RESEARCH PAPER

Bridging the Gaps: Incongruences and challenges in Academic English skills and Professional English skills

Diriba Legesse* and Wondimu Tegegne

Department of English Language and Literature Ambo University, Ambo Ethiopia

Corresponding Author: Email: fenetd29@gmail.com

Abstract

Mastery of English language skills is essential for academic success and professional development, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts such as Ethiopia. This study investigated English language skill difficulties faced by undergraduate agriculture students at Ambo University and former graduates in their workplaces. It focused on their proficiency in the four macro-skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), the challenges encountered in academic contexts, and the language barriers experienced in professional settings. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. A survey was administered to 13 former graduates and 121 undergraduate agriculture students across different academic programs, assessing their self-reported proficiency and their areas of difficulty in English language skills. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four English language instructors and four employers working in various sectors of the agriculture industry. In addition, an evaluation of course materials assessed their alignment with students' English proficiency levels. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data. Findings revealed significant difficulties in writing and speaking, particularly in academic reporting, presentations, and discussions. Former graduates reported that these challenges persist in professional settings, hindering effective communication, access to resources, and career advancement. Contributing factors included inadequate language support and insufficient focus on English within the curriculum. This research highlights the need for tailored language instruction aligned with the academic and professional demands of agriculture students. By addressing these needs, universities can better prepare graduates to meet the challenges of global and national agricultural development. The findings provide actionable insights for higher education institutions in Ethiopia and similar contexts, underscoring the importance of specialized English education in fostering academic and professional competence in agriculture.

Keywords: Academic needs, English for Specific Purpose, English language skills, needs analysis

Introduction

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged as a critical area in language education, especially in non-native English-speaking contexts where English serves as the primary medium of instruction in higher education and the working language in many professional fields. Hutchinson and Waters (2020) emphasize the importance of tailoring ESP to meet specific academic and professional needs. For agriculture students and former graduates at Ambo University, proficiency in English is essential for academic success and professional competence. Mesfin (2020) highlights similar challenges faced by students in Ethiopia. However, these students face significant challenges in acquiring the specific language skills necessary for their academic coursework and professional careers. This study investigates the English language skills difficulties encountered by undergraduate agriculture students and former graduates, emphasizing the need for ESP interventions to enhance their linguistic proficiency and

performance in academic and professional settings (Hyland, K. 2018).

The concept of ESP is grounded in tailoring language instruction to meet specific learner needs in particular disciplines, such as agriculture. Hutchinson and Waters (2020) and Abuklaish (2014) highlight that ESP differs from general English by focusing on practical applications in professional and academic contexts, requiring specific vocabulary, discourse, and communicative skills. In agriculture, these skills include reading and interpreting scientific articles, writing research reports, engaging in technical discussions, and delivering presentations on specialized topics. However, existing research indicates that many students, especially in developing countries like Ethiopia, struggle with these demands due to limited prior exposure to English for academic purposes (Mesfin, 2020; Bedilu, 2020).

Needs analysis is central to any ESP curriculum, identifying gaps between students' current language abilities and the skills required in their field. Basturkmen (2010) emphasizes that a thorough needs analysis involves understanding target language use situations, required competencies, and learners' perceptions of their needs. For agriculture students, this analysis evaluates their abilities in reading technical documents, scientific writing, and spoken communication in academic and professional settings. Studies suggest needs analysis is crucial in fields like agriculture, where language requirements are highly specialized and distinct (Chostelidou, 2011; Abuklaish *et al.*, 2014).

At Ambo University, where English is the medium of instruction, agriculture students often encounter linguistic challenges hindering academic performance and limiting professional participation. Their difficulties span reading comprehension, writing proficiency, oral communication, and listening skills. Kagwesage (2013) and Shibeshi (2017) note that for students in technical fields, understanding and producing specialized texts is particularly difficult when their general English skills are weak. Flowerdew (2013) adds that agriculture students must navigate complex scientific literature and produce research reports requiring precise language use, yet many lack even basic English proficiency, let alone mastery of discipline-specific language.

In a similar vein, agriculture former graduates face challenges in their professional careers. They must communicate effectively with peers, supervisors, and international partners, write reports, deliver presentations, and engage in negotiations, all of which demand high English proficiency. Deveci (2017) and Bantalem (2017) argue that limited English skills can negatively impact employability and professional advancement, especially in fields requiring international collaboration. For agriculture graduates, insufficient ESP training leaves them unprepared for professional demands, limiting career opportunities in both national and international contexts.

