted in Graddol, "I strongly believe that we need an Indian test which can assess our learners' language proficiency at different levels." (2010:116) The former CIEFL tried to administer National English Language Test (NELT) but could not succeed. Its successor, English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) has set up The All India English Language Testing Authority (AIELTA) to conduct national level English language assessment but has not started its trials even after a decade of its inception.

3. Objective of the Study

This study is an attempt to find out the English language proficiency level of the learners at the beginning of graduation. It also tries to find out the performance of the learners in various language

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skills viz. Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. The result of this study is expected to help the teachers understand the performance of the learners in different language skills so as to plan the instruction according to the needs of the learners by filling the gaps in their learning.

4. Review of Literature

As there are no studies available in Indian context to examine the students' English language proficiency level with indigenous variety, a few of the foreign studies are observed to understand the significance and relevance of these tests. Nurhazlini Rahmat, et al. (2015) conducted a correlation study between English language proficiency test and undergraduate academic achievement in University Putra Malaysia. They found that there was a medium positive correlation between English language proficiency and academic achievement where the students who scored higher bands in English proficiency tests were also scored good CGPA in academics. This study suggested that the universities should change the minimum entry requirements of language proficiency to ensure the academic excellence of prospective graduates.

Wilson and Komba (2012) conducted a study to find out the relation between English language proficiency of the learners and their academic results. They concluded that there was a weak positive relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement of the learners. Contrastingly, the study by Stephen, Welwan and Jordaan (2004) investigated the impact of English language proficiency on academic success found that there was a high correlation between language proficiency and the academic success of the students in Africa

Majority of the studies state that the level of language proficiency determines to some extent the academic performance of the learners. In India, there are several entrance examinations (like JIPMER, CAT, BITSAT etc.) for admissions into professional courses include a few questions on English to test the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and comprehension of the students but there is no place for assessing the ability of using language skills in the real-life situations. The present study attempts to offer some information about the English language abilities of the learners who joined in the engineering graduation programme in Andhra Pradesh.

5. Methodology

5.1. Sample Group

The sample chosen for this study are 120 students at tertiary level. They are pursuing computer science engineering in Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research, a private deemed to be university located in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. These learners have recently completed their intermediate (+2) education and joined in engineering first semester. These learners are offered a course called 'English Proficiency and Communication Skills' (EPCS), a special mandatory course designed as a part of the curriculum to enhance the learners' English language proficiency. The major objective of this course is to enable the learners perform independently in four language skills in both academic and real-life contexts. The outcome of this course is measured by conducting an intermediate level international English Proficiency Test. At the end of this course, these learners appear for Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET). It is a B1 level certification of English language proficiency as per Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

5.2. Research Tools

As there is no approved Indian test for assessing English language proficiency of the learners at any level, the researchers have used a previous paper of Preliminary English Test, available in the Cambridge website (<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams-and-tests/preliminary/preparation/>) for the conduction of this study. This paper has four sections namely Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. All the tasks reflect the real-life use of English language. Reading section has 35 multiple choice questions in five parts. They focus on testing various sub-skill of reading. Writing section has 8 questions in three parts. All the writing tasks are designed on informal contexts which the learners experience in their real life. The tasks test the learners' situational use of vocabulary, grammar and communicative achievement in short compositions. Listening section has 25 questions in four parts ranging from picture identification to note-taking and understanding the facts and opinions in conversations. Speaking section has four parts which would test the students' grammar and vocabulary, discourse management, pronunciation, interactive communication and global achievement. The learners' performance in each skill is assessed separately at a scale of 170 points and the final grade is awarded by considering the average score of all four skills put together.

5.3. Administering and Assessment

The test is conducted as per the norms stipulated for PET examination. As researcher¹ is a member in the core team of operations for conducting examinations from the Cambridge Authorized Exam Centre, all the precautions have been taken to create the formal test conditions. Reading and writing tests are conducted together in 90 minutes and after a short gap of 15 minutes, listening test is conducted for about 30 minutes. Speaking test is conducted for pairs of students for about 10-12 minutes each by the examiners who are certified 'Speaking Examiners' for conducting CEFR-B1 level examinations. The researchers have taken the help of a few more examiners for assessing the speaking performance of the learners. After the test, the researchers interacted with the learners informally to know the opinion of the learners about the test experience. Then the answer scripts are evaluated as per the prescribed key and evaluation scales of Cambridge Preliminary English Test. Though the number of tasks in each skill are not the same, the performance in the tasks is normalised and calculated for all the four skills (LSRW) equally. The scores for each skill are tabulated and analysed range-wise and task-wise.

6. Data Analysis

The performance of the 120 learners is evaluated and the scores are presented independently and cumulatively for all the four skills. Irrespective of the number of questions for each skill in the test, the scores are normalised equally for all skills and assessed on the CEFR Levels of A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 respectively from lower level to higher level. The assessment scale ranges from 100 to 220 and as per the score of the learners, their level of language proficiency increases at every 20 points from A1 to C2. The Preliminary English Test is assessed at B1 level in which the scores of the learners are marked from 120 to 170. By considering the average of all the four skills, when the learner scores between 120 and 140, his or her performance is reported at A2 level. The scores of 140 to 159 achieve a pass at B1 level and above 160 are rated at B2 level. In the present study, the scores are normalised as per the Cambridge assessment scale. The performance of the learners in LSRW skills of Preliminary English Test is presented in the following tables.

Table-1 represents the percentage of learners performed at different levels of each skill. The total percentage of learners at each CEFR level is also shown along with the cumulative average and mean scores of each skill. The fractions in the percentage are rounded to the nearest value.

Scores	CEFR level	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking	Average
80-99	Pre-A1	18	48	21	8	20
100-119	A1	38	28	44	72	52
120-139	A2	32	18	28	19	27
140-159	B1	11	6	7	1	2
160-179	B2	3	0	1	0	0
Mean Score		117	101	112	114	111

Table-1: Performance of learners in LSRW skills (figures in % of students)

In addition to the assessment of skill wise performance of the learners, a detailed study on the task wise performance has also been conducted to understand complexity of the task and the sub-skills need to be improved in the learners. Table-2 reveals the task wise performance of the learners in LSRW skills. The average scores in each part of the skill are presented in percentage of correct answers.

Skills	Part-1	Part-2	Part-3	Part-4	Part-5
Reading	75	76	70	54	69
Writing	41	67	62	-	-
Listening	70	71	54	67	-
Speaking	67	64	65	66	69

Table-2: Task-wise performance in LSRW skills. (in %)

The detailed description about the skill wise performance of the learners is presented in the following parts.

6.1. Reading

Reading section has 35 questions in five parts and tasks are arranged from simple messages to information gap activities in the longer texts. All the texts are extracted from real life situations like information from notices, brochures, websites etc. The learners are expected to use the sub-skills of reading like inferencing, scanning, reading for details, etc.

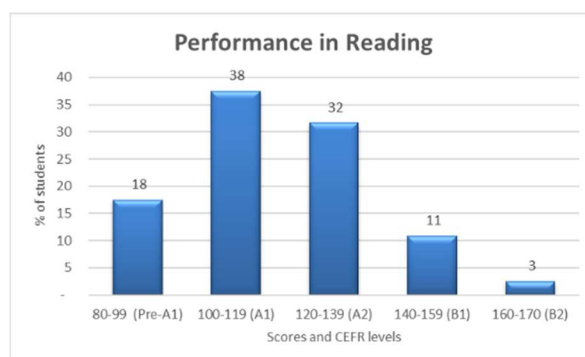


Figure-1: Reading Scores

Figure-1 shows the performance of the learners in reading skill. The scores are presented at every 20-point interval as per CEFR levels. The number of students scored in the given range is presented in percentages. 18% students scored between 80 and 99 which is considered Pre-A1 level. 38% students scored between 100 and 119 and it is at A1 level. 32% students scored between 120 and 139 and are reported at A2 level. Those who score 140 and more are certified at B1 level of language proficiency. There are 11% students at this range and 3% students have scored more than 160 which is a B2 level performance.

