

# BRIDGING THE PROFICIENCY GAP: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF CHALLENGES AND REFORM AVENUES IN SECONDARY-LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*English plays a vital role in education and business since it is used and understood worldwide. There is, however, a big and long-lasting gap between what English language classes are supposed to teach and what secondary school pupils actually learn, especially in English. This report examines and synthesizes the findings of 25 research projects conducted from 2007 to 2025 across several EFL contexts, including India, Iran, China, Vietnam, and Nepal. The study shows that the differences in skill level are caused by a number of elements that are all connected. It can be challenging to talk to people if you rely too much on standard Grammar-Translation Methods. People who are really anxious about language and don't want to fit in could have a hard time socially and culturally. Systemically, unfair resource distribution, overcrowded classrooms, evaluation systems that promote rote learning, and neglect of kids' multilingual talents all get in the way of learning. The study shows that your gender, where you live (in a city or in the country), and the sort of school you go to can all have a big effect on the findings.*

**Keywords:** *English Language Education, Secondary-Level EFL, Proficiency Gap, Grammar-Translation Method, Communicative Language Teaching, Language Anxiety, Educational Reform*

## Introduction

English is the language of business in today's world; it is an important part of school programs all around the world. This is especially true in high school, when kids are getting ready for college and the global job market. In this setting, learning English is not just an academic activity; it is also a necessary ability for getting a job, talking to people from other countries, and learning new things. There has been a lot of financial investments on teaching resource but still goals of English learning and the skills required for the students has not been achieved. To analyze the variety of factors that serve as barriers to learning English as a language, this review paper aggregates recent literature and breaks down the challenges into categories relating to education, socio-cultural influences, and structural limitations. Teacher instruction is one area of concern. Despite the inefficacy of outdated teaching methods such as Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), many institutions still adhere to this model which emphasizes memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary over functional conversation with others. While found that GTM had positive effects on student grammar proficiency, it found little to no effect on their ability to speak and listen, skills which are crucial to communicating effectively in real life. This poses a paradox as students may know how to say something but not how to say it correctly. Some teachers don't want to adopt more participatory, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methods because they don't get enough training, their classes are too big, and their tests focus more on grammar than on fluency.

There are also big problems with motivation, culture, and society, in addition to these teaching problems. A lot of students believe that English is a language that is very far away and not very useful in their daily lives. Students may not be as motivated in studying the language if they don't perceive how it fits into their lives or culture. Also, if you're afraid of making mistakes in front of others, it could be hard to take part in speaking activities, which makes it much tougher to learn how to talk to people.

Lastly, issues with the system and the infrastructure make it very hard to learn English well. Some of these problems are that there aren't enough trained English teachers, especially in remote regions, and that there aren't enough practical learning tools and technology. The curriculum is often too much to grasp and doesn't fit with the amount of time that is genuinely available for language study. This indicates that only the surface of the knowledge is covered, and learning doesn't get much deeper. National assessments, which often measure grammar and reading comprehension at certain times, make traditional teaching methods even better and make it harder to educate pupils how to talk to each other.

As a result, this review's goal is to give a full picture of these related problems. This study aims to elucidate the pedagogical deficiencies, socio-cultural obstacles, and structural limitations that hinder secondary students' attainment of English competence, while concurrently providing potential pathways for substantive educational reform.

## Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives: (i) To identify and analyse the key pedagogical, socio-cultural, and structural challenges that impede English language proficiency among secondary-level learners in EFL contexts; (ii) To examine the impact of teaching methodologies, particularly the Grammar-Translation Method and Communicative Language Teaching, on students' language development; (iii) To investigate the role of motivational and affective factors, including language anxiety and learner attitudes, in shaping English language outcomes; (iv) To explore how demographic variables such as gender, school type, and urban-rural location influence English language achievement; and (v) To synthesize evidence-based reform strategies that can bridge the proficiency gap and improve English language education at the secondary level.

