



Role of English literacy in India's educational development

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Abstract

English literacy occupies an important position in India's educational development because of its relationship with higher education, scientific knowledge, technology, research, employability, and global communication. In a multilingual country such as India, English functions as an important language for accessing national and international knowledge resources while also facilitating communication across linguistic communities. The present review-based study examines the role of English literacy in India's educational development by exploring its historical development, educational significance, contribution to higher education and research, relationship with employability and digital learning, and associated challenges. The study adopts a qualitative review-based research design and analyzes relevant scholarly literature, policy documents, and educational perspectives. The findings indicate that English literacy has contributed significantly to access to higher education, scientific knowledge, research, technology, and global communication. However, unequal access to quality English education continues to produce disparities associated with socioeconomic background, geographical location, institutional resources, and differences between rural and urban learners. The study concludes that English literacy should be promoted as an important educational resource without undermining India's multilingual and cultural diversity. A balanced approach that strengthens English literacy alongside mother tongues and other Indian languages can contribute to equitable, inclusive, and future-oriented educational development.

Keywords: English literacy, educational development, India, multilingualism, higher education, employability, digital learning

Introduction

Language occupies a central position in the educational development of individuals and societies because it serves as a major medium through which knowledge, ideas, values, and cultural experiences are communicated. Literacy enables individuals to access written knowledge, participate effectively in educational processes, communicate ideas, and develop intellectual and critical capacities. In contemporary India, English literacy has acquired particular importance because English is extensively used in higher education, scientific communication, technology, research, business, administration, and international interaction (Graddol, 2010) [3].

India is characterized by extraordinary linguistic diversity. Numerous languages and dialects coexist across different regions and communities, reflecting the country's rich cultural and historical heritage. Within this multilingual environment, English has developed an important functional role as a language of wider communication and academic engagement. Research on English language education in India demonstrates that English has evolved from being primarily associated with higher education and scholarly communication to becoming increasingly important in school education and wider social aspirations (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2019) [7].

The role of English literacy in India cannot be understood merely in terms of language acquisition. The ability to read, write, comprehend, and communicate in English can influence educational opportunities and participation in the contemporary knowledge economy. English provides access to academic literature, scientific research, digital resources, and international platforms of communication (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2010) [2, 3].

English literacy has also become increasingly associated with higher education and employability. The expansion of information technology, global business, international research collaboration, and digital communication has increased the practical importance of English language competence. Consequently, English literacy is frequently perceived as an important skill for participation in professional and academic environments (Graddol, 2010) [3]. At the same time, the growing importance of English has generated concerns regarding linguistic inequality and educational justice. Access to quality English education remains uneven across socioeconomic groups and geographical regions. Learners studying in well-resourced schools may receive greater exposure to English, whereas students from disadvantaged backgrounds may encounter limitations related to teacher availability, learning materials, and opportunities for language practice (NCERT, 2019). Therefore, the role of English literacy in India's educational development must be examined from a balanced perspective. English can serve as a powerful resource for knowledge and opportunity, but equitable educational development requires that all learners receive meaningful opportunities to develop language skills while India's multilingual traditions are respected and strengthened.

Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework of the present study is based on the understanding of literacy as an essential instrument of educational development and English literacy as an important form of linguistic and academic competence in contemporary India. Literacy extends beyond the mechanical ability to read and write. It involves the capacity

to comprehend, interpret, communicate, analyze, and apply information in meaningful educational and social contexts.

English literacy includes the ability to comprehend written English, communicate ideas effectively, express knowledge through writing, and use the language for academic and professional purposes. In India, English literacy has particular relevance because English continues to occupy an important position in higher education, scientific communication, research, professional education, and global interaction (Graddol, 2010) ^[3].

The framework also recognizes the relationship between language and access to knowledge. Educational development depends substantially on the availability and accessibility of learning resources. English literacy enables learners to engage with a wide range of academic publications, digital resources, scientific literature, and international educational materials. Research on English language education in India has similarly highlighted the importance of English in higher education and its expanding role in school education and academic communication (NCERT, 2019).