Another significant concern is the inadequacy of instructional materials. A study by Tadesse (2022) notes that most CES course books used in Ethiopian universities lack contextual relevance, failing to address the specific communicative needs of agriculture students. These materials often emphasize general language skills rather than integrating agricultural themes, technical terminologies, or real-world scenarios. This misalignment between course content and practical requirements exacerbates the language proficiency challenges faced by agriculture students and graduates.

Additionally, pedagogical approaches in CES instruction are criticized for being overly theoretical and teacher-centered, offering limited opportunities for practical language use (Demissew, 2020). Studies from similar contexts, such as Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2019) in Oman, suggest that interactive and task-based methods are more effective in equipping students with functional language skills. Adopting such approaches in Ethiopia could bridge the gap between academic preparation and professional application, particularly for agriculture students requiring context-specific communication abilities.

Despite these findings, limited research in Ethiopia focuses on the English language needs of agriculture students and graduates. Most studies address general English language teaching, neglecting the unique requirements of agriculture majors, whose academic and professional success relies heavily on their ability to communicate technical knowledge effectively. This study addresses this research gap by investigating the proficiency levels of agriculture students and graduates, identifying their major challenges, and offering practical recommendations to enhance English language instruction in Ethiopian higher education.

The persistent challenges faced by agriculture students and graduates necessitate a clear articulation of the problem. Despite courses like CES in Ethiopian higher education institutions, many students and graduates lack the proficiency to navigate academic and professional environments effectively. This gap affects their performance and undermines national efforts to produce globally competent agricultural professionals. Addressing this issue requires aligning undergraduate English programs with the professional language needs of graduates, as emphasized in ESP literature (Hutchinson and Waters, 2020; Belcher, 2006). For agriculture professionals, language skills are essential for tasks such as technical report writing, stakeholder engagement, and participation in international forums. A lack of congruence between pre-service English training and professional demands limits graduates' ability to apply language skills effectively (Basturkmen, 2010).

Needs analysis provides a framework to identify and integrate workplace linguistic and communicative demands into the curriculum. For agriculture students at Ambo University, this involves embedding agricultural themes, workplace simulations, and interdisciplinary collaboration into the CES course. The adoption of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), emphasizing practical language use through authentic tasks, ensures students develop functional language proficiency (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Aligning academic English programs with workplace needs enhances employability and

equips graduates with critical thinking and communication skills for success in both academic and professional domains (Dudley-Evans and John, 1998).

This study investigated the English language difficulties of agriculture students and former graduates, focusing on their proficiency levels and challenges in academic and professional contexts. Specifically, it examines the effectiveness of the CES course in addressing these challenges and suggests solutions to bridge the gaps. The study addresses the following research questions: 1) What are the English language proficiency levels of agriculture students and graduates? 2) What specific English language difficulties do students and graduates face in academic and professional settings? The study includes undergraduate agriculture students and graduates from Ambo University, emphasizing their experiences and perspectives regarding English language use.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers about the specific English language needs of agriculture students and graduates. By addressing these needs, the study contributes to improved language instruction practices, enhanced employability of graduates, and supports the agricultural sector's development in Ethiopia. Furthermore, the findings serve as a model for similar contexts where English is used as a medium of instruction in specific fields.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted at Ambo University, located in the Oromia region of Ethiopia, with a focus on undergraduate agriculture students and former graduates. The research employed a descriptive case study design to investigate the English language skills difficulties faced by these students. A total of 154 participants were selected through probabilistic and purposive sampling methods. The sample included 121 current undergraduate agriculture students from the third academic year, 13 former graduates, 16 instructors (12 MCIs and four ELIs) and

four employers. This sample size was chosen to ensure the representativeness of the findings.

Data collection was carried out using a combination of methods. A structured questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data on the participants' self-assessed proficiency in four major English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended questions (using a Likert scale) and open-ended questions to capture more in-depth responses. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants (four instructors and four employers) to gain deeper insights into the specific challenges they encountered in developing their English language skills during their studies. The questionnaire was piloted with 10 students to test for clarity and reliability, and necessary adjustments were made before the full distribution. The study adhered to ethical research practices, including obtaining informed consent from all participants. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures. Data were anonymized to protect participants' identities, and all research activities were conducted in accordance with the university's ethics review board guidelines. The data collection process took place over a period of two weeks, the second and the third weeks of April 2022.

The collected data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were processed using SPSS software version 25 to generate descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, which were used to identify the most common language difficulties. The qualitative data from interviews document analysis and open-ended questionnaire responses were analyzed thematically. The responses were coded and categorized into themes to identify recurring patterns related to challenges in speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills. These findings were then cross-referenced with the quantitative data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the language difficulties experienced by the participants..

Results and discussions

This section presents the results of the study in the following order: students' and former graduates' perceived ability in the English language and students' and former graduates' English language lacks.

English Language proficiency of the students and former graduates

The study used three items (Items 2, 3, and 4) to assess students' English language proficiency in studying major courses. Item 3 focused on students' ability in the four macro-skills, while Items 2 and 4 focused on their abilities in studying major courses. The questionnaires were given to both instructors and students. Below are the summaries of the results:.

Table 1. Students' English language proficiency to follow major courses as indicated by major course instructors (MCI) and students (STS)

No	Item	Respondents	Responses										Grand Mean
			VW		W		A		G		VG		
			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
1	To what extent do you/your students follow major courses taught in English	STS			35	28.9	16	13.2	58	47.9	12	9.9	3.38
		MCI	1	8.3	7	58.3	3	25	1	8.3			2.2

VW= very weak, W=weak, A= average, G=good, VG= very good

As shown in Table 1, regarding students' overall English language ability to follow major courses, 47.9% of the students rated their ability as "good," while 9.9% described it as "very good." In contrast, none of the instructors considered the students' ability to follow major courses as "very good," and only 8.3% rated it as "good." Conversely, 28.9% of the students

described their English ability as "weak," whereas 13.2% rated it as "moderate" in understanding major courses taught in English.

Table 1 also depicts that almost a quarter of the instructors, 25% claimed that the students had average English language ability in following major courses in the university under consideration, and above a tenth, 13.2% of the students shared the perception of the instructors. More than half of the instructors, 58.3% responded that students have weak performances in accomplishing tasks in major courses, while only 28.9% of the students felt the same. Based on the given information, there is a disparity between the instructors' and the students' responses. Thus, students felt that they were following the courses well in English while the instructors perceived that the students were weak in following the major courses given in English.

Both the students and English language instructors, during their interviews, supported the majority view expressed by major course instructors in the questionnaire data. The students' interview results revealed that many students face challenges in attending major course classes due to their low level of English proficiency. For example, AUST1 responded to an interview question about the extent to which students can follow major courses taught in English, stating:

"I have several language problems when I attend the major course classes. My English language ability in almost all the skills is weak, and I face difficulties in listening to lectures to take notes, speaking to communicate with classmates and instructors, reading and understanding handouts and references, and writing answers to essay-type assignments and exams.

Similarly, another respondent (AUST3) shared,

"I believe that my ability in using English for major course study is below the demand of the academic level I am pursuing. I am not good at performing speaking, writing, reading, and listening activities, and even my ability to grasp vocabulary and using appropriate and

acceptable grammar for communicating ideas in major courses is worse."

In contrast, some participants expressed confidence in their English skills. For instance, AUST4 stated, "I am good at following major courses, all of which are given in English, as I have a good command of English language skills except the writing skills."

These varied responses reveal a disparity in students' self-assessed English language proficiency, with some perceiving their skills as inadequate to meet academic demands, while others report fewer difficulties. This suggests that while some students struggle significantly with language barriers, others may face only specific challenges, such as writing. Addressing these individual skill gaps could enhance overall academic performance and participation.

The English language instructors too, confirmed that the students have poor language performances to attend their major courses. One of the instructors (MCI3) said that most of the students failed to communicate their academics using English. For instance, asking and answering questions, writing term papers, reports, presentations, reading academic notes, and understanding lectures and so on were areas where students lacked abilities.

Moreover, other instructors (MCI1 and MCI5) on their part said that having a good command of English is customary for the students since major course lessons are delivered in English. The instructors added that the students are weak when they deliver academic speeches, listen to lectures, read academic notes, take notes from lectures; and write answers to essay-type questions using the English language. They further suggested that students have to be proficient enough in all the language skills so that they can easily communicate in academic contexts. It seems from the data that there was a disparity between the students and the instructors' views regarding the students' ability in performing academic activities in English. The students felt that they had average English language abilities when the instructors seemed to rate students' English language

ability to perform different academic tasks as weak.

Thus, it seems from the above data that both the student and instructor respondents were aware of the view that having good language ability is critical for students to be successful in their academics and professional settings. On the other hand, the responses reveal the students were below average (weak) in their English language ability in using English for their academic studies.

The findings of the study align with Bantalem (2017), who observed a slight difference in the perceptions held by students and teachers regarding students' English language abilities for following major courses. Specifically, a greater number of teachers believed that students possessed poor language abilities compared to the students themselves, who were more optimistic or held differing views about their proficiency. This discrepancy highlights a significant issue: the language ability students are expected to have for effectively engaging with major courses taught in English is higher than their current ability. As a result, students face considerable challenges in comprehending and learning their major courses, which may adversely affect their academic performance and overall learning experience.

