

RECOGNIZING SIGNIFICANCE OF ENGLISH IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY ON THE PERCEIVED ROLE OF EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ENHANCING ENGLISH COMPETENCE

Puneet Narang

Associate Professor
Guru Nanak Dev Engineering College, Ludhiana

ABSTRACT

The objectives of the present study were to understand perspective of the students with regard to significance of learning English language and role of their respective institutes in enhancing their English Competence. The sample of the study included 418 college students, studying through English medium and pursuing professional courses in various institutes of Punjab. An interview schedule had been prepared to seek their responses and its content has been standardized by including exact and precise questions to eliminate interviewer's bias and to ensure that each respondent receives same stimuli in the form of questions. The data collected through interviews has been analyzed by employing the techniques of content analysis and percentage analysis. The percentage analysis has facilitated in gauging at themes and patterns across data, avoiding biased interpretation, enhancing precision, making contrast and comparisons and validating conclusions. The qualitative analysis of these findings of the study is discussed in this research paper.

Key Words: English Competence; Educational Institutions; Interview Schedule; Content Analysis; Percentage Analysis

INTRODUCTION:

With the emergence of globalization, development of information and communication technology and with the expanding operations of multinational corporations in developing countries, there has been proliferation in the use of English language world over. English is frequently being stated as a growing language of today, continuously being enriched within various countries and across countries in the form of its use for national and international communication. It is the present global language of entertainment, education, commerce, governance and world diplomacy. It is generally being ascribed with nomenclatures such as 'global lingua franca' or 'global language'. It is the existent international language of communication.

The present global spread of English is due to a number of historical, political and socio-economic factors. In 1990s the economic globalization with the expanding operations of the transnational corporations and development of information technology resulted in the proliferation of use of English language world over. Furthermore, today English has also become the only medium of global trade and commerce, science and technology and the internet. It has emerged as a chief communicative tool for inter and intra cultural communication among different peoples in different parts of the world.

Since the liberalization of the economy in the early 1990s, a large section of the population in India has come to believe the proficiency in English language is a powerful marker of middle-class identity and a decisive means of socio-economic mobility. English language proficiency is now an essential component of one's cultural baggage, a resource that can eventually open doors into the world of professional employment in India and abroad. For the

middle classes, English is a resource that must be defended and maintained at all costs (Scrase 372).

In this context, English language has become an indispensable part of higher education. With regard to English language education in India, the NCERT Position Paper on Teaching of English (2006) states: English is in India today a symbol of people's aspiration for quality in education and a fuller participation in national and international life. Its colonial origins now forgotten or irrelevant, its initial role in independent India, tailored to high education (as a "library language," a "window on the world"), now felt to be insufficiently inclusive socially and linguistically, the current state of English stem from its overwhelming presence on the world stage and the reflection of this in the national arena(3).

India is one of those countries which have formally acknowledged English's status in their constitution. The renowned linguist David Crystal articulated that a language "achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country. This special role is acquired by a language either due to its status of official language in which case, it is considered as second language of that specific community or it becomes part of school curriculum as a foreign language. (4) In India also, it was viewed as a great medium of economic progress and global communication and therefore it was retained as an official language.

Dell Hymes emphasized the aim of language teaching is what called 'communicative competence'. He was of the view that acquiring communicative competence led to development of knowledge and ability to use language. The British Applied linguists laid focus on the functional and communicative aspects of language. In their view, it is essential to focus on communicative competence instead of grammatical competence. The aims of this approach are, firstly, to make communicative competence the goal of second language teaching, and secondly, to develop procedures for the teaching of four language skills. This communicative language teaching (CLT) approach shifted its focus from grammar to the central role of language i.e. communication.

The leading exponents of communicative teaching namely Christopher Candlin and Henry Widdowson drew influence from the work of British functional linguists John Firth, M A. K. Halliday; American sociolinguists Dell Hymes, John Gumperz and William Labov.

Hence, the proliferation of English language in the era of globalization led to shift in language-in-Education policies in various multilingual countries including almost all third world countries (Spolsky3). In India also, recognizing its significance AICTE/ UGC and other statutory bodies have introduced English/ Communication Skills as mandatory courses in almost all professional courses. Therefore, these days the higher educational institutions and more specifically those offering professional education also have well recognized the need to develop communicative competence of their students in English language to make them employable. Despite these policies and wide range of efforts being made by the institutions, it is pertinent to explore how the students perceive these efforts and the role of English language in their prospects of career success.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Various researchers in the field of English language and allied areas have analyzed wide range aspects of language learning including significance of developing communicative competence. Some of these studies are reported below:

Tembe and Norton have reported that English language competence is perceived as a prerequisite for upward mobility and global citizenship. Therefore there is general perception

among parents and policy makers that being educated means being proficient in English language (58).

The trend of introduction of English in school and higher education is not only visible in India, but, in almost all South Asian countries. In whole South Asian region, as Kennett explains, English serves as an instrumental link language between countries. It is official language in India and Pakistan. In Bangladesh, English is language of education and utilized in higher law courts. In Sri Lanka, English has been used as link language (320).

Referring to status of English in the context of South Asian countries, Elizabeth Erling argues that, across the region, “English is seen as essential in accessing the best higher education opportunities, which then lead to the best employment opportunities. Thus, higher English proficiency is being strongly linked to opening up of lucrative job avenues (9).

Therefore, there is general perception among parents and policy makers that being educated means being proficient in English language (58). Evaluating African educational landscape, Dietrick has argued that the ascendancy of English in the international business and communication, is directly linked to social mobility (138).

According to Halliday, the theorist whose language theory had great impact on communicative language teaching, “Linguistics...is concerned...with the description of speech acts or texts, since only through the study of language, and therefore all components of meaning, brought into focus” (145).

David Crystal claimed that “the children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand” (184). There has been a large-scale switch over from government-run schools, which teach predominantly in the language of the state and offer education free of cost, towards private English-medium schooling, which is largely viewed as being transformative of a student’s future prospects (Jayadeva 2).

Bourdieu theorizes that English language has become a cherished ‘linguistic currency’ which is a form of cultural capital. He, then, notes that English is a means to acquire status and as a sign of merit (122). Tsuda, further says, that in a situation where English dominates communication, the non-English-speaking people are inevitably disadvantaged (12).

Thus, it is concluded that, in the present global world, the significance of English has increased manifold, as it is being perceived to play an instrumental role in social mobility of an individual. In this context, developing communicative competence in English has become indispensable for career success and this aspect of learning language even has the capacity to impact education policy formulation across countries.

RATIONALE:

In India also, the significance of English language has enhanced manifold in these years. English now a days has become a major cultural resource and an important element of cultural capital in India. Moreover, in most of the states of the country, English has been introduced as subject from the first class. Similarly, at the higher education level, as a response to the needs of the emerging job market, imparting knowledge and skills in English language has become an essential part of professional higher education. Besides, English has largely been the medium of instruction of professional education. In this context, when education is being shaped and oriented to the needs of the global economy, it is pertinent to study how such developments are having their impact on the process of knowledge construction and that of knowledge production in Punjab as well. In the recent past, Punjab

has also witnessed mushrooming of professional institutes to meet the growing need for education associated with job opportunities available around the globe. The advent of multinational companies has not only impacted the type of courses to be offered, but also the need to inculcate proficiency in English among those pursuing them. Hence the present work aims at analyzing, from students' perspective, the impact of these policies of introducing English as a subject and the efforts being made by their educational institutes in enhancing their English communicative competence.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To study the perception of students about Significance of English language for their professional success.
2. To study the perception of students about the efforts being made by Educational Institutions to enhance their English Communicative Competence,

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- a. **Sample and Sample size:** In the present study, 418 college students pursuing their studies in English medium in various streams like B.Com., BBA, BCA and B. Tech. from all the prominent professional and general higher education institutions of the state were included in the sample. Further, incidental sampling technique was used.
- b. **Research Tool:** The study has been conducted by employing qualitative approach of research. To study the objectives of the study, an Interview Schedule was prepared comprising of the following questions:

Sr. No.	Question
1	What is your opinion regarding the significance of English language in the present day world?
2	Whether English as subject has been offered in your present degree course?
3	For how many semesters is English being offered as a subject in your complete degree course?
4	In your opinion, what is the significance of studying English as a subject in your degree program in academic/professional progress?
5	Which of the language skill/skills do you think you have improved upon due to study of English as a subject in your present degree programme?
6	Apart from offering English as a subject, what are the special steps being taken in your institute to develop students' command over English language?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

To understand the role of educational institutes in improving English Language skills seem relevant if the students also share the same goal and have conviction about its importance in their career. Hence first and foremost issue was to know the perspective of the students about significance of learning English language.