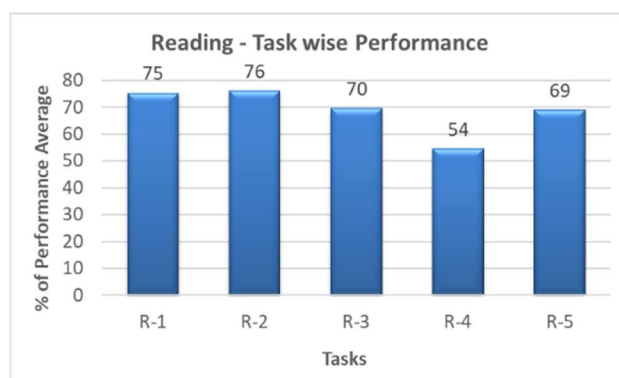


Figure-2: Task wise Reading Performance

Figure-2 presents the performance of the learners in five tasks of reading skill. The average scores of each task are presented in percentages. The Figure shows that the learners' score in task four, a reading comprehension passage with five multiple choice questions is lower than the score of other tasks. The teachers need to find the reasons for the difficulty of the task and work on to help the learners overcome the problems.

6.2. Writing

Writing skill section has three parts. The learner's grammar and composition are tested in the writing skill. The tasks focus on testing the use of language (vocabulary & Grammar) relevance of the content, organisation of the information and communicative achievement by using appropriate register for the context in these three tasks.

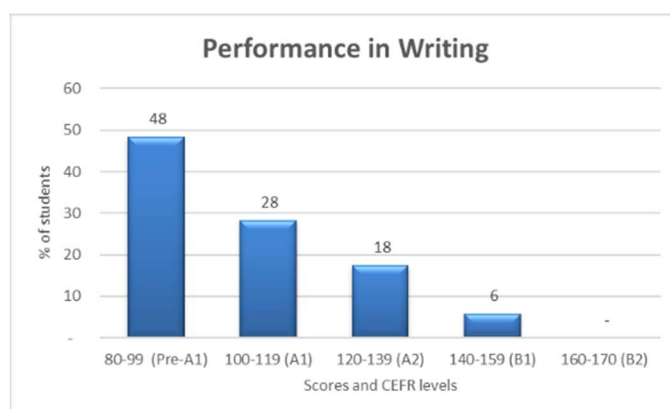


Figure-3: Writing Scores

The performance of learners in the tasks of writing skill is presented in figure-3. Two large groups of learners (48% and 28%) have performed at Pre-A1 and A1 levels respectively. 18% students

have got 120-139 score range and only 6% have shown B1 level performance in writing. This is an alarming situation that the learners' writing skills are far below the beginners' level of language proficiency.

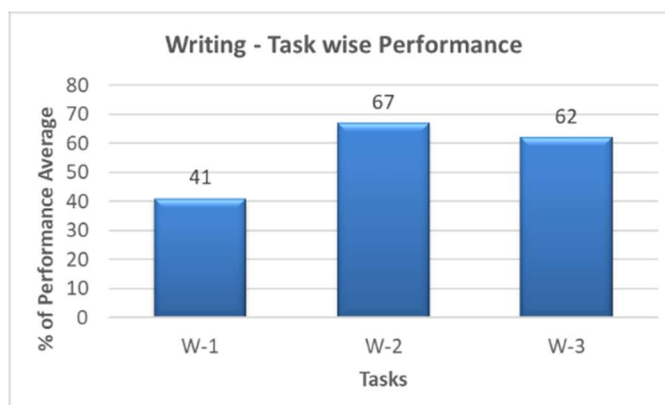


Figure-4: Task wise Writing Performance

Figure-4 presents the writing task performance in more detail that the first task of rewriting the given sentence in a different structure seems to be very difficult for the learners to cope with. Their performance in the second task of e-mail writing and the third task of response to the letters received is also moderate and the learners could not accomplish these tasks well. Major problems are identified in the mechanics of writing short and longer composition.

6.3. Listening

Listening is a primary receptive skill for learning a language. While learning a second language, there has been no attention on developing listening skills of the learners. It is the first time for many learners to experience a listening test in learning a second language. There are 25 questions in four parts of the listening test.

