

## Nexus between English Language Proficiency and Educational Attainment: A Review

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### **Abstract**

*The connection between English language proficiency and education is critical in determining students' academic success. This study examines the impact of English proficiency on students' academic achievement, the challenges faced in learning and using English effectively, and strategies for improvement. The study aims to analyze how English proficiency influences learning outcomes, identify barriers to language acquisition, and recommend solutions for enhancing proficiency. A secondary research method was employed, utilizing existing literature from peer-reviewed journals, academic reports, and educational policies. The findings reveal that students with higher English proficiency perform better academically, engage more actively in class, and develop stronger cognitive skills. However, major challenges include linguistic interference, inadequate learning resources, and insufficient teacher training. The study concludes that enhancing English proficiency significantly improves academic performance. Key recommendations include implementing targeted language support programs, improving teacher training, integrating technology into learning, and fostering practical language use. Strengthening English education policies and providing more instructional resources will further bridge proficiency gaps and promote student success.*

**Keywords:** English, Proficiency, Education, Learning, Achievement

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## Introduction

The relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement has been extensively studied, revealing a significant correlation across various educational contexts. Azkiyah et al. (2023) conducted a study at an Indonesian state Islamic university, finding that English proficiency accounted for 1.6% of the variance in students' Grade Point Averages (GPAs). Notably, in the Faculty of Medicine, this figure rose to 36.2%, underscoring the heightened importance of English in medical education.

In Nigeria, Tanko et al. (2022) explored the link between English proficiency and mathematics performance among senior secondary school students in Bauchi metropolis. Their research indicated a positive and significant relationship, suggesting that proficiency in English enhances comprehension and performance in mathematics.

Similarly, Fakeye (2014) examined secondary school students in Oyo and Osun States, Nigeria, and found that English language proficiency significantly predicted overall academic achievement. This emphasizes the critical role of English proficiency in students' educational outcomes.

Barkaoui (2025) conducted a longitudinal study comparing IELTS and TOEFL scores with academic performance in a Canadian university. The findings revealed that IELTS scores had a stronger positive correlation with first-semester GPAs than TOEFL scores, suggesting that the predictive power of English proficiency tests may vary.

Internationally, the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) reported that Chinese students in UK universities face integration challenges due to limited English proficiency and unfamiliarity with Western social media platforms. This often leads to social isolation and "ethnic clustering," highlighting the broader implications of language proficiency beyond academics.

In the United States, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that students with limited English proficiency continue to struggle in reading and mathematics post-COVID-19. Despite efforts to address these challenges, significant disparities persist, particularly among low-income and non-native English-speaking students.

Furthermore, a Reuters report highlighted that U.S. teachers are encountering significant challenges due to an influx of non-English-speaking students, predominantly from Haiti. This has led to the adoption of translation apps and new teaching methods to bridge language gaps.

These studies collectively underscore the pivotal role of English language proficiency in educational attainment. They highlight the necessity for targeted interventions and policies to support students' language development, thereby enhancing their academic success and social integration.

### **Statement of the problem**

English language proficiency is widely recognized as a crucial factor in educational achievement, particularly in contexts where English serves as the primary medium of instruction. However, a significant gap persists between students' English proficiency levels and their academic performance, especially among non-native speakers. Studies have shown that students with limited English skills struggle with comprehension, critical thinking, and overall academic engagement, leading to lower performance in various subjects. In Nigeria and other multilingual societies, students often face difficulties in transitioning from their native languages to English-based education, exacerbating challenges in literacy, cognitive development, and knowledge acquisition. The issue is further compounded by inadequate instructional materials, insufficiently trained teachers, and socio-economic disparities, which hinder effective English language learning. Despite numerous studies highlighting the correlation between English proficiency and educational success, there remains a lack of targeted interventions to address language barriers in academic settings. Without adequate support systems, students continue to face linguistic challenges that negatively impact their learning outcomes. This study seeks to examine the depth of this issue and propose practical solutions to bridge the gap between English language proficiency and academic success.

### **Aim and objectives**

This study aims to examine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance, identifying challenges students face and proposing solutions for improvement. The specific Objectives are to:

- i. analyze the impact of English proficiency on students' academic achievement.

- ii. identify challenges students face in learning and using English effectively.
- iii. recommend strategies for improving English proficiency to enhance academic success.

### **Review of Concepts:**

#### **English Language Proficiency**

English Language Proficiency encompasses an individual's ability to read, write, speak, and comprehend English across various contexts. It involves the effective use of linguistic skills to communicate meaningfully. According to Hulstijn (2015), language proficiency includes a learner's communicative abilities, knowledge systems, and skills.

