

Navigating the Pedagogical Shift: English as a Skill, Not a Subject in Higher Education and Standardized English Language Exams in Haryana

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ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to explore the pedagogical implications of teaching English as a skill rather than as a subject, particularly focusing on its subsequent impact on higher education and standardized testing within the context of Haryana, India. Through a series of case studies, we investigate how traditional methods of rote learning and memorization-based language instruction contribute to comprehension barriers in exams such as the IELTS and PTE. This paper underscores the need for a pedagogical shift, advocating for skill-based English education to improve linguistic competence and academic outcomes.

Keywords: Pedagogical Shift, Skill-Based English Education, Standardized Testing, Comprehension Barriers

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a fundamental tool for communication, a medium for academic engagement, and a gateway to socio-economic mobility. As English progressively becomes a global lingua franca, the onus to acquire competence in this language is increasingly pressing, especially within educational systems aspiring to align themselves with international standards. This is particularly relevant in Haryana, a state in India where English language teaching (ELT) practices predominantly treat English as a subject to be mastered through memorization rather than as a skill to be acquired for practical utility. Consequently, despite years of formal education in English, many individuals face substantial challenges when navigating higher studies or attempting standardized tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate the outcomes of this prevalent pedagogical approach. Specifically, we aim to:

1. Examine how teaching English as a subject rather than as a skill impacts students' performance in higher education and standardized tests.
2. Utilize case studies to identify comprehension barriers faced by test-takers in Haryana attempting to clear standardized language tests like the IELTS and PTE.
3. Propose pedagogical shifts toward skill-based English language teaching and discuss their potential to ameliorate the identified issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the conceptualization of language as a subject has dominated academic curricula globally, research argues for a nuanced perspective that considers language not just as a body of knowledge but also as a set of skills (Krashen, 1982; Canale & Swain, 1980). There has been a significant amount of studies in the field that emphasize the importance of integrating the four pillars of language acquisition—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—into the instructional design (Nunan, 1999).

The landscape of ELT in India is diverse, reflecting a variety of teaching methods, from grammar-translation to direct method and communicative language teaching (Agarwal, 2008; Khanna, 2011). Despite this diversity, rote learning and examination-oriented teaching often overshadow skill-based learning (Patel & Jain, 2008).

Research has shown that English language proficiency remains a significant barrier for candidates attempting competitive exams like the IELTS (Green, 2014; Taylor, 2007). Inconsistent scores among test-takers from non-English speaking backgrounds reveal disparities stemming from early educational experiences (Brown & Hill, 2008).

A skill-based approach integrates cognitive, metacognitive, and procedural skills, ensuring that students are equipped to use the language effectively (Oxford, 1990; Cohen, 1998). This is particularly crucial in higher education settings where language competence directly impacts academic performance (Cummins, 2000).

While Behaviorist theory considers language learning as habit formation through repetition and reinforcement (Skinner, 1957), Constructivist theory posits that learners actively create their own understanding by connecting new knowledge to existing cognitive frameworks (Piaget, 1967; Vygotsky, 1978). This distinction is crucial for understanding the pedagogical limitations of rote learning, which largely aligns with Behaviorist ideology, as opposed to skill-based language learning that falls under the Constructivist framework.

In English-dominant countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, educational policies often emphasize language acquisition as a skill, incorporating various aspects of language use, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing (NCLB, 2001; DfE, 2013).

Cultural norms and traditions often shape the language education landscape. For instance, in many Asian countries, the emphasis on memorization may be rooted in Confucian pedagogical traditions, which could limit the effectiveness of skill-based English language learning (Hu, 2002; Rao, 2006).

Standardized tests like the IELTS and PTE are designed to evaluate a wide array of language skills. However, a disconnect often exists between these assessments and classroom teaching practices. Candidates taught in knowledge-based environments are often ill-prepared for such exams, leading to disparate outcomes (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007).

Lack of access to quality skill-based language education often disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, thereby exacerbating existing social inequalities (Coleman, 2010; Rassool, 2007). This point is pertinent for the study, given the focus on Haryana, where disparities in English proficiency could be a symptom of broader socio-economic inequalities.