Moreover, Shibeshi (2017) corroborates this by finding that his participants recognized the critical role English plays in following health and related courses, despite their poor performance in using the language. He further emphasizes that the Communicative English Skills course was not designed with the academic and professional needs of health science students in mind, resulting in its failure to address their academic and career requirements. Additionally, the study highlighted that speaking, writing, and reading about food science topics, as well as understanding instructions, lectures, meetings, and discussions, are crucial for BSc food science students.

From the discussion so far, it can be inferred that the language competence and readiness of agriculture students to follow their major courses, where English serves as the medium of instruction, were found to be inadequate. This conclusion is supported by evidence showing that the students under study struggled with several key academic tasks. These included taking effective notes, composing answers for essay-type assignments, comprehending lectures, reading and understanding academic handouts, and actively engaging in classroom activities such as asking and answering questions.

Students' and Former Graduates' Ability in the Four Macro-skills

Students' Ability in the Four Macro-skills

Item 3 of the questionnaire required MCIs to reveal their perspectives on the students' ability in the four-macro skills to study major courses: Listening, speaking, reading and writing. The participants were asked to rate students' abilities with 'very weak, 'weak, 'average', 'good' and 'very good'. The students were also asked the same item regarding their abilities in the given skills. Table 2 presents the results in mean scores and percentages.

As indicated in Table 2, the students put their ability in speaking and listening below average. The calculated mean score for the two items (Item 1 and 3) which read 2.80 and 2.76 respectively could be rounded to 3.0, the average mean score, indicating that the students had some ability of listening and the reading skills in pursuing their major courses. The instructors however, felt that the students' ability in these mentioned skills is average, 3.00 and. 3.08 respectively. The instructors also said that the students are weak in both writing (2.33) and speaking (2.58) skills though they claimed that the students are a little better in speaking than writing. The students on their part, however, believe writing (2.01) and speaking (2.46) are by far below average though speaking is better than writing.

Table 2. Students' ability in the four macro-skills as indicated by the students and major course instructors

No	Macro Skills	Respondents	VW N	VW %	W N	W %	A N	A %	G N	G %	VG N	VG %	Grand Mean
1	Listening	STS	5	4.1	46	38.0	43	35.5	27	22.3			2.76
		MCI			2		8		2				3.00
2	Speaking	STS	2	1.7	40	33.1	58	47.9	21	17.4			2.46
		MCI			5	417	7	58.3					2.58
3	Reading	STS	15	12.4	50	41.3	41	33.9	15	12.4			2.80
		MCI			2	16.7	7	58.3	3	25.0			3.08
4	Writing	STS	23	19.0	76	62.8	19	15.7	3	2.5			2.01
		MCI			7	58.3	5	41.7					2.33

VW= very weak, W=weak, A= average, G=good, VG= very good

From the data, we can infer that both the instructors and students believe that students are relatively better in their receptive skills (reading and listening) than the productive skills (speaking and writing). The only disparity between the instructors and the students' perception on the students' abilities in the four macro-skills is a matter of ranking. The instructors put the ranking of their students' abilities from average (in reading and listening) to weak (in writing and speaking) while the students rated their abilities from good (in listening and reading) to average (in speaking and writing).

Data obtained from interviews attest the responses of the majority of the major course instructors. The interview conducted with English language instructors regarding agriculture students' ability of using the macro skills, confirmed almost the same result except some disparities given on the receptive skills. One instructor (MCI3), for example, rated reading as average and the other skills as poor. The other instructor (MCI2) said that students are very poor in speaking and writing skills while they are average in reading and listening when they study their major courses. Besides, an interview with the students and the open ended question on the students questionnaire indicated that Writing is the major problematic area that they failed to jot down what they intended to do.

The former graduates were asked to rate their English language abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing. They rated their abilities using Likert scale which was worded as 'very good', 'good', 'average', 'weak' and 'very weak.

Former graduates' Ability in the Four Macro-skills

According to the data in the Table 3 above, the former graduates are relatively better in their reading followed by listening, speaking and writing. The mean scores of reading and listening skills are 3.38 and 3.07 respectively and these show that they are nearer to good in both skills. When we see the speaking skills, they are below average with a mean score indicating 2.76. The mean score of writing skills is 2.61, and this indicates that the former graduates are weak in writing. Moreover, it was indicated in the table that out of 13 former graduates, 12(92.4%) of them rated their reading skills as average and good when only one respondent rated she/he was of weak performance in reading.