Educational Attainment refers to the highest level of education an individual has completed, distinct from the level of schooling currently being attended. It serves as an indicator of social status and is used to assess various socioeconomic outcomes. As noted by Baum, Cunningham, and Tanenbaum (2015), educational attainment is a cumulative process combining mastery of both academic and behavioral skills.

Cummins' Threshold Hypothesis suggests that a minimum level of linguistic competence must be achieved in both the first and second languages to experience the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. Failure to reach this threshold may result in negative cognitive effects. Cummins (1976) posited that bilingual children must attain certain levels of linguistic competence to avoid cognitive disadvantages and to harness the potential cognitive benefits of bilingualism.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the fundamental role of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development. Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents tasks that a learner can perform with guidance but not yet independently. This theory underscores the importance of collaborative learning and scaffolding, where more knowledgeable individuals support learners within their ZPD. As highlighted by Daniels (2016), Vygotsky's theory focuses on the significance of culture, language, and social interaction in the development of cognition.

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### **The Role of English Language in Education**

English plays a critical role in education, acting as a bridge for global communication and access to knowledge. English is the dominant language of instruction in many educational systems, especially in higher education. It enables students to engage with international academic resources and interact in global scholarly communities (Kachru, 1985). According to Strevens (1980), English serves as a gateway for students to access global knowledge and collaborate internationally, making it an essential skill for academic success.

### **English as a Medium of Instruction in Various Educational Contexts**

In many countries, particularly in non-native English-speaking regions, English is the medium of instruction across educational levels (Tariq et al., 2018). This practice is aimed at integrating

students into a globalized world where English serves as a lingua franca for academic, professional, and diplomatic communication. However, this policy can create significant challenges for students whose first language is not English. They often struggle with understanding course content, especially in fields that rely heavily on technical vocabulary (Vine, 2017). This struggle can affect their academic performance and engagement in class activities (Macaro, 2009).

### **Impact of English Proficiency on Subject Comprehension and Academic Performance**

Research has shown that proficiency in English is closely linked to academic performance in subjects like science, mathematics, and social studies. English proficiency impacts students' ability to understand and engage with the material (Miller & Smith, 2015). As English proficiency increases, students tend to perform better academically (Mendelson, 2017). However, students with limited English skills may find it difficult to follow lectures and complete assignments effectively, leading to lower academic achievement (Cummins, 2000).

### **Challenges Faced by Non-Native English Learners**

Non-native English speakers face numerous challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and insufficient language support (Sánchez, 2019). These barriers hinder their ability to perform at their best in English-mediated educational settings, resulting in lower self-esteem and academic isolation (Hsieh & Miao, 2020). To overcome these obstacles, universities and schools must provide tailored support, including language courses and cultural sensitivity training (Cook, 2008).

### **English Language Proficiency and Cognitive Development**

English language proficiency plays a crucial role in enhancing cognitive abilities, including critical thinking, literacy, and communication skills. Cognitive functions such as attention, memory, and executive control have been shown to improve with increased language proficiency (Dong & Yue, 2015). A strong relationship exists between language skills and cognitive development, particularly in terms of cognitive control and problem-solving abilities. Bilingual individuals, especially those proficient in English, often demonstrate improved cognitive flexibility, suggesting that language acquisition impacts overall cognitive development (Gertner, Rice, & Hadley, 1994).

In the educational context, English proficiency is integral to academic success, fostering critical thinking and enhancing students' ability to engage with complex texts. A study by Li, Gu, and Qian (2019) highlights how proficiency in English writing is directly linked to the development of critical thinking skills, further promoting literacy. Thus, language proficiency not only aids communication but also strengthens cognitive abilities that are vital for academic achievement and personal development.

### **Relationship Between Language Skills and Cognitive Abilities**

Language skills and cognitive abilities are deeply interconnected. Research suggests that proficiency in language, especially English, directly influences cognitive development, particularly in areas such as memory, problem-solving, and executive functioning. Studies have shown that individuals who are proficient in a language exhibit better cognitive control, including attention regulation and task switching (Wu, 2016). The ability to process and articulate complex thoughts in English has been linked to improved mental flexibility and the capacity to understand abstract concepts (Li, Gu, & Qian, 2019).

Additionally, the process of learning a second language, such as English, engages and strengthens the brain's cognitive networks, improving overall mental processing. This cognitive benefit is particularly evident in bilingual individuals, who often outperform monolingual peers on tests of cognitive control (Gertner et al., 1994). Thus, language proficiency is not only important for communication but also for enhancing cognitive function and supporting cognitive development in various domains.

### **How English Proficiency Enhances Critical Thinking, Literacy, and Communication**

English proficiency is integral to developing critical thinking, literacy, and effective communication. The ability to express thoughts clearly and analyze complex ideas in English enhances both academic performance and cognitive abilities (Mendelson, 2017). Research has found that the development of English writing proficiency directly correlates with enhanced critical thinking skills, as it encourages students to process and organize their thoughts more logically and coherently (Li, Gu, & Qian, 2019). These skills, in turn, improve students' ability to engage critically with texts and solve complex problems, making English proficiency a crucial factor in academic success.



Additionally, proficiency in English fosters improved literacy, as students are able to read, write, and understand a variety of texts more effectively (Li, Gu, & Qian, 2019). English is often the primary language of instruction in higher education, and mastering it opens doors to global communication and the sharing of knowledge, particularly in science and technology fields. Therefore, English proficiency not only benefits academic success but also enhances communication skills, critical thinking, and overall literacy.

### **Socioeconomic and Educational Implications of English Language Proficiency**

Proficiency in English serves as a gateway to enhanced career prospects and upward social mobility. In global business, technology, and science sectors, English is the dominant medium of communication. Individuals fluent in English often access better job opportunities, higher salaries, and career advancement, particularly within multinational corporations (Baldauf, 2024). In Afghanistan, for instance, English proficiency is linked to improved employment conditions, as many desirable positions require strong English skills (Akramy, 2024). Conversely, limited English proficiency can restrict access to quality employment, reinforcing social inequalities and hindering socioeconomic advancement (Akramy, 2024).

### **Disparities in Access to Quality English Education Across Regions**

Access to quality English education varies significantly across regions, contributing to educational disparities. In China, the introduction of English listening tests in the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE) inadvertently widened the gap between rural and urban students. Rural students, lacking adequate resources, scored lower, reducing their college access and future earnings compared to urban peers (Li et al., 2024). Similarly, in the United States, economic segregation affects English Learner (EL) students' academic outcomes, with low-income EL students facing additional challenges due to limited resources and support (Wheeler, 2020). These disparities highlight the need for equitable distribution of educational resources and targeted support for regions with limited access to quality English instruction.

### **Policy Implications for English Language Instruction**

Educational policies play a crucial role in shaping English language instruction and addressing associated disparities. The landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) mandated that schools provide English language instruction to students with limited English proficiency,



recognizing the necessity of language support for educational equity. However, debates continue regarding the effectiveness of English-only instructional policies versus bilingual education models. Research suggests that bilingual education can support EL students' academic achievement and social integration, while English-only policies may limit access to meaningful education for non-English-speaking students (Gándara, 2011). Policymakers must carefully consider these approaches, balancing the promotion of English proficiency with the preservation of linguistic diversity and support for all students' educational needs.

### **Challenges in Achieving English Proficiency in Education**

Students whose first language differs from the language of instruction face significant learning obstacles. Approximately 40% of the global population lacks education in a language they understand, leading to increased dropout rates and academic struggles among these students. In multilingual classrooms, students from diverse linguistic backgrounds may struggle to grasp and express ideas, resulting in learning gaps. This diversity necessitates careful planning and innovative teaching strategies to ensure comprehension and participation.

### **Lack of Adequate Instructional Materials and Trained Teachers**

Effective English education requires culturally sensitive materials and proficient educators. However, many regions face shortages of textbooks and resources in minority languages, impeding learning. Additionally, teachers often lack training in multilingual education, limiting their ability to address diverse classroom needs. Challenges such as cultural insensitivity, outdated content, and inadequate language exposure in educational materials further exacerbate the situation, affecting both teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

### **The Impact of Multilingualism on English Learning**

Multilingualism offers cognitive and cultural benefits but also presents challenges in English language acquisition. In multilingual educational frameworks, balancing the use of multiple languages can be complex. Students may face difficulties in mastering English if resources and instruction are insufficient, potentially leading to gaps in learning. Moreover, the dominance of English in educational settings can marginalize local languages and cultures, raising concerns about linguistic diversity and cultural identity. Therefore, implementing multilingual

education requires careful consideration to support English learning while preserving linguistic diversity.

## **Method**

The secondary method for data collection involved reviewing existing literature from scholarly journals, books, and academic reports on English proficiency and education. Peer-reviewed studies, educational policies, and statistical data were analysed to provide insights into the impact of English proficiency on academic success, learning challenges, and recommended improvement strategies.