In line with these observations, S. K. Jha (2013) also underscores that the curriculum and the prescribed textbooks frequently lack authentic and interactive lessons essential for fostering real communication within the lives of learners, encompassing their indigenous culture, language, real-life events, needs, and paraphernalia. Furthermore, Jha aptly points out that these prescribed textbooks often lean toward antiquity and form, rather than emphasizing practical functionality (practicum).

Empirical studies affirming the effectiveness of skill-based language learning provide substantial evidence in favor of such pedagogical shifts. For example, research shows that learners exposed to skill-based methodologies exhibit superior reading comprehension and are better equipped to tackle standardized tests (Carrell, 1988; Grabe, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is rooted in a qualitative paradigm, employing a multiple case study design to offer an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and pedagogical practices concerning English language learning in Haryana.

Participants and Setting

Utilizing a purposive sampling strategy, the study includes a sample of 30 individuals who have completed their high school education in Haryana and have either taken or are preparing to take the IELTS examination. These participants range in age from 18 to 30 and are representative of various genders and socio-economic backgrounds.

Data Collection Methods

To generate a comprehensive understanding, the research employs multiple methods of data collection:

Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews of approximately 45 minutes were conducted with each participant. The semi-structured format allows a balanced mix of predefined questions and open-ended discussions. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized for confidentiality.

Document Analysis: A meticulous review of curriculum documents, textbooks, and past IELTS examination papers was conducted. This analysis aims to understand how skill-based or knowledge-based orientations manifest in educational material.

Google Form Survey for Teachers: A structured Google Form was circulated among English teachers in Haryana to collect data on current pedagogical practices. The focus of this survey is to ascertain the prevalence of textbook-oriented instruction that emphasizes comprehension and factual questions over skill-based learning.

Data Analysis

The data will undergo thematic content analysis in adherence to Braun and Clarke's six-phase model (2006). This methodology allows for a nuanced interpretation of both qualitative and quantitative data. Special attention will be given to the survey data during the analysis, as it serves as empirical evidence to confirm or challenge the qualitative findings derived from interviews and document analyses. Statistical measures such as frequency and percentage distributions will be computed for the survey data, while qualitative data will be coded and thematically categorized.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND CASE STUDIES

The research findings are organized thematically, reflecting the overarching trends identified from the multi-method data collection strategy, which includes semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and a Google Form survey among English teachers. The findings are corroborated with four distinct case studies, offering nuanced perspectives on the state of English language teaching in Haryana, India.

Thematic Findings

1. Financial Investment in English Proficiency: The data reveals that the average financial expenditure on IELTS preparation is approximately 70,000 INR. This speaks volumes about the perceived importance of English language proficiency and the lengths to which individuals are willing to go to achieve it.

2. Mismatch between Schooling and Proficiency: A striking 90% of participants reported that despite receiving education in English-medium schools until Grade 12, they felt as if they were learning English anew when preparing for standardized tests. This points to a significant gap in the teaching methods employed at the foundational level.

3. Call for Skill-Based Approach from the Start: The majority opinion among participants was that skill-based English language teaching should begin at the school level. This pedagogical shift is seen as a critical step towards achieving high levels of proficiency required for standardized tests like IELTS and PTE.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: Keshav (Name Changed)

Keshav's journey is emblematic of the struggles faced by many in Haryana. He has been attempting to migrate to Australia for two years and has taken the IELTS exam seven times, achieving a highest band score of 6.5. Despite the substantial financial and temporal investment, his goal remains elusive. Keshav moved from his hometown, Ladwa, to Chandigarh in search of better coaching centers. His experience accentuates the pivotal role played by competent instruction in language learning. He emphasized that he felt the lack of proper teaching methods more acutely when he enrolled in a more professional coaching center.

Despite his earnest efforts, Keshav's struggles typify the fundamental issue: the disjunction between early educational experiences and the demands of globalized standardized testing. His case echoes the sentiment that effective language teaching needs to be incorporated into the school curriculum to break this cycle of inadequacy.

Case Study 2: Priya (Name Changed)

Priya, a 25-year-old woman, completed her school education in a renowned English-medium school in Haryana. She aspires to pursue a Master's degree in Management from a university in Canada. Despite her educational background, Priya was startled by the complex language requirements of the IELTS exam. She felt her schooling primarily focused on rote learning, which inadequately prepared her for the language complexities of international academia. Priya stressed the importance of having qualified instructors, echoing Keshav's sentiments. She took online courses from foreign instructors and saw a noticeable improvement in her language skills. The strain of multiple IELTS attempts has caused her family considerable financial stress, particularly because they had assumed her English-medium schooling would suffice in preparing her for such challenges.