When it comes to speaking and writing skills, the former graduates evaluated their proficiency as average in speaking and weak in writing. This self-assessment suggests a significant disparity in their command over different language skill domains. Notably, these

graduates appear to be stronger in receptive skills—such as reading and listening—compared to productive skills, which involve speaking and writing. This trend is consistent with the challenges often observed in language learners, where the ability to understand and process information (receptive skills) develops faster than the ability to articulate thoughts effectively (productive skills). The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions in teaching methodologies to bridge this gap and enhance graduates' performance in productive skills, particularly writing, which is essential for their academic and professional success.

Table 3. Former graduates' self-assessment of language skills competence in target situations

No.	Language Skills	Respondents	Responses										Grand Mean
			VW		W		A		G		VG		
			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	%
1	Listening	13			2	15.4	8	61.5	3	23.1			3.07
2	Speaking	13			3	23.1	10	76.9					2.76
3	Reading	13			1	7.7	6	46.2	6	46.2			3.38
4	Writing	13			5	38.5	8	61.5					2.61

VW= very weak, W=weak, A= average, G=good, VG= very good

In general, the former graduates had average performance in almost all the four language skills when the percentage reads 76.9, 61.5, 61.5 and 46.2 for speaking, listening, writing and reading skills respectively. Thus, they ranked their language ability as reading first, listening second, speaking third and writing the least. Hence, it is possible to understand from the questionnaire data that former graduates have some problems in productive skills particularly in writing and speaking.

An interview was held with employers to disclose their views on former graduates' English language ability of the four macro skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) when performing different activities in occupational settings. The data obtained with this regard are presented as follows.

The results of the interview with employers also support the former graduates' view for the same item. For instance, EMP1 and EMP3 said that the former graduates (employees) were of weak performance in communicating their activities that require the skills of writing and speaking. They added that some employees failed to organize and write lab and official reports in English. They ordered former graduates' English language ability in a decreasing order (from good to weak) as listening, reading, speaking and writing for the major skills.

On the contrary, EMP1 mentioned that former graduates are good at almost using all the English language skills to accomplish activities (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in the occupational settings. He (EMP1) said that despite some disparities across former graduates, reading, speaking, listening and writing are ranked in the decreasing order of ability the former graduates had to the interviewee's perception.

Thus, it is evident from both the questionnaire and the interview data that former graduates had average performance in productive and receptive skills which attributed to their in efficient communication in the professional/occupational areas.

The results of this study agrees With Bedilu's (2020) work when he found that language skills

have significant value for students' academic performance and professional competence. For instance, he found that having good language command in all language skills is very important in former graduates work situations. The importance of English language skills for future profession, were rated in decreasing order as reading, listening, speaking, and writing respectively. This result is also consistent with Bantalem (2017), Abuklaish, (2014) and Chostelidou (2011) who found out that the English language abilities are very important for agriculture students in their current studies and future careers.

Nevertheless, the findings in this category of the current study contradicts with Dagmawit (2011) as the overall degree of difficulty for each language skills were rated by almost all of the participants as writing, reading speaking and listening in decreasing order for students' professional life. As a result, it is possible to deduce that all language skills are almost equally important for undergraduate agriculture students to be proficient enough in the professional domains.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to consider that agriculture former graduates were found good at the receptive skills when they exhibit less than average proficiency in the productive ones

Students' and Former Graduates English Language Challenges in Academic and Professional Contexts

Students' Difficulties in Learning and Using English for Academic Purposes

Identifying areas of difficulty and gaps students experience is essential when conducting a needs analysis in academic settings. In this context, a questionnaire (Item 1) was specifically designed to explore the challenges students face concerning various micro-skills. Participants were given five response options: "very great difficulty," "great difficulty," "some difficulty," "little difficulty," and "no difficulty." The data collected on this aspect are presented below:

Table 4 indicates that student respondents viewed most of the speaking sub skills as they confront it with 'great difficulty' in the academic endeavors. The grand mean value computed for this skill reads 2.004 which could be rounded to 2, the value assigned to represent 'great difficulty.' With regard to the speaking sub-skills, majority of the student respondents responded that presenting term papers or reports, asking and answering questions in the class and participating in class discussions were considered as activities students engage in with great difficulty with the computed mean scores of 2.31, 2.39 and 2.41 respectively. Similarly, Speaking to continue daily conversations with mean score 2.91 became the oral language sub skill learners perform with average difficulty in their academic arena. As it is evident from the table above, both the students and the Major course instructors (MCI) agreed that presenting projects /term papers is the most difficult oral language activity. The computed mean value for this item is 2.31 for the students and 1.91 for the instructor respondents. Besides, the MCI respondents perceived that undergraduate agriculture students felt great difficulty in undertaking speaking activities in their classrooms.