The students have been asked to express their views regarding the significance of learning English for their academic and professional progress. Their responses to various questions are reported below in Table 2:

Table 2

Significance of Learning English as a Subject in Degree Program for Students' Academic/Professional Progress

Response	Rationale	Number of Respondents	Total
Yes	English language as a subject supports me in grasping my core subjects which I have to study in English medium.	97 (23%)	385 (92%)
	It is significant as it develops language skills required for qualifying recruitment process	96 (23%)	
	English language learning will open job avenues for me at global level.	70 (17%)	
	It is significant as development of English language ability will help me to become more participative in classroom learning.	52 (12.5%)	
	English, being language of internet and other electronic media, will support my academic and career goals.	40 (9.5%)	
	The text books as well as reference books of my field are available only in English language.	30 (7%)	
No	Because, instead of being practical and skill based course, it is completely theoretical.	10 (2.5%)	33 (8%)
	We need to focus on our core area subjects instead of English.	8 (2%)	
	Because we are not trained in speaking skill as teacher himself/herself speaks in vernacular most of the time in the classroom.	8 (2%)	
	It is not of much significance as this course is simply a repetition of the English courses offered in schools.	7 (1.5%)	

Total	418 (100%)
--------------	-----------------------------

The majority of these students (92%) have viewed that English learning is crucial both for their academic performance and prospective professional success. They have given varied reasons to explain their perspectives. They have opined (23%) that English language as a subject supports them academically by improving comprehension of core subjects being offered in English medium. Moreover, according to them (23%), learning English also plays a significant role in developing their language skills which are required for qualifying recruitment process. Further, they (17%) have expressed their belief that learning of English language will open job avenues for them at global level. Besides, a small proportion of respondents (12.5%) have opined that learning English will help them in becoming more participative in classroom interaction. Also the respondents (9.5%) have stated that English being language of internet and other electronic media will support them in their academic and career goals. Furthermore, these students (7%) have reasoned that the text books as well as reference books of their fields are available only in English language, hence learning English will facilitate learning of other core subjects as well.

On the other hand, 8% per cent of the respondents have viewed that English as a subject in their degree program is not of much significance for students' academic/professional progress. In their view, this course is simply a repetition of the English courses offered in schools. Moreover, instead of being practice and skill based course, it is completely theoretical. Some of these respondents (2%) have been of the view that it is important to focus on core area subjects instead of English. Besides, some of them (1.5%) have pointed out that English ~~was~~ themselves are not fluent in English and liberal use of vernacular is made by them while teaching.

In nutshell, majority of these students recognize the role of English language skills in improving their academic performance through better comprehension, improved classroom interaction and better understanding of learning material available in the form of books and internet. However, there are a few students, who give preference to core subjects and the role of their teachers is also the reason behind their lesser interest in English.

Offering English as a subject facilitates students' learning as it contributes immensely by enhancing understanding of usage of language and vocabulary; increasing knowledge of grammatical rules and making them competent in communication skills.

When the question about provision of English as subject and for the duration it is being offered in their respective degree program was asked, nearly all of them have responded that they are studying English as a subject during their degree. The number of semesters for which they are studying ranges between one semester (46%) to all semesters (27%). However, two per cent of the responding students were not studying English as subject in their respective courses.

Table 3 shows the duration for which this course is being offered:

Table 3

Duration of English Course as Offered as a Subject in the Degree Program

Responses	Number of Respondents
One semester	192 (46%)
Two semester	67 (16%)
Three semester	33 (8%)
Four Semesters	4 (1%)
All semesters	112 (27%)
None	10 (2%)
Total	418 (100%)

Furthermore, the students have been asked about various language skills which they have improved upon due to learning of English as a subject in their present degree programs. As shown in table 5, these students have reported that English language learning has contributed in enhancing their basic language skills i.e. Fluency in speaking English (45%), Reading Skills (44%), and Writing skills (42%). Further, they have acknowledged the development of their language skills such as Interview skills (37%), Conversation skill in English language (36%), Group discussion skills (35%), Presentation skills (35%), Command over Grammar (32%) and Standard English pronunciation (28%).