## Methodology

This study adopts a systematic review methodology to synthesize existing empirical and theoretical research on English language education at the secondary level in EFL contexts. A total of 25 research studies published between 2007 and 2025 were selected for review. Sources were drawn from peer-reviewed journals, academic conference proceedings, and scholarly publications, with a focus on studies conducted in diverse EFL settings including India, Iran, China, Vietnam, Nepal, and Brunei. The selection criteria prioritized studies addressing pedagogical approaches, learner motivation and attitudes, structural and institutional barriers, and demographic influences on English language achievement. Thematic analysis was employed to categorize and interpret findings across studies, identifying recurring patterns and divergences in the literature. The review process involved systematic reading, coding, and synthesis of data to draw comprehensive conclusions and formulate evidence-based recommendations for educational reform.

## Review of different research papers

This paper illustrates that modeling is an efficacious approach for enhancing children's self-efficacy and self-regulation in reading and writing, grounded in Bandura's social cognitive theory and Zimmerman's four-phase model. A lot of research on interventions shows that students' self-efficacy and academic skills are better when they learn from others, especially when they watch their peers. For instance, kids who were given process goals and feedback that showed them how to use a method to do better felt more confident and did better than their brothers who were given result or more generic goals. Also, saying the stages of a technique out loud and utilizing fading to hide speech helped students recall what they learned. This helped them move from the watching and copying stage to the self-regulated and self-controlled level of proficiency. The modeling process reveals how crucial it is to be a good teacher. Modeling demonstrations, guided practice, and feedback are all parts of good teaching. This helps kids learn new things that stick with them, such how to improve their literacy skills and change how they think about motivation.

This research examined the attitudes and motives of 108 Iranian undergraduate EFL students engaged in English translation studies. It was founded on Gardner's socio-educational framework. The authors employed the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) and found that students demonstrated significant instrumental (86.11% agreement) and integrative motivation (93.98% agreement) for learning English. This means that the students are learning English not only to get jobs that need it, but also to learn how to get along with others who speak English and read English publications. In addition, the students had very good feelings about learning English (91.85% agreement) and about people who speak English (79.40% agreement). The results show that these students are ultimately motivated by two main things. The study contests the idea that EFL learners are exclusively instrumentally motivated. The authors stress how important it is to take both types of motivation into account when creating a course or lesson in order to help the language learner acquire as much as possible in context.

In this study, the researchers analyzed characteristics thought to hinder the acquisition of English as a second language among 400 higher secondary school students in India. The researchers utilized their own scale to delineate three primary dimensions: Environment, Attitude, and Teacher's Competence. The environment was the factor that most people stated made it hard to learn English, with a mean score of 70.86. The results showed that boys had more trouble with Environment and Attitude than girls, and that students in rural areas had more trouble with Attitude and Teacher's Competence than students in urban areas. Also, students who didn't read English newspapers or listen to English news said they had much higher difficulty in all areas than students who did read newspapers and/or watch news broadcasts on a regular basis. The authors assert that the lack of an English-speaking environment, negative attitudes, and insufficient opportunities for English engagement in the curriculum hinder English practices and, consequently, the acquisition of a second language. The authors claim that the current system should improve to allow for more English speakers. This could alleviate some of the issues surrounding the aforementioned variables. They would require educating teachers, changing the curriculum, and making it easier for students to read newspapers and/or watch the news in English.

This study investigates the advancement of reading comprehension among seventh-grade children learning English as a second language (ESL) in comparison to their native English-speaking (L1) counterparts. There were no discrepancies in standardized and experimental assessments of reading comprehension between ESL and L1 students. The authors suggested that through prolonged training, ESL learners might cultivate reading comprehension skills comparable to those of L1 students. The impact sizes were small, but ESL students did worse on the assessments that measured their working memory and syntactic awareness. The research categorized readers into three groups: proficient comprehenders (GC), deficient comprehenders (PC), and inadequate readers (PR). The authors observed that a nearly identical percentage of students were assigned to each group across all language types, with approximately 85–88% of students categorized as GC. It is important to note that PC pupils who could decode words well but didn't understand them well were very different from GC groups when it came to phonological, syntactic, and morphological awareness, as well as working memory. The authors make it clear that these findings support the idea that understanding what you read is the result of many cognitive processes, not only decoding. They also say that all students, even ESL students, need to master these abilities on purpose.