They rated the degree of difficulty the students faced in the academic setting in decreasing order as asking and answering questions, participating in class discussions, speaking to continue daily conversations, and speaking to request or give comments with respective mean scores of 1.99, 2.05, 2.56 and 2.78.

With regard to listening sub-skills, the students considered themselves as moderately competent enough in performing listening activities. They rated their difficulties in listening average including their skills to follow question and answer sessions in class, instructions and explanations in labs, follow seminars, course lectures, and spoken presentations in their academic study (mean scores were between 2.50 and 3.49). Similarly, the MCIs viewed their students' difficulties to be average in listening to instructions and explanations in labs, follow seminars, course lectures, and spoken presentations with

computed mean scores of 2.86, 2.91, 2.99, 3.25   and 3.34 respectively.

Table 4. Students' difficulties in some sub-skills as rated by the students (STS) and the MCIs

No.	Items	Mean scores		Rank	
		STS	MCI	STS	MCI
	Listening activities in English	3.06	2.96		
1	Listening to instructions and explanations in labs	2.86	2.72	4	5
2	Listening to follow question/ answer sessions in class	2.99	2.91	3	4
3	Listening to spoken presentations in class	3.25	3.16	2	1
4	Listening to follow course lectures	3.34	2.99	1	3
5	Listening to follow seminars	2.86	3.02	4	2
	Reading activities in English	2.57	2.37		
6	Reading exam questions	2.78	1.81	1	5
7	Reading instructions for lab/assignments	2.34	2.32	5	4
8	understanding study notes/ lecture handouts	2.59	2.59	3	2
9	Reading text books and references	2.64	2.64	2	1
10	understanding appropriate terms in the course	2.51	2.51	4	3
	Speaking activities in English	2.004	2.258		
11	Speaking to continue daily conversations	2.91	2.56	1	2
12	asking and answering questions in the class	2.39	2.05	3	3
13	presenting term papers or reports	2.31	1.91	4	5
14	Participating in class discussion	2.41	1.99	2	4
15	Speaking to give comments	2.31	2.78	4	1
	Writing activities in English	1.99	2.29		
16	Writing to take notes from books/lecture	2.85	2.71	1	1
17	Writing field and lab reports	2.01	2.13	2	4
18	Writing term papers	1.83	2.13	4	4
19	organizing ideas appropriately	1.71	2.31	5	3
20	writing answers to essay type exams	1.85	2.05	3	5
21	Summarizing something read	1.71	2.43	5	2

Both the students and MCIs were asked 5 (Items 6-10) questions on the reading sub skills, and the questionnaires were provided to seek information about learners' difficulties in academic settings. In this regard, the computed mean of 2.56 indicated that reading and understanding academic texts is the most difficult reading event agriculture students were facing in their academic setting. The mean score of 2.34 which falls with the scale of a bit above 2, the value assigned to great difficulty, also proved that the majority of the students were understanding appropriate terms in the major course with great difficulty.

Likewise, understanding lectures is the second most difficult activity followed by understanding appropriate terms with

respective mean scores of 2.51 and 2.59. The student respondents found it relatively easier to read and understand books and references and exam questions with mean score of 2.64 and 2.78 respectively than those mentioned above. On the contrary, MCIs responded to the same question as understanding exam questions is the most difficult (1.81) reading event followed by understanding appropriate terms (1.96) in the academic setting. Like the students, the respondent instructors believed understanding lectures, books and references are activities their students accomplish with some difficulty when the respective mean scores read 2.84 and 2.87.

It is designated in Table 4, that of all the language skills, the students rated the writing

skills activities as the most difficult ones. Likewise, the student respondents put organizing ideas appropriately (1.71), summarizing something read (1.71), writing essay/term papers (1.83), writing answers to essay type exams (1.85), writing field and lab reports (2.01), making notes from books (2.85) in decreasing order of difficulty. In sum, the grand mean value for the writing skills is 1.99, which could be rounded to 2, the value assigned to great difficulty indicates that students face serious challenges when they are required to perform different writing activities in the academic setting.

Although MCIs mostly agreed with the students' order of ranking and level of difficulty, there were slight disparities between the two respondents when the instructors ordered from the most difficult writing activities to those performed at moderate difficulty as writing answers to essay type exams, writing field and lab reports, organizing ideas appropriately, summarizing something read, making notes from books when the computed mean score read 2.05, 2.13, 2.31, 2.43, and 2.74 respectively.