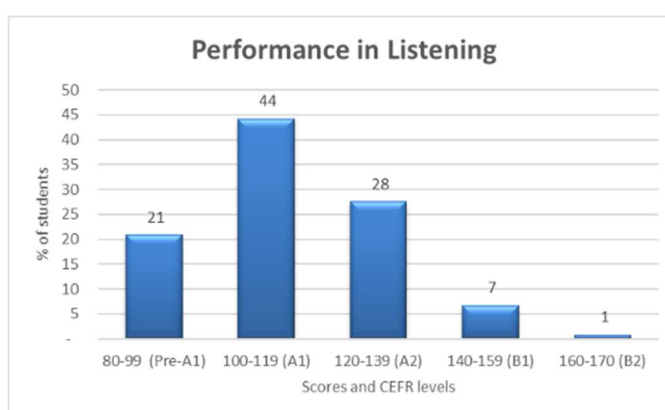


Figure-5: Listening Scores

Figure-5 presents the performance of the learners in listening skill. 21% students scored less than 99 and 44% scored between 100 and 119. These two groups are at pre-A1 and A1 levels. 28% students scored between 120 and 139 and their performance is at A2 level. 7% students performed at B1 level with a score between 140 and 159. Only 1% scored more than 160 to reach B2 level in listening.

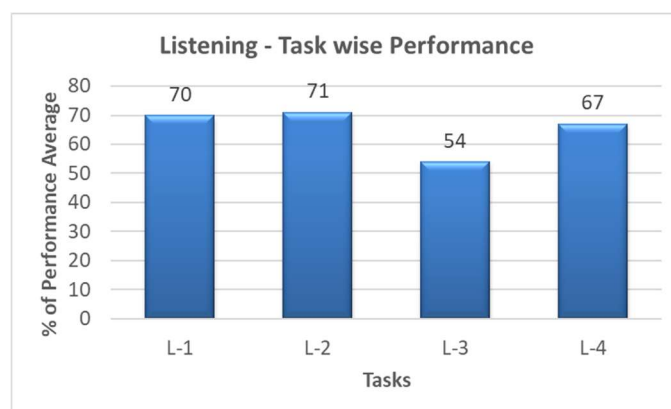


Figure-6: Task wise Listening Performance

Figure-6 shows task wise performance in listening. The learners listen to short conversations, monologues and dialogues to identify pictures, to comprehend the messages, to make notes and to understand intentions and opinions of the speakers. Except task three, the performance in the other tasks is in a range of 70,71 and 67.

6.4. Speaking

Any individual's language ability is often remarked by observing the spoken performance of that individual in general contexts. The performance in speaking test is assessed by the 'Speaking Examiners' who are certified by Cambridge to assess CEFR-B1 level exams. They follow a five-point assessment scale with the criteria of Grammar and Vocabulary (GV), Discourse Management (DM), Pronunciation (P), Interactive Communication (IC) and Global Achievement (GA).

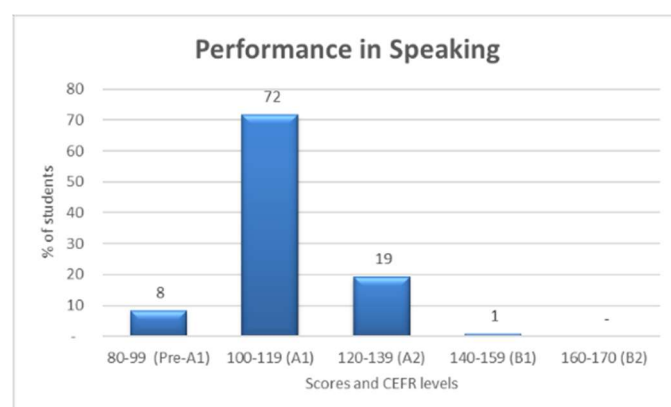


Figure-7: Speaking Scores

Figure-7 shows the speaking scores of the learners. A majority (72%) have scored between 100 and 119 at A1 level with 8% students scored less than that at Pre-A1 level. 19% students are at A2 level with a score between 120 and 139. Only 1% students reached B1 level with a score of more than 140.

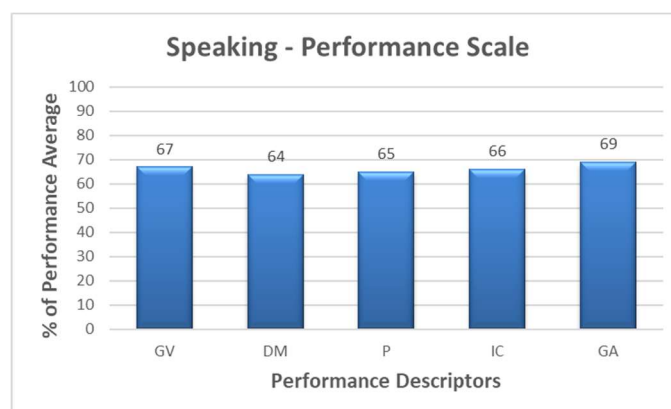


Figure-8: Descriptor wise Speaking Performance

Figure-8 reveals the performance of learners as per the assessment scale. The five-point scale and five criteria used to assess are presented here. The performance seems to be uniformly moderate in the criteria and the overall performance is at level A1 only.