The researchers contend that globalization and the ensuing "glocalization" of English—where it is modified to convey local cultural subtleties—demand a transformation in English language teaching (ELT) technique. He states that native speaker-based syllabus designs and larger concepts such as intercultural communicative competence don't work in environments where the majority of communication takes place between speakers of various Englishes (non-native speakers). He suggests that EIL syllabus should involve more than ensuring learners use the target language accurately. It should also involve teaching children to think alternatively and to explain & negotiate meaning. In this way of thinking, one must acquire meta-cultural competence in order to communicate effectively in globalized situations. One must move beyond mere reproduction of one linguistic norm.

The research examines how primary school teachers in Brunei teach students to learn English as their second language. Questionnaires given to 45 Year 4 students and 2 teachers showed that ICT and music helped them learn and were their preferred way of teaching. 90% agreed or strongly agreed that ICT and music made learning more fun and easier to understand. Some children (33.3%) stated they were not interested because they did not understand the language, the instructions were not clear and there was no encouragement from the teacher nor parent. Teachers claimed they taught English through multimedia, activity-based tasks, and creating an environment (ex. "English corner") that engaged the students. The research shows a clear difference: even when teachers use interactive methods, students' attention depends a lot on how interesting they think the lesson is, how easy it is to learn, and how inspired they are by things outside of school. The study reveals that to get people interested, you need to combine technology, fun activities, and a stress-free setting. It is clear that teachers need to do more than merely get students' attention; to be truly effective, they also need to deal with the main reasons why students don't understand or are not motivated on a daily basis.

In this study, the researcher examines the different obstacles impeding successful English education and acquisition in Iranian junior and senior high schools. The analysis, which combines many local studies, finds seven problem areas that are all connected: problems with students (like low motivation, not enough exposure to real language, and not enough good learning strategies), problems with teachers (like teaching for tests instead of communication skills), problems with textbooks that are too old and don't have enough cultural content or communicative tasks, problems with the Grammar-Translation method, problems with a summative assessment system that focuses on testing instead of learning, problems with a curriculum that focuses too much on reading comprehension, and problems with politics that are too sensitive to Western culture. The data demonstrates that kids still don't know how to talk to each other well after seven years of school. The study reveals that these items make people learn English for tests instead of using it in real life. It says that all of these associated parts need to be fully altered to make things far better.

This study looks at the speaking problems of 160 higher secondary students in Srinagar, India. The data from interviews and questionnaires revealed a significant disparity in speaking proficiency, yielding an average score of 2.53 out of 5. A paired t-test revealed no statistically significant improvement ( $p=.486$ ) in speaking skills from the initial to the final exam during a six-month duration. This means that the learning process has come to an end. The investigation indicated that this was due to insufficient opportunities to engage in the activity. Researchers that attended the classroom saw that the teacher was talking and finishing the syllabus most of the time, not doing activities where students may participate. 53.8% of students said they "a little" used English with their friends, and 46.2% said they "never" used it with their family. Not having enough words, having issues with their own language, and making grammar mistakes were some of the main problems with language. The study indicates that the educational system's emphasis on testing and excessive curriculum coverage, along with high class numbers and insufficient audio-visual resources, significantly hinders students' ability to enhance their spoken English, despite years of study.