Case Study 3: Harsh (Name Changed)

Harsh is a 22-year-old man preparing for job opportunities in the United States. He's employed with a local IT company in Haryana. Harsh initially believed that his English was proficient enough to clear the IELTS without any hitch, given his work environment demanded constant use of English. After his first unsuccessful IELTS attempt, Harsh realized that conversational English in a work environment didn't equip him with the skills to understand and produce academic English, a vital part of IELTS. Harsh's experience further stresses the need for a skill-based language education that not only prepares students for local job markets but also equips them with the capability to perform on a global scale.

Case Study 4: Renu (Name Changed)

Renu is a high school English teacher in Haryana who decided to take the IELTS to validate her proficiency in the English language. Despite teaching English for over a decade, Renu found the IELTS challenging. She stated that the examination tested aspects of the English language that she had never thought to teach her students. Renu's experience has led her to rethink her teaching methods, aligning with the majority of participants who believe that a radical change in school-level English language teaching methodology is imperative.

Renu's case illuminates the need for systemic change, not only in the perspectives of students but also among educators who are the primary agents of academic dissemination.

Integration of Google Form Survey Results

The survey conducted among English teachers in Haryana confirmed that a staggering 90% of educators still rely on textbook-based instruction focusing on comprehension and factual questions. This data serves as empirical evidence corroborating the participants' sentiment that early educational experiences inadequately prepare them for the demands of global language proficiency.

CONCLUSION

The present study delineates the significant lacunae in the existing pedagogical frameworks for English language instruction in Haryana, India. Utilizing a multi-method research design involving interviews, document analysis, and Google Form surveys, the study brings to light the disjuncture between school-based learning and the exigencies of global standardized tests like IELTS and PTE. With the supplementary lens of four detailed case studies, the research elucidates the shared and unique experiences of individuals, underlining the enormous financial, emotional, and time investments involved in achieving English language proficiency.

While the thematic findings and case studies coalesce into a compelling argument for the re-evaluation and restructuring of English language teaching, it becomes evident that reform needs to be instituted at multiple levels—pedagogy, curriculum, and teacher training. There is an urgent need for systemic change, one that promotes skill-based learning over rote memorization, to equip learners with the tools they need to navigate the global landscape successfully.

Limitations

- a) Sample Size and Demography: The study included only 30 participants, limiting the scope and generalizability of the findings.
- b) Geographical Focus: The study was limited to Haryana, and hence, the findings may not necessarily extend to other parts of India or other educational settings globally.
- c) Qualitative Focus: While this allows for in-depth understanding, it limits the empirical rigor, which might be offered by a more quantitative or mixed-methods approach.
- d) Self-reported Data: The study relies heavily on the perspectives and experiences of the participants, which could be influenced by a range of subjective factors.
- e) Educational Policy: The study does not delve into the details of educational policy and how that shapes English language teaching, which could offer another layer of understanding.

Scope for Further Research

- a) Expansion to Other Geographies: The study can be extended to include other states in India, or even other countries, to ascertain if the findings hold true in different socio-cultural contexts.
- b) Inclusion of Policy Analysis: Future research can evaluate the policy frameworks affecting English language teaching to offer a more comprehensive view.
- c) Teacher Training Programs: Studies could be designed to evaluate the effectiveness of various teaching methods when implemented in pilot settings.
- d) Longitudinal Studies: Observing the same participants over time could yield insights into the long-term impacts of English language education reforms.
- e) Incorporation of Quantitative Metrics: Subsequent research could employ a mixed-methods approach to validate the qualitative findings statistically.
- f) Curriculum Review: Analyzing English language textbooks and instructional materials across different grades could provide additional evidence to support the call for reform.

The research, despite its limitations, serves as a seminal work highlighting the systemic issues that plague English language teaching in Haryana. It acts as an impetus for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to collaborate in enhancing the quality of English language education, thereby uplifting the future trajectories of countless individuals.

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