6.5. Performance in LSRW Skills

The performance of the learners in each of the language skills is presented above and a comparative study is presented in Figure-9.

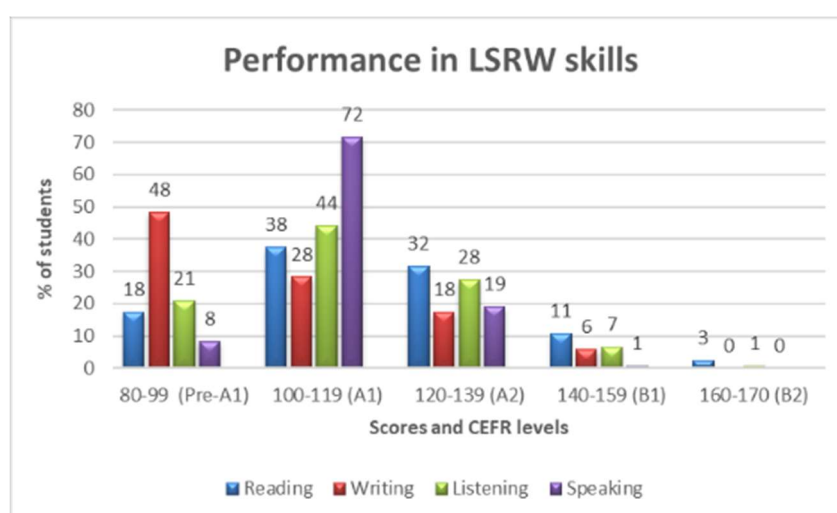


Figure-9: Skill wise Scores

It shows that all bars are high at A1 level. Reading performance is high at A1 and A2 levels, writing performance is high at Pre-A1 and A2 levels, listening performance is high at A1 and A2 levels and speaking is more at A1 and A2. All the bars are gradually very low in A2 and B1 levels.

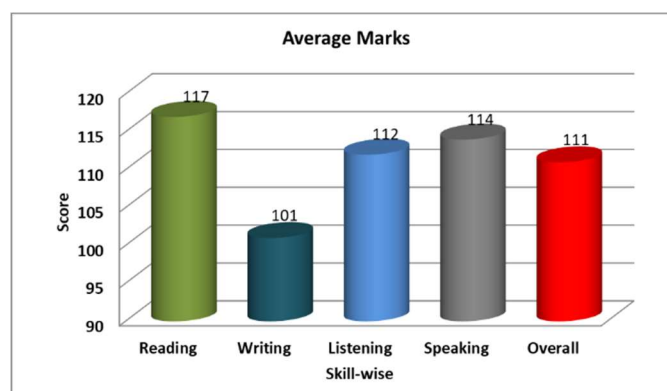


Figure-10: Skill wise average scores

A clear comparison of performances in LSRW skills is found in figure-10. The skill wise average score of 120 students is presented. The mean scores of all four skills is also provided in total score. The students got the mean score of 117 in reading 101 in writing, 112 in listening and 114 in speaking skills. The average of cumulative total is 111 which is at A1 level of CEFR.

6.6. Overall Performance

Though the scores are presented in each skill separately, the overall proficiency level is assessed by calculating the average of all the four skill. All the skills have equal weightage in the assessment irrespective of the number of questions in each component.

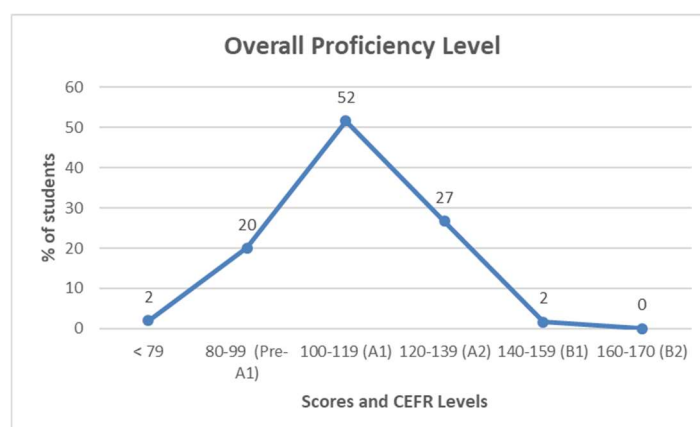


Figure-11: Overall Proficiency Level

Figure-11 represents the overall English language proficiency levels of the learners in this study as shown in table-1 above. 20% learners' language proficiency is at Pre-A1 level and a majority 52% are at A1 level. 27% learners have shown their ability at A2 level and only 2% are at B1 level of language proficiency.