The study further considers English literacy as a potential form of educational and social capital. Language proficiency can influence access to educational opportunities, professional communication, and employment. However, English literacy should not be considered the sole determinant of educational success because academic achievement is also influenced by socioeconomic conditions, institutional quality, teacher competence, family support, and access to learning resources.

Finally, the conceptual framework recognizes multilingualism as a fundamental characteristic of Indian education. The promotion of English literacy should not require the marginalization of Indian languages. The National Education Policy 2020^[5] emphasizes the importance of multilingualism and the use of home languages and mother tongues, particularly during the foundational years of education (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020) ^[5]. Thus, English literacy should be developed within a broader multilingual educational framework.

Review of Related Literature

The relationship between language and educational development has been widely discussed in language and education research. Language functions as an essential medium through which learners construct knowledge, communicate experiences, and participate in academic life. Literacy development consequently plays an important role in educational participation and intellectual growth.

English has had a complex historical presence in Indian education. The development of English during the colonial period contributed to the establishment of English-medium higher education and influenced the development of modern educational institutions. The historical role of English subsequently changed after independence as the language continued to occupy an important position in higher education, administration, professional education, and wider communication (Kachru, 1986) ^[4].

Kachru (1986) ^[4] emphasized the distinctive development of Indian English and demonstrated that English in India cannot simply be understood as a foreign language. Its long

historical presence and widespread use have contributed to the development of unique linguistic and cultural forms.

The increasing importance of globalization has further influenced the position of English. Crystal (2003) ^[2] described English as a global language whose widespread use is associated with international communication and the global circulation of knowledge. Similarly, Graddol (2010) ^[3] examined the future of English in India and highlighted the relationship between English, education, demographic change, employment, and economic development.

English literacy has also been associated with access to higher education and academic knowledge. Research literature indicates that English continues to play an important role in scholarly communication and access to international academic resources. The NCERT review of research in English language education observed that English has historically been regarded as a language of higher education and academic knowledge, while its demand and role in school education have expanded considerably over time (NCERT, 2019).

The relationship between English and multilingualism has also received substantial scholarly attention. Agnihotri (2007) ^[1] emphasized the importance of multilingualism as a resource for learning rather than considering linguistic diversity as an educational problem. Similarly, the National Education Policy 2020^[5] recognizes multilingualism as an important component of educational development and encourages the use of home languages and mother tongues in the early years of schooling (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020) ^[5].

Educational inequality remains an important concern in relation to English literacy. Access to English education may vary according to socioeconomic conditions, institutional resources, teacher quality, and geographical location. Graddol (2010) ^[3] noted the increasing aspirations associated with English in India while also identifying significant challenges in expanding meaningful access to English learning opportunities.

Digital transformation has added another dimension to English literacy. Online educational platforms, research databases, digital libraries, and international academic resources frequently operate through English. Consequently, English literacy can complement digital literacy and increase access to global learning resources.

Overall, the literature suggests that English literacy has an important role in educational development, but its benefits are influenced by broader questions of equity, access, multilingualism, and educational quality.

Rationale of the Study

The present study is significant because English literacy has become increasingly relevant to India's educational development in the context of globalization, technological advancement, digital transformation, and the expansion of knowledge-based societies. Language skills influence learners' capacity to access information and participate effectively in educational opportunities.

English literacy is particularly important because a substantial amount of academic and professional knowledge is communicated through English. Learners with adequate English literacy can access research articles, books, digital learning materials, and international educational resources. The continued importance of English in higher education

and knowledge access has been recognized in research on English language education in India (NCERT, 2019) ^[7].

The study is also important because access to English education remains unequal. Differences in socioeconomic conditions, geographical location, institutional resources, and teacher availability can influence opportunities to acquire English literacy. Graddol (2010) ^[3] identified the challenge of expanding English learning opportunities beyond traditionally privileged sections of society.