Table 4

Improvement in Various Language skills Due to Learning of English

Responses	Number of Respondents
Fluency in Speaking English	188 (45%)
Reading ability	184 (44%)
Writing ability	176 (42%)
Interview skills	157 (37%)
Conversation skill in English language	151 (36%)
Group discussion skills	146 (35%)
Presentation skills	146 (35%)
Grammatical command	134 (32%)
Standard English pronunciation	118 (28%)

The acquisitions of these skills is very much significant for these students and also align with their responses to previous question where they have emphasized that English language learning is significant for academic and professional progress.

The second objective of the study was to understand the role the Institute playing to develop students' command over English Language.

These students have also been asked about the various additional efforts that are made in their respective institute level to enhance their command over English language. As shown in Table 5, they have reported (39%) that various events such as seminars and workshops are organized. Further, they have stated (30%) that English Club and English society have been formed to enhance their skills in English language.

They have also mentioned that organizing competitions in English language such as debates, declamation contests, group discussions, youth parliament etc. (29%), setting up language lab (20%) and arranging special English proficiency courses (17%) for students are the various efforts being made by their institutes to improve their language skills.

Table 5

Special Steps Taken by the Institute to Develop Students' Command over English Language

Responses	Number of Respondents
Organizing events such as Seminars and workshops	162 (39%)
Formation of English Club and English society	126 (30%)
Organizing competitions in English language such as debates, declamation contests, group discussions, youth parliament etc.	121 (29%)
Setting up Language lab	83 (20%)
Arranging special English proficiency courses for Students	71 (17%)
No special initiative	75 (18%)

However, 18 per cent of these students have reported that no special efforts are made by their institutes. Thus, most of the institutes are concerned with enhancing the communication skills in English and varied kind of efforts are also made in this regard.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the responses of the sample understudy, it can be concluded that majority of these students are well aware of the fact that learning English is very much pertinent in order to be successful in their academics and explore wide range career options in future. There is consensus among them that learning English as a subject has the capacity to learn the requisite communication skills which the employment world seeks in their prospective employees. Hence, they have positive attitude towards learning it. Further, they also recognize the special efforts being made by their respective institute to enhance their English communicative competence by making curricular and extracurricular activities a regular feature of their learning process. Thus both educational institutes and learners share the common perception about the crucial role of English language in the present world and believe that consistent efforts may contribute immensely in achieving the shared objective of

being proficient in communicative English.

Implications of Study

The present study may have the following implications:

1. The study is insightful for the educational institutions that the introducing English as a subject and determining its appropriate duration can be crucial for successful development of English competence among the students.
2. Consistent efforts through organizing wide range of extracurricular activities may offer requisite exposure to the students to overcome their hesitation and develop desired communication skills in English.

Scope for future work

1. The study may further be extended to non-professional institute of higher education where learning English can play a crucial role in achieving course outcomes.
2. The study may be conducted on larger sample.
3. A comparative study of public and private institutes may also be conducted on the issues under study.
4. Even a comparison of institutes in rural and urban area may also throw light on those challenges related to demographic situations.

REFERENCES

1. Amritavalli, R. *Position Paper: National Focus Group on Teaching of English*. National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2006.
2. Bourdieu, P. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.
3. Crystal, David. *English as a Global Language*. Cambridge University Press, Second edition, 2003.
4. Dietrick, B. A. "Social Mobility: 1969-1973" *Journal of ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1974, pp. 138-147.
5. Erling, E. J. *The Role of English in Skills Development in South Asia: Policies, Interventions and Existing Evidence*. London: British Council, 2014, p 9.
6. Halliday, M.A.K. "Language Structure and Language Function." In J. Lyons, (Ed.), *New Horizons in Linguistics*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970, pp.140-465.
7. Jayadeva, S. "English-Medium: Schooling, Social Mobility, and Inequality in Bangalore, India." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, vol.50, 2019, pp.151-169.
8. Kennett, P. *English as a Tool for Conflict Transformation*. In Coleman, H. ed., 2010, pp. 319-332.
9. Scarse, T.J. "Globalisation and Cultural Politics of Educational Change: The Controversy over the Teaching of English in West Bengal, India" *International Review of Education*, vol 48, no.5, pp.361-375.
10. Spolsky, B. *Language management*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

11. Tembe, J., and B. Norton. "Promoting Local Languages in Ugandan Primary Schools: The Community as Stakeholder." *Canadian Modern Language Review*, vol.65 , no.1, 2008, pp.33–60.
12. Tsuda, Y. *The Invading English, the Counterattacking Japanese*. Tokyo: PHP, 1996.