7. Findings

The performance of the students in this study has been analysed in the previous parts of this paper. The reflections of the students have also collected in the informal oral interactions after

conduction of the test. The scores of the test and reflections of the students help the researchers to make the following finding about the graduate students' English language proficiency.

- a) It is for the first time they have appeared for the skill based English language proficiency test.
- b) Listening and speaking skill sections are entirely a new domain for them in testing.
- c) The tasks in LSRW skills are close to their real-life situations and are interesting.
- d) The students' performance in the reading skill component is the highest of all skills.
- e) The students' performance in the writing skill component is the lowest of all skills.
- f) Listening and speaking skills performance is just above the average performance of all four skills.
- g) The average score in each skill is in between 100 and 119 which is considered A1 as per CEFR.
- h) The total score of 111, an average of the scores in all four skills, is also at the A1 level.

According to Common European Framework of Reference for languages, B1 level proficiency of second language learner is regarded as a pre-independent user and B2 level is considered independent user. At these levels the learners will be able to use LSRW skill independently in both familiar and unfamiliar contexts. As per Graddol (2006), in the traditional EFL contexts, the learners are expected to reach the B1 level at the age of 16 and B2 level at the age of 18 and the graduate level academic requirement is C1 level at the age of 20 (2006:97). If these standards are considered as reference for our Indian students, there is a huge gulf between the actual abilities of Indian students and the expectations of the real world. The present study reveals that more than 90% of our Indian students do not reach up to these levels at present. There are several countries creating new orthodoxy in learning English as a second language. Graddol remarks that "...the relationship between age and expected levels of proficiency in English has dramatically shifted from the traditional EFL model, with major implications for textbooks, curriculums, methodologies, and assessment. English learning at basic – and sometimes intermediate levels – is becoming a childhood matter." (2006:97)

8. Limitations of the Study

This study is conducted on the students of a private deemed to be university. The learners have scored more than 80% in their intermediate education. All the sample group of learners are taken from computer science branch. The geographic location of the learners is mostly in three coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh. The scale chosen for language proficiency assessment is CEFR and the tool used in the assessment is Preliminary English Test tasks. The result of the research may vary if any of the conditions mentioned above are changed.

9. Suggestions

Based on the finding of this study, it can be suggested to the teacher educators, curriculum developers and policy makers that there should be a systematic, goal-oriented progress in the learning of a second language particularly in the acquisition of English as an international language. English proficiency tests focus on assessing the performance of the learners in real life language use. Hence, there should be a due importance in curriculum design and material development on enhancing LSRW skills of the learners in addition to vocabulary and grammar. There is also a need for standardised national level assessment of English language proficiency at all levels of education as it helps the teachers and educators to verify whether the learning objectives and outcomes are achieved or not in the practical sense of language use. The implications of this study would also help the students to realise their potential in the acquisition of language skills so as they can work on the areas which need

improvement. The researchers may further work on these finding to relate the future performance of the learners in their academics to their English language proficiency.

10. Conclusion

The present study reveals the fact that the students at the beginning of technical graduation course could perform at A1 level language proficiency which is an alarming condition in the teaching and learning of English as a second language in the region. These learners aspire for higher education or employment at the end of their graduation. Enabling these learners to be industry ready and making them eligible to get admission at foreign higher educational institutions is a challenge ahead of the teachers of English. The teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers and policy makers need to rethink and analyse the systems being implemented and introduce more effective ways of quality learning. Availing the opportunities in the modern liberalized economic world irrespective of nationalities with the help of English language proficiency is gaining momentum. It is the responsibility of all the involved in the process of the English Language Education in India to ensure that our ESL learners should not fall behind in the global competition.

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Web Resources

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