Semi-structured interview was held with MCIs to reveal their perspectives of students' difficulties when using English for their academic purposes. The instructors were interviewed on the extent to which the students face difficulties to accomplish different academic activities in English (understanding lectures, taking lecture notes, participating in class discussions, understanding text/reference books, and etc.). Besides, they were interviewed on their evaluation of the English proficiency level of the students by considering the students' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The data obtained with this regard are presented as follows.

In this response, three different views were reflected. Specifically, two teachers (MCI1 and MCI4) said that their students had very great difficulty in using English for academic concerns. For instance, MCI1 said:

"*Majority of the students in my class encounter much difficulty when they use English to listen to lectures, participate in class discussions, ask and answer questions, read and understand lecture notes, write term papers, write answers to essay type assignments or exams.*"

MCI4 on his part responded to the same question when he said:

…the students had poor language proficiency in all the language skills and they were unable to express their ideas through speaking (oral presentations, asking and answering questions in the classroom) and writing skills (summarizing something read, writing answers to essay questions) when they were better at receptive skills, they rarely use English."

The other two MCIs (MCI2 and MCI3) mentioned that even though the students had difficulties in learning and using English for studying their major courses, they believed that the degree of difficulty was somewhat average. MCI2, for example, said:

"*I believe that having good command of English language skills is imperative for students to gain knowledge in their respective field of study at universities, where the medium of instruction is English. As such my students are of average proficiency in almost all the four language skills that they experience moderate difficulty when performing different activities in their studies.*"

On the contrary to the above two views, MCI5 said that except for the writing skills, students are performing almost better at reading, listening and speaking skills activities respectively. However, she (MCI5) emphasized the challenges the students had in the writing sub skills when communicating their academics. From the above responses, it is noted that students have great difficulties in writing essays/term papers, writing answers to essay type exams, participating in class discussions, asking questions in class, understanding lectures, taking notes and expressing themselves in English. Comparatively, the students have less difficulty in understanding lectures, answering questions in class and making notes from books.

The majority of the students in their part reported that they encountered great difficulties in summarizing something read, asking and answering questions, understanding lectures, understanding appropriate terminologies, writing essay type exams, writing field and lab reports and participating in class discussions. On the other hand, they reported that they are in good position in taking lecture notes, understanding manuals and understanding textbooks and reference books.

In general, it is very important to learn from data that students encountered challenges of using different academic English language skills when they use and learn it for academic accomplishments/ study major courses. Thus, as issues the researcher dealt with under this theme has tried to address each and every function and genre to be dealt with; data generated from this study suggest that students have a lot of gaps to be intervened so as to make them capable in their academic and professional environments

Former Graduates' Difficulties in Some Sub-skills in Occupational Setting

Moreover, former graduates were also asked (Item 2) to reveal their awareness of their own difficulties with English language sub-skills when performing in workplaces. In addition, semi-structured interview was held with employers. Hence, below is the summary of students' responses on the issue

Table 5 depicts that the mean values for the former graduates on the given listening skills show, the former graduates are relatively best in listening to presentations, instructions, etc., and listening to lectures with respective mean scores of 3.23 and 3.00, which are near to the numerical value given the ability level 'average. These are followed by meetings, seminars, conferences with respective mean scores of 2.86, 2.86, 2.76, which are near to the average varyingly.

Listening to foreigners was the listening activity area where the former graduates were found to be weak with a mean score of 2.61, far below average. In practice, Table 6 also shows that the former graduates were average in their ability at listening in performing different purposes in professional/occupational areas.

The former graduates were relatively best at reading researches, lab reports with a mean score of 3.38, which refers to the ability level as 'good'. The former graduates are exactly average at reading manuals and reading business or personal letters with the mean score of 3.00 and 3.00 respectively. In a very similar fashion, reading professional books, journals, newspapers were reading areas the former graduates themselves average with the respective mean score of 2.85 and 2.85.

Among the given speaking skills, the former graduates are relatively best in giving instructions with the mean score of 2.92, which is very close to the average (3). The former graduates were below 'average' in their ability in giving instructions with the mean score of 2.85, which could be rounded to 3, the value assigned to average. Moreover, in delivering speeches at meetings, conferences and seminars, giving presentations, reports and speaking to colleagues and agriculture experts with their respective mean scores of 2.42, 2.61, 2.28 and 2.90 former graduates were found weak.

Regarding the writing activities, the former graduates are relatively best in writing specific work programs and schedules and writing notes from different sources with respective mean scores of 3.23 and 3.15. They were above average in writing curriculum vitae and writing job application letters or personal letters with respective mean scores of 3.07 and 2.85. In writing reports (research, lab, journal articles), former graduates were 'weak' with respective mean scores of 2.30.