Another rationale for the study is the increasing relationship between English literacy and digital education. Online learning has expanded access to courses, electronic resources, virtual classrooms, and international learning communities. English literacy can enable learners to participate more effectively in these emerging educational environments.

The study is further relevant because English education must be examined within India's multilingual context. The promotion of English literacy should not lead to the neglect of regional languages and mother tongues. Educational development requires a balanced approach that recognizes both linguistic identity and the practical advantages associated with wider communication. The National Education Policy 2020^[5] supports multilingual learning and emphasizes the importance of learners' home languages during foundational education (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020) ^[5].

Therefore, the present study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of English literacy in India's educational development while examining both its opportunities and challenges.

Research Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the historical development of English literacy in India.
- To analyze the role of English literacy in India's educational development.
- To explore the contribution of English literacy to higher education, research, and knowledge access.
- To examine the relationship between English literacy, employability, and social mobility.
- To identify the major challenges associated with the development of English literacy in India.
- To explore the future prospects of English literacy within India's multilingual educational system.

Research Questions of the Study

The following research questions guide the study:

- How has English literacy developed within the Indian educational system?
- What role does English literacy play in India's educational development?
- How does English literacy contribute to higher education, research, and access to knowledge?
- What is the relationship between English literacy, employability, and social mobility?
- What major challenges affect the development of English literacy in India?
- How can English literacy be strengthened while preserving India's multilingual character?

Methodology of the Study

The present study adopts a qualitative review-based research design. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the

study examines existing scholarly literature, educational policy documents, books, and research publications related to English literacy, language education, multilingualism, educational development, and access to knowledge in India. The review includes major scholarly perspectives concerning the historical development of English in India, the role of English in higher education, multilingual educational practices, and the relationship between English literacy and educational opportunities. Important policy perspectives, particularly those relating to multilingualism and language education, were also considered (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020; NCERT, 2019) ^[5, 7].

The collected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis. Major themes were identified and organized according to the objectives of the study. These themes included historical development, educational access, higher education, research, employability, digital learning, multilingualism, and educational inequality.

The review-based methodology enables an integrated examination of English literacy by bringing together historical, educational, linguistic, and contemporary perspectives.

Objective-wise Findings of the Study

Objective 1: To examine the historical development of English literacy in India

The review indicates that English literacy in India developed through a complex historical process. During the colonial period, English gradually became associated with formal education, administration, and higher learning. The expansion of English education contributed to access to Western scientific, literary, and philosophical traditions and influenced the development of modern educational institutions (Kachru, 1986) ^[4].

Following independence, English continued to occupy an important role within higher education and wider communication. The linguistic diversity of India contributed to its continuing functional importance in academic and professional contexts. Over time, English increasingly became associated with educational aspirations and school education (Graddol, 2010) ^[3].

The NCERT review of research on English language education indicates that English, which was historically described as a language of higher education and scholarly knowledge, has increasingly become a language of public demand within school education (NCERT, 2019). The historical development of English literacy therefore demonstrates a transformation from a language closely associated with colonial administration and elite education into an important resource for academic, professional, and global communication. However, this development has also been accompanied by inequalities in access.

Objective 2: To analyze the role of English literacy in India's educational development

The findings demonstrate that English literacy contributes to educational development by expanding learners' access to academic resources and wider learning opportunities. English enables students to engage with books, journals, research publications, scientific materials, and digital resources produced across different national and international contexts (Crystal, 2003) ^[2].

English literacy also supports communication between learners and scholars from different linguistic backgrounds.

In a multilingual country, English can function as an important language of wider academic communication. The NCERT (2019) review demonstrates that English language education in India is connected with diverse areas, including language policy, multilingualism, literacy development, English for specific purposes, university-level teaching, and the use of information and communication technology.

English literacy can also contribute to the development of communication and academic skills. Reading and interpreting diverse texts may strengthen comprehension, vocabulary, writing ability, and analytical thinking. The findings therefore suggest that English literacy has become an important component of educational development, particularly in secondary, higher, professional, and technology-oriented education.

