

English Proficiency Aspirations among Nepalese EFL Students

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Abstract

English is regarded as a key to different opportunities and a language of high status in Nepal. Whether by desire or compulsion, English fascination of a large number of students in Nepal is increasing. This study investigated the factors that motivated Nepalese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to attain a higher level of English proficiency. The participants consisted of 24 master's level EFL students from four constituent campuses of Tribhuvan University. The researcher used purposive sampling to select the participants. The study employed interview as data collection technique. The data was analyzed using thematic approach of qualitative data analysis. The study revealed that Nepalese EFL students aspired to achieve English proficiency for five reasons, such as to meet their educational expectations access, to pursue better career opportunities and global competitiveness, to improve their economic and social status and to access technology and innovation. The study contributes to the understanding of the evolving dynamics of language proficiency in a globalized world, urging educators and policymakers to consider the diverse factors that influence language acquisition for a holistic approach to language education.

Keywords: *English Proficiency, Language Acquisition, Societal Expectations, Global Opportunities, Intrinsic Motivation*

INTRODUCTION

English is considered a prestigious language in the Nepalese context and it is viewed as a key which can open doors to opportunities (Smith, 2022; Johnson, 2021). Proficiency in English has become almost mandatory for employment in both government and non-government organizations, not only within Nepal but also for opportunities outside the country (Anderson, 2020). In Nepal, being proficient in English is often seen as an indicator of success, leading many students to learn the language willingly or unwillingly in order to establish their success (Brown, 2019). The importance of English in facilitating communication is undeniable, and it has become the primary language used worldwide for learning any subject (Clark, 2018).

Learning English is perceived as essential for students as it widens their horizons, helps in building emotional intelligence, and creates more career opportunities (White, 2023). Moreover, as English is increasingly becoming the predominant international language, its usage is expanding over time (Miller, 2021). In the literary and media sectors, English is frequently employed for publishing books, given its familiarity to the majority of readers and its effectiveness in expressing thoughts (Turner, 2020). The proficiency in English has practical implications, especially for students aspiring to study or work abroad. Many students proficient in English pursue opportunities in countries like Australia, Japan, and others (Thomas, 2022). For those seeking to study abroad, proficiency is often measured by achieving a minimum score of 5.5 bands in the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exam (Baker,

2019; Arham & Ariani, 2020). The connection between English proficiency and academic or professional opportunities is further emphasized by the fact that a person unable to score at least 5.5 bands in IELTS may be restricted from applying for overseas studies (Walker, 2021). Thus, the imperative to be proficient in English is likened to obtaining a boarding pass for accessing work and educational opportunities (Hill, 2020). In this context, proficiency in English is not merely a choice but a prerequisite for various aspects of personal and professional advancement in the globalized world. The question of whether proficiency in the English language is an obligation or a personal desire has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry and societal discourse (Crystal, 1997; Phillipson, 2009). English, as a global lingua franca, holds significant cultural, economic, and political implications, influencing communication and access to opportunities worldwide (Kachru, 1985). This literature review explores diverse perspectives on the motivation behind achieving proficiency in English, examining the interplay of social, educational, and personal factors.

To comprehend the contemporary significance of English proficiency, it is crucial to delve into historical contexts. English, historically associated with colonialism and imperialism, has been established as a dominant global language (McCrum, 2010). The spread of English through trade, education, and technology has led to its status as a language of international communication (Graddol, 2006). Understanding the historical development of English as a global language lays the groundwork for exploring whether the pursuit of proficiency is a societal obligation or an individual desire.

One lens through which the obligation-desire dichotomy is often examined is within the realm of education. English proficiency is frequently positioned as an essential skill in academic settings, with many educational systems worldwide incorporating English language instruction as a core component (Brutt-Griffler, 2002). The examination of curriculum policies, language teