
A Psychological Perspective on Teaching and Learning English in India: Challenges, Classroom Interventions, and Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract:

Despite the long-standing presence of English in the Indian education system, a significant proportion of learners fail to attain functional proficiency in the language, particularly those from marginalized and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This study examines the psychological and pedagogical factors contributing to ineffective English language teaching and learning in India. Employing a descriptive qualitative research design supported by classroom-based interventions, the study draws on observations, learner performance analysis, and experiential data collected from government schools and colleges in Karnataka. The findings indicate that limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical competence, overdependence on bilingual instructional methods, inadequate language-learning environments, and learners' psychological resistance to error correction are the primary barriers to English acquisition. The study further demonstrates that motivation-driven interventions grounded in psychological principles such as reinforcement, repetition, and learner autonomy can significantly enhance English language proficiency. The paper concludes by recommending psychologically informed pedagogical practices to improve the quality and inclusiveness of English language education in India.

Keywords: English language teaching, psychological approach, vocabulary acquisition, grammar competence, marginalized learners, Indian education

Introduction

English continues to play a crucial role in India's educational, professional, and socio-political domains. Introduced during the colonial period primarily to facilitate administration, English education later became a tool for intellectual empowerment and social mobility. However, despite extensive exposure to English instruction across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, effective language acquisition remains elusive for a large section of Indian learners.

Recent policy initiatives, including the expansion of English-medium instruction in government schools, reflect public demand but also expose systemic inadequacies in teacher preparedness, curricular design, and classroom practices. The situation is particularly critical among first-generation learners, rural students, Dalits, minorities, and economically weaker sections, who often lack access to conducive learning environments.

While widespread failure characterizes English learning outcomes, isolated cases of exceptional success—such as Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and contemporary learners from marginalized backgrounds—highlight the potential of psychologically supportive and pedagogically sound interventions. This paradox underscores the need to investigate English language learning in India through a psychological lens.

Review of Related Literature

Research on English language teaching in India consistently points to challenges related to inadequate vocabulary, weak grammatical foundations, examination-oriented pedagogy, and teacher-centered instruction (Thorndike, 1903; Chadrashekhkar, 1999). Studies on language learning psychology emphasize the importance of motivation, reinforcement, repetition, and learner engagement in successful acquisition (Sawant, 2016). Recent scholarship also critiques the excessive use of bilingual and translation-based methods, arguing that they limit learners' exposure to authentic English input and inhibit communicative competence. Furthermore, poor learning environments and lack of opportunities for meaningful language use negatively affect learners' confidence and proficiency.

However, there remains a gap in empirical studies that integrate psychological principles with classroom-level interventions, particularly in rural and marginalized contexts. This study attempts to address this gap.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study seeks to:

1. Identify psychological and pedagogical barriers to effective English language learning in India.
2. Examine the impact of vocabulary and grammar deficiencies on learner performance.
3. Analyze the role of motivation and reinforcement in improving language acquisition.
4. Evaluate the effectiveness of classroom-based psychological interventions.
5. Propose pedagogical strategies aligned with psychological principles for English language teaching.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a **descriptive qualitative research design**, supplemented by **intervention-based classroom experimentation**.

4.2 Participants

Participants included:

- Undergraduate students from government colleges
 - Secondary school students from rural government schools
- All participants belonged predominantly to socio-economically marginalized backgrounds in Karnataka, India.

4.3 Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using:

- Classroom observations
- Informal interviews with students and teachers
- Learner performance records
- Reflective field notes
- A structured vocabulary acquisition intervention

4.4 Intervention Procedure

A motivation-based vocabulary learning program was implemented in a rural government high school. Students were encouraged to systematically learn English vocabulary from prescribed textbooks. Financial incentives were provided based on the number of words mastered. Repetition, pronunciation practice, meaning recall, and periodic oral testing formed the core of the intervention.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary deficiency emerged as the most significant impediment to comprehension and expression. Post-intervention observations revealed notable improvement in learners' reading comprehension, sentence formation, and oral narration skills.

5.2 Grammar Competence

Learners demonstrated limited understanding of basic grammatical structures, which constrained effective communication. Repeated practice and overlearning strategies resulted in improved sentence accuracy and fluency.

5.3 Instructional Methods

Excessive reliance on bilingual instruction was found to restrict language immersion. Gradual reduction of mother-tongue dependence improved learners' confidence in using English.

5.4 Learning Environment

Lack of exposure to communicative activities limited learners' opportunities for practice. Structured writing tasks were found to indirectly enhance speaking competence.

5.5 Psychological Barriers

Fear of making mistakes and resistance to correction significantly hindered learning. Learners who developed positive attitudes toward feedback exhibited greater improvement.

6. Discussion

The findings align with psychological theories of learning that emphasize motivation, reinforcement, and repeated exposure. The success of the vocabulary intervention confirms the effectiveness of reward-based learning in enhancing learner

engagement, particularly among students with limited intrinsic motivation. The study reinforces the view that language learning is not merely cognitive but deeply psychological and behavioral.

7. Pedagogical Implications

The study suggests:

- Integrating psychological principles into teacher training programs
- Prioritizing vocabulary and grammar as foundational components
- Creating error-tolerant and supportive classroom environments
- Reducing overdependence on translation-based teaching
- Encouraging sustained practice through reinforcement mechanisms

Limitations and Scope for Further Research

The study is limited to selected institutions in Karnataka and relies primarily on qualitative data. Future research may adopt experimental or mixed-method designs with larger samples to enhance generalizability.

Conclusion

English language teaching in India faces complex psychological and pedagogical challenges, particularly among marginalized learners. This study demonstrates that targeted, psychologically grounded interventions can significantly improve language learning outcomes. By adopting motivation-driven and learner-centered approaches, educators can transform English language classrooms into inclusive and effective learning spaces.

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