Objective 3: To explore the contribution of English literacy to higher education, research, and knowledge access

The review indicates that English literacy plays an important role in higher education and research. English continues to be widely used for academic communication and access to international scholarly resources. Students and researchers with functional English literacy can engage with research articles, academic books, conference materials, and digital knowledge repositories (NCERT, 2019) ^[7].

The importance of English is particularly evident in disciplines involving science, technology, professional education, and interdisciplinary research. English literacy can enable students to understand academic terminology, engage with international scholarship, and communicate research findings across wider academic communities.

Digital academic resources have further strengthened the importance of English literacy. Electronic journals, academic databases, digital libraries, online courses, and international research platforms often require learners to possess adequate English comprehension skills. Consequently, English literacy can facilitate participation in global knowledge networks (Crystal, 2003) ^[2].

The findings therefore demonstrate that English literacy contributes to higher education by expanding access to knowledge, supporting research engagement, and facilitating participation in wider academic communication.

Objective 4: To examine the relationship between English literacy, employability, and social mobility

The review suggests that English literacy has an important relationship with employability in contemporary India. Economic globalization and the expansion of professional sectors have increased the importance of communication skills and access to international information networks.

Graddol (2010) ^[3] examined the relationship between English, education, and employment in India and identified English as an important factor within changing demographic and economic conditions. English literacy may support participation in professional sectors involving information technology, education, business, research, tourism, media, and international communication.

English literacy may also contribute to social mobility by expanding access to educational and professional opportunities. However, the relationship is not automatic. Educational achievement, technical skills, professional qualifications, socioeconomic circumstances, and

institutional opportunities also influence employment outcomes.

Therefore, English literacy should be understood as an enabling skill rather than an independent guarantee of employment. Its greatest contribution occurs when it is combined with disciplinary knowledge, technological competence, critical thinking, and professional skills.

Objective 5: To identify the major challenges associated with the development of English literacy in India

The study identifies several challenges associated with English literacy development. One of the most significant challenges is unequal access to quality English education. Students from economically privileged backgrounds may receive greater exposure to English through well-resourced schools, private instruction, books, technology, and supportive learning environments.

Differences between rural and urban educational environments can also influence opportunities to develop English literacy. Learners in underserved areas may experience limitations related to teacher availability, educational infrastructure, and access to learning materials.

Teacher preparation represents another important challenge. Effective English literacy development requires teachers with adequate language proficiency and appropriate pedagogical competence. Research on English language education in India has emphasized the diversity and complexity of English classrooms and the importance of teaching approaches suited to multilingual contexts (NCERT, 2019).

Another challenge involves linguistic attitudes. English should not be treated as a measure of intelligence or cultural superiority. Such attitudes can create linguistic hierarchies and undermine the educational value of Indian languages.

The findings therefore suggest that the expansion of English literacy must be accompanied by policies that address inequality, teacher development, educational resources, and multilingual pedagogy.

Objective 6: To explore the future prospects of English literacy within India's multilingual educational system

The findings suggest that English literacy will continue to remain important because of globalization, technological development, higher education, research, and international communication. However, its future development should be guided by the principles of equity, inclusion, and multilingualism.

The National Education Policy 2020^[5] emphasizes multilingualism and recognizes the importance of learners' home languages and mother tongues, particularly during the early stages of education (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020) ^[5]. This approach suggests that the development of English literacy does not require the replacement of Indian languages.

Schools can strengthen foundational literacy in learners' familiar languages while gradually developing proficiency in additional languages, including English. Agnihotri (2007) ^[1] similarly emphasized the educational value of multilingualism and the importance of recognizing learners' linguistic resources.

Digital resources may also contribute to expanding English learning opportunities. Online platforms, educational applications, digital libraries, and interactive materials can support learners beyond conventional classroom

environments. However, technological benefits depend upon equitable access to devices, connectivity, and digital skills. The future of English literacy in India should therefore be understood within a multilingual framework in which learners can develop competence in their home languages while also acquiring English for wider academic and global communication.

Discussion of the Study

The findings demonstrate that English literacy occupies an important position within India's educational development. Its significance is closely connected with access to higher education, scientific knowledge, research, digital resources, employment opportunities, and international communication.

One major observation is that English literacy functions as a bridge to wider knowledge systems. Learners who can read and write effectively in English may gain access to academic resources and scholarly discussions extending beyond regional linguistic boundaries (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2010) ^[2, 3].

However, the findings also highlight the relationship between English literacy and educational inequality. Access to high-quality English education is unevenly distributed across different social and geographical groups. Consequently, English literacy can function simultaneously as a resource for opportunity and as a marker of educational privilege.

This contradiction has important implications for educational policy. If English literacy is increasingly important for higher education and employment, unequal access can reinforce existing socioeconomic disparities. Educational institutions must therefore provide meaningful opportunities for learners from disadvantaged communities to develop English literacy.

The study also demonstrates the importance of multilingual education. India does not need to choose between strengthening English and preserving Indian languages. Both can play complementary roles within educational development. The National Education Policy 2020^[5] recognizes the importance of multilingualism and encourages the use of learners' home languages and mother tongues during foundational education (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020) ^[5].

Digital transformation creates additional possibilities for English literacy development. Technology can provide learners with access to interactive language-learning materials, online courses, digital libraries, and wider communication opportunities. However, unequal access to technology remains an important concern.

Overall, the findings suggest that English literacy should be promoted as part of a broader vision of inclusive, equitable, and multilingual educational development.

Educational Implications

The findings of the study have several important implications for educational policy and practice.

First, English literacy education should emphasize meaningful communication rather than mechanical memorization. Learners should develop reading comprehension, writing ability, vocabulary, listening, speaking, and critical communication skills.

Second, teacher education programs should strengthen the pedagogical competence of English teachers. Teachers

require effective strategies for working with learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Multilingual classrooms should be viewed as educational environments containing valuable linguistic resources rather than as obstacles to learning (Agnihotri, 2007) ^[1].

Third, educational institutions should address inequalities in access to English learning resources. Government schools and institutions in underserved areas require improved access to qualified teachers, libraries, digital resources, and appropriate language-learning materials.

Fourth, digital technologies should be integrated effectively into English literacy education. Online resources and interactive learning platforms can supplement classroom teaching and provide learners with additional opportunities for practice.

Fifth, English education should be integrated with multilingual pedagogical approaches. The National Education Policy 2020^[5] emphasizes the importance of multilingual learning and recognizes the role of home languages in early education (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020) ^[5].

Finally, English literacy policies should ensure that the language contributes to inclusion rather than privilege. Every learner, irrespective of socioeconomic background or geographical location, should receive meaningful opportunities to develop functional English literacy.

Conclusion

The present review examined the role of English literacy in India's educational development. The findings demonstrate that English literacy has become an important educational resource because of its relationship with higher education, research, science, technology, digital learning, employability, and global communication (Graddol, 2010^[3]; NCERT, 2019).

English literacy can expand learners' access to knowledge and educational opportunities. It enables students to engage with diverse academic resources and participate in wider scholarly and professional communities. Its importance is likely to continue within the context of globalization and digital transformation.

However, the study also highlights significant challenges. Unequal access to quality English education can reinforce existing educational and socioeconomic inequalities. Differences in institutional resources, teacher availability, geographical location, and family background influence learners' opportunities to acquire English literacy.

Therefore, the development of English literacy must be guided by the principles of equity, inclusion, and multilingualism. English should be promoted as an important language for wider communication and academic engagement without diminishing the importance of India's diverse linguistic traditions. This position is consistent with the multilingual orientation emphasized in contemporary Indian educational policy (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020) ^[5].

A future-oriented educational system should provide learners with meaningful opportunities to develop strong literacy skills in their home languages while also acquiring English as an additional language for wider academic and global communication. Such a balanced approach can contribute to inclusive educational development, improved access to knowledge, enhanced employability, and greater participation in the global knowledge society.

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