

English Education in India: Navigating Relevance, Impact, and Challenges

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Abstract

English education in India has undergone significant transformation, reflecting the changing socio-economic landscape yet continuing to grapple with major challenges in relevance and impact. Historically, education reforms—from Macaulay's "Minutes of 1835" to the liberalization era—emphasized reading and writing, neglecting spoken language development. This imbalance left many graduates proficient in grammar but unable to communicate effectively, impacting employability and social mobility. The advent of English-medium schools and spoken English institutes marked a paradigm shift, but access remained limited for rural and economically marginalized students, perpetuating disparities in professional opportunities. Despite curricular reforms, evidence—like the Annual School Education Report 2022—shows persistent gaps: up to 38% of 14-year-olds cannot read English sentences fluently, and English phobia hampers engagement, especially among first-generation learners. Activity-based learning, as recommended by the Curriculum Development Centre, emerges as a promising approach to bridge these divides, promoting communicative competence, emotional intelligence, and market readiness. The study calls for urgent revision of curriculum frameworks to emphasize real-world use, listening, and speaking skills, ensuring education aligns with student aspirations and employer expectations. By fostering a learner-centric and relevant educational environment, India's English education system can empower diverse youth, enhance employability, and support inclusive growth in a globalized era.

Keywords: *English education; India; relevance; impact; challenges; curriculum reform; activity-based learning; employability; language acquisition*

1. Relevance of English Education in India

The problem of education has been ubiquitous and all-pervading throughout the ages. Problems in education have existed for centuries; in the 1800s, Abraham Lincoln described his education in an election nomination form as "defective." Multiple commissions have submitted reports stressing the need to focus on spoken language and easing the burden of writing from first class for students. However, these recommendations were often violated rather than observed. This is evident from the fact that most Indians known to the English-speaking world are writers rather than

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speakers. Winston Churchill, an advocate of English, once said, "Some of the best sentences in English are written by Indians." Historical documents reveal India produced more writers than speakers of English.

This situation began to change after Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (L.P.G.), when engineering graduates applying for software jobs were required to speak in English during post-written test rounds such as Group Discussions and Interviews. This need resulted in the mushrooming of spoken English institutes, many of which focused solely on grammar, often with dismal outcomes. Consequently, top engineering colleges introduced English language labs, and presently most colleges have employment cells to assist students from rural areas, aiming to increase their Unique Selling Proposition (U.S.P.).

A significant shift also took place in parental perspectives during the 1980s. English started being seen as a tool for employment and empowerment, leading to a rise in English-medium schools. Deprived sections of society viewed English as an instrument for liberation and social struggle.

Importantly, English is one of India's official languages and is widely acknowledged as a global language. Its acquisition is highly valued, taught from elementary through undergraduate levels. Most pupils achieve some proficiency by graduation (Masani, 2018; Albuquerque, 2018).

2. Impact of English Education

Despite these shifts, educational planners have not fully gauged the paradigm shift. Only a privileged few accessed the best schools, often due to high fees, while students in rural schools remained excluded from mainstream advantages. Talented students struggled in interviews due to their inability to explain concepts in English, while those with rudimentary spoken skills landed jobs. In the 1990s, the job market shifted towards recruiting engineering graduates as software engineers, leading to an increase in private engineering colleges and more local students entering the software sector. This trend made spoken English a prerequisite for job selection.

However, English continued to operate as a form of spoken currency in social interaction, segregating students based on English proficiency. The Bollywood movie *Happy Days* exemplifies this social divide, where a character memorizes Kipling's poem "If" without fully understanding it.

Many graduates in liberal arts, science, and commerce were left out of this English advantage. According to Sabharwal and Rooj (2018), even B.A. English graduates often lacked conversational skills, noting only five percent of candidates seeking jobs through Team Lease were hired due to poor English communication.

Recognizing the mother tongue's role in education, the Government of Andhra Pradesh established the Telugu Academy. By the 1980s, students could write exams in Telugu, resulting in increased enrollment and graduation rates. Nevertheless, English remains intimidating for most students, equated almost exclusively with grammar, as seen in the popularity of grammar books like Wren and Martin (Masani, 2018).

Bill Gates (TED, 2015) emphasized teacher feedback's importance in improving education quality, urging teachers to be introspective and sharp.

Albuquerque (2018) identified critical issues:

1. The need for education to move beyond exams and equip students with job-market skills.
2. Over 350 million children attend schools hoping for better life opportunities.
3. Despite initiatives like the Right to Education Act, 70% of educated youth remain unemployable.
4. Infrastructure deficits, poor teacher quality, and outdated syllabi further hamper education.
5. Language learning should include testing of speaking and listening.
6. English usage should be incentivized in schools and colleges.

Sabharwal and Rooj (2018) further advocate shifting assessments to regular feedback, moving away from industrial-era one-size-fits-all models. Lifelong learning should span preparation, repair, and upgrade phases. They emphasize urgent recognition of spoken English's fundamental role for students (Sabharwal & Rooj, 2018).

University programs often focus on foreign literature and grammar with lecture-based teaching and limited technological aid, which fails to develop functional language skills. Vocational undergraduate education is intended to prepare students for careers, but employers report a deficit in candidates possessing both competence and practical experience (Albuquerque, 2018).

3. Challenges in English Education

Undergraduate students gain a working knowledge of English through general courses, often viewing it as an easy subject. They fail to discern the difference between everyday and professional language. Pronunciation errors, limited vocabulary, poor logical articulation, and low self-confidence are common, discouraging active participation (Sabharwal & Rooj, 2018).

Many academically successful students struggle to find employment because they cannot comprehend compulsory reading materials or communicate effectively. Companies provide further training for language skills post-hiring.

Gaps in language acquisition persist despite efforts to accelerate instruction. The 2022 Annual School Education Report shows that only 62.3% of 14-year-olds and 70% of 18-year-olds read English sentences proficiently (Annual School Education Report, 2022).

English language teaching in India originated from Macaulay's Minutes of 1835, focusing on reading and writing, with minimal classroom hours allocated to English. This limited exposure, alongside factors such as first-generation learners, textbook scarcity, language phobia, and financial constraints, have hindered proficiency (Masani, 2018).

English has evolved into a language of commerce and daily communication, but undergraduate textbooks and curricula have not kept pace with market demands, often disengaging students.

Curtis Kelly recommends activity-based learning methods—role plays, dramatics, songs—to reduce cognitive load and foster engagement (Kelly, 2019). The University Grants Commission's Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) promoted a learning-centric, inquiry-based approach incorporating simulation, games, and projects to encourage creativity and problem-solving (CDC, 1989).

Curriculum reforms must shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered models, motivating students and aligning education with beneficiary needs for greater social relevance (CDC, 1989).

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