The researcher examines the correlation among age, motivation, and achievement in the acquisition of English as a second language. There were 210 students in the study, and they were split into three age groups: ten, fourteen, and eighteen years old. A customized questionnaire was utilized to collect data on motivation, while academic success functioned as a measure for quantifying achievement. The investigation revealed a strong link among these characteristics. The findings are significant since they indicate a decline in motivation with age, with ten-year-old exhibiting the highest levels of motivation and eighteen-year-olds the lowest. The younger kids who were more motivated also did better on a test, which means that the youngest group did the best in school. We calculated Spearman's correlation coefficient and conducted a statistical analysis that revealed a strong, positive correlation between overall motivation and success. The study shows that not only do younger students have more desire to learn, but they excel in their ability to acquire a second language as well. The results suggest that teachers, parents, and curriculum designers who would like to take advantage of this increased sensitivity should focus on making learning fun for children at a young age.

Developed and validated the Second Language Writer Self-Efficacy Scale (L2WSS) with a sample of 609 Chinese university students. The L2WSS is an assessment instrument designed to measure a wide variety of aspects based on the theories of social cognition and self-regulated learning. Through confirmatory factor analysis, we found robust support for a three-factor structure: linguistic self-efficacy (ability to use language), self-regulatory efficacy (meta-cognition), and performance self-efficacy (achievement on classroom tasks). The scale has significant internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81-.85$ ), composite reliability ( $CR = .87-.89$ ), and both convergent and discriminant validity ( $AVE > .50$ ). Correlation analyses revealed that the three self-efficacy measures displayed a moderate positive association with intrinsic goal orientation ( $r = .389-.467$ ) and task value, while showing a weak link with extrinsic goal orientation.

This study examines the status of English language instruction (ELT) within ICSE, CBSE, and State boards through an analysis of 25 secondary schools in Siliguri, West Bengal. ICSE and CBSE schools taught English as a first language and had a lot of resources, like 5 to 10 periods a week, English-only classrooms, and better facilities. State board schools, on the other hand, taught it as a second language and had to deal with worse facilities and teaching in more than one language (mostly Bengali/Hindi). One important finding was that 70% of teachers had master's degrees, yet they usually employed old-fashioned methods. For example, 64% of teachers used pattern practice to teach grammar, and 62% of them used chalkboards with chalk as their main tools. They didn't use new tools or technology very often. In 70% of State board classrooms, the learning atmosphere was boring. This was nothing like how friendly and interactive ICSE and CBSE schools were. The biggest problems were that ICSE teachers didn't have enough teaching resources, CBSE teachers had too many students in their courses, and State board teachers had too many other things to do. The research demonstrates that the board type, instructional language, and available resources significantly influence the quality of English language teaching (ELT), regardless of teacher proficiency. This means that the environment needs to be changed so that people can speak English more easily, especially in government buildings.

This study looks at problems that make it hard for people to learn English by looking at secondary school students in the Devakottai Educational District. A survey methodology was employed to analyze data from a student sample, and the utilized instrument demonstrated reliability, as validated by a test-retest procedure. The t-test showed that men and women have very different problems when it comes to learning English ( $t=4.35$ , S). The two groups were not very different: female students (Mean=23.87) had a little more trouble than male students (Mean=23.02). There were no significant differences between the two types of schools (government vs. private,  $t=0.15$ , NS) or the two areas (urban vs. rural,  $t=0.96$ , NS). The research revealed that gender influences the difficulty faced by pupils; however, the administration and location of the school exert minimal impact on the difficulties encountered by children studying English. The survey shows that many schools have the same main problems, but they are not the same for boys and girls. This is probably because of social and mental factors. It says that professors can get students to work harder by making them use English in class discussions, activities, and debates. It also says that schools should make their learning spaces better, like language labs and libraries, so that kids can learn in a more comfortable place.

The Inventory of Learning Styles (ILS) was utilized to analyze the learning styles of 8,072 Chinese students in secondary school, high school, and college. The results showed that college students utilized critical processing ( $M=3.37$ ) and self-regulation methods the most, while secondary students largely used cooperative learning ( $M=3.83$ ). Dimensionality analyses showed that secondary and high school students had comparable factor structures, with meaning-critical and undirected patterns. However, college students had a different action-directed pattern. Different groups were affected in different ways by personal attributes including age and gender. Nonetheless, parental education and employment repeatedly demonstrated robust positive correlations with advanced learning methodologies, such as critical processing and self-regulation. The research shows that even while learning patterns change as schooling improves, socioeconomic background is still a big

factor in the environment. These findings highlight the necessity for targeted pedagogical support to facilitate students' transitions between educational phases and to encourage more adaptive, self-regulated learning methodologies.