Moreover, the interview data from the employers as well as the former graduates themselves support the findings of the questionnaire data. Most of the employers believed that the former graduates were not proficient enough in communicating through writing and speaking.

Table 5. Former graduates' difficulties in some sub-skills as given by the former graduates themselves

Items	Mean	St. D	Ranks
Listening activities in English			
a) Listening at meetings, seminars, conferences	2.8462	.37553	3rd
b) Listening to lectures	2.7692	.43853	4th
c) Listening to instructions	3.0000	.81650	2nd
d) Listening to foreigners	2.6154	.50637	5th
e) Listening to presentations/seminars	3.2308	.43853	1st
Reading activities in English			
a) Reading professional books	2.8462	.68874	4th
b) Reading researches, lab reports	3.3846	.50637	1st
c) Reading Manuals	3.0000	.57735	2nd
d) Reading professional journals, Newspapers	2.8462	.68874	4th
e) Reading business or personal letters	3.0000	.81650	2nd
Speaking activities in English			
a) Giving presentations, reports, papers	2.2308	.43853	5th
b) Giving workshops	2.6154	.50637	3rd
c) Delivering speech at meetings conferences and seminars	2.6154	.50637	3rd
d) Giving instructions	2.8462	.37553	2nd
e) Speaking to English-speaking colleagues/ agri-experts	2.9231	.27735	1st
Writing activities in English			
a) Writing reports (research, lab, journal articles)	2.3077	.75107	5th
b) Writing specific work programs and schedules	3.2308	.72501	1st
c) Writing notes from different sources	3.1538	.55470	2nd
d) Writing Curriculum Vitae	3.0769	.86232	3rd
e) Writing job application letters or personal letters.	2.8462	.37553	4th

For instance, two of the employers (EMP2 and EMP3) said, employees face great difficulty when they write research reports, lab/field reports, personal and official letters. They added that the employees were of not good proficiency in giving presentations, papers, workshops and delivering speeches at meetings, conferences and seminars.

On the other hand the respondents agreed that the former graduates under study were better at reading and listening when communicating in their occupational/professional settings. The former graduates had relatively better performance when reading professional books, manuals, business or personal letters and the employers added that the same is true when the former graduates were listening at meetings, oral presentations and instructions given by the employers.

Based on the information given in the table, it seems that the former graduates are better in their ability in receptive sub-skills (reading and listening) than productive sub-skills (speaking and writing). This shows that former graduates lack ability in some sub-skills that hampered communication for professional purposes.

The findings of the current study is in harmony with Bedilu (2020) and Hyland, K. (2018) who have found that students and former graduates seem to have various language, linguistic, lexical, and etc., difficulties that hampered their effective communication within academic and professional contexts. The study showed that former graduates had more difficulties in the receptive skills than in the productive skills. Similarly, Abuklaish's (2014) study identifies several difficulties that his subjects faced in learning and using English in the two domains. Delivering speeches at meetings and conferences; writing reports, reading magazines, articles, listening at meetings were some of the communication challenges that Thai food science workers encountered.

Hence, it is possible to infer that undergraduate agriculture students and former graduates faced different challenges that hindered the effective communication in their academic and professional settings. The students were found better at speaking and reading followed by listening when writing was the most difficult but very important skill for their academic performances. Regarding the former graduates, the most problematic area that challenged their professional communication in a decreasing order of difficulty could be reading, speaking, listening and writing sub skills.

Thus, it can be deduced from the data that the undergraduate agriculture students and former graduates encountered various difficulties in using English for both academic and professional duties which is due to a mismatch between agricultural students' purposes for which they are using English and the contents of current communicative English skill course. Thus, to solve the problem, it is essential to clearly identify the specific purposes for which agricultural students and former graduates need English for academics and professional settings.

Conclusions

The findings of this study underscore the significant challenges undergraduate agriculture students and former graduates face in mastering the English language for both academic and professional purposes. The analysis revealed that these students struggle particularly with technical reading, academic writing, and oral communication, skills crucial for their success in higher education and the global agricultural workforce. The gap between their current English proficiency and the demands of their academic and professional tasks highlights the inadequacy of general English instruction, pointing to the urgent need for a tailored English for Specific Purposes (ESP) curriculum. By addressing these specific language needs, such a curriculum would empower students to perform better academically and professionally, enhancing their readiness for career opportunities that require effective communication and technical expertise. This study's findings offer valuable guidance for universities like Ambo University to develop targeted language programs that equip agriculture students with the essential skills for thriving in both local and international contexts.

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