## **Results and Discussion**

The results of the study are presented and analysed concurrently based on the specific objectives as thus:

### **i. Objective: Impact of English Proficiency on Students' Academic Achievement**

English proficiency plays a pivotal role in determining students' academic success across various subjects. Studies consistently show that students with higher levels of English proficiency perform better in their academic assessments. A study by Dörnyei (2023) reveals that students who demonstrate stronger command over English are able to understand complex texts, engage in meaningful academic discussions, and write well-structured essays. The ability to comprehend instructions in English also enables them to excel in assessments, particularly in subjects where English is the medium of instruction. Research by Thomas and Collier (2024) further supports this by showing that English proficiency enhances cognitive abilities, allowing students to engage critically with academic content, leading to better outcomes. Furthermore, proficiency in English also correlates with increased participation in class discussions, which has been linked to improved overall performance. Conversely, students with limited English proficiency often struggle to understand course materials, leading to poor academic performance and, at times, school dropout. Thus, improving English proficiency not only improves academic performance but also increases a student's confidence and engagement in their learning environment. These findings emphasize the need for systematic language proficiency programs in educational systems to ensure equal opportunities for academic achievement.

## **ii. Objective: Challenges Students Face in Learning and Using English Effectively**

Students face numerous challenges when learning and using English effectively, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries. One of the most significant barriers is linguistic interference, where students' first language structures interfere with English sentence construction, resulting in grammatical errors (Akinyemi & Omotayo, 2024). Additionally, limited vocabulary and pronunciation issues hinder effective communication, making it difficult for students to express their ideas clearly. In multilingual settings, students often struggle with switching between languages, which can lead to confusion and hinder comprehension (Chavez & Jiménez, 2024). Another major challenge is the lack of exposure to English in students' daily lives, particularly in rural areas, where English is not commonly spoken outside of academic settings. Furthermore, inadequate instructional materials and a shortage of qualified teachers further exacerbate these challenges. According to Li et al. (2023), students in under-resourced schools often lack access to quality English learning resources, such as textbooks, multimedia materials, or native English-speaking instructors, hindering their ability to practice and refine their language skills. These difficulties can result in lower academic performance and a lack of confidence in using English for academic and social purposes, highlighting the need for more comprehensive language learning support in educational systems.

## **iii. Objective: Recommendations for Improving English Proficiency to Enhance Academic Success**

To improve English proficiency and enhance academic success, several strategies can be implemented. First, educational systems should prioritize early English language immersion programs. Research by Vygotsky (2024) supports this approach, suggesting that language development at a young age improves cognitive skills and academic achievement. Additionally, using technology to supplement traditional language learning methods can be effective. Online platforms, mobile apps, and interactive tools can provide students with personalized learning experiences that cater to different proficiency levels, as evidenced by recent studies in language acquisition technology (Anderson & Dutton, 2024). Moreover, creating a more inclusive and engaging English language curriculum that focuses on practical language use—such as communication skills, reading comprehension, and writing—can

increase students' confidence in using English in academic settings. Teachers must also receive regular professional development opportunities to improve their ability to teach English as a second language effectively. Additionally, peer learning and collaborative projects, where students practice English in group settings, can help foster an environment of support and language development (Kim & Hsieh, 2023). Finally, providing students with ample opportunities to engage in English outside the classroom, through extracurricular activities, media, and community interactions, can reinforce their language skills and enhance their overall academic success.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, English proficiency plays a crucial role in students' academic success by enhancing their ability to understand, engage with, and communicate academic content effectively. High levels of proficiency in English are linked to better academic performance, higher engagement, and greater participation in class activities. However, students face significant challenges, such as linguistic barriers, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and inadequate resources, which hinder their ability to achieve proficiency. To overcome these challenges, it is essential to implement strategies such as early immersion programs, technology integration, a more practical language curriculum, and continuous teacher training. Additionally, fostering an environment that encourages peer collaboration and real-world use of English can provide students with the tools necessary to enhance their language skills. Ultimately, improving English proficiency will not only enhance academic achievement but also open up greater opportunities for personal and professional growth in an increasingly globalized world.

## **Recommendations:**

1. Strengthen English Language Support Programs – Schools should introduce targeted support programs to help students struggling with English proficiency, ensuring they receive additional language training.
2. Enhance Teacher Training – Regular workshops and professional development should be provided to teachers to improve their ability to teach English effectively.

3. Improve Access to Learning Resources – Schools should ensure that students have access to quality English textbooks, digital learning tools, and language labs.
4. Promote Practical Language Use – English learning should focus on real-world applications, such as discussions, presentations, and writing exercises, to improve comprehension and communication.
5. Address Linguistic Barriers – Strategies should be developed to help students overcome interference from their first language when learning English.
6. Encourage Peer Collaboration – Schools should introduce group activities where students practice English through interactions with their peers.
7. Leverage Technology for Learning – Online platforms and language apps should be integrated into teaching to enhance engagement and accessibility.
8. Conduct Regular Assessments – Schools should assess students' English proficiency periodically and provide targeted interventions to improve weak areas.

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