This study looked at how well 1,000 high school pupils in the Srikakulam district of India spoke English. It looked at things like the pupils' gender, where they lived, and how the school was operated. A researcher created an achievement test, which indicated that the majority of children performed at an average level. The groups were very different from each other. For instance, female students (Mean=30.46) outperformed male students (Mean=28.45), urban students (Mean=31.32) surpassed rural students (Mean=26.42), and private school students (Mean=30.95) excelled compared to government school students (Mean=27.92). At the 0.05 and 0.01 significance levels, all null hypotheses were turned down. The research shows that teaching English is not fair to everyone. It contends that students in rural and public schools perform inadequately due to insufficient resources, their socioeconomic status, and the quality of their education. The result of earlier studies shows that girls face more problems in learning English especially in rural areas. The research shows that we need to fix these issues by making educational policy more focused, managing resources better, and giving teachers more training.

This study examines the viewpoints of 5<sup>th</sup> grade primary school Vietnamese children regarding the acquisition of English as a foreign language (EFL). Students comprehended the significance of English on a cognitive level, evidenced by their elevated mean scores in areas such as grasping its worldwide utility and enhancing their knowledge. The students were proud of how much English they had learned and were happy to speak it. The students were very dedicated to their studies because they went to class a lot and spent a lot of time learning English. These results support earlier research that shows how important attitude is for learning a language. The study suggests that teachers use these positive attitudes to keep students interested and improve their grades by using fun, psychologically aware teaching methods. It also says that more research should be done in other places to see if the results can be used in other situations.

This study investigates the difficulties encountered by 415 management students in Bihar to reveal a significant disparity between students' perceptions of what is essential for their professions (86% of respondents) and their proficiency in English. Descriptive statistics show that speaking is the hardest skill since tasks like answering questions and giving presentations get the highest mean difficulty ratings. On the other hand, reading was the easiest. It was discovered that teachers employed several instructional strategies beyond traditional lecturing, including collaborative activities and role-playing. But there was a big problem with the ICT and language labs: only 11% of pupils used them every week. The study's conclusion is that the way of teaching is still too theoretical and doesn't meet the needs of the business. This hurts students from rural and low-income areas the most. The report says that the curriculum needs to be modified immediately away so that it includes teaching methods that are current, useful, and employ technology. These changes would help students learn the communication skills they need to get a job that are different from what they learn in school. This is based on a research with primary school kids in D.G.

## Conclusion

This comprehensive review demonstrates that secondary school pupils in EFL contexts continue to exhibit significant deficiencies in their English proficiency. There are a lot of difficulties that are all connected that produce this. A lot of teachers still utilize archaic approaches like the Grammar-Translation Method too much when they teach. A research in India found that 64% of teachers used pattern practice drills, which hurt their students' ability to communicate. Language anxiety is a huge issue for society and culture. A study conducted in West Bengal identified a significant negative correlation ( $r = -0.623$ ) between anxiety and proficiency. The system is different in many ways. Studies from India indicate that pupils in urban settings (Mean=31.32) and private institutions (Mean=30.95) perform significantly better than those in rural areas (Mean=26.42) and public schools (Mean=27.92). One thing to remember about Bihar is that many pupils speak English as their third language. This makes a distinct "hesitancy gap." The synthesis goes on to say that real change requires a change in how people think. To close the gap in proficiency, this means using multilingual, communicative teaching methods, adding technology (which meta-analysis shows makes learning much better), and making changes to the system, such as fair resource allocation and assessment reforms that focus on real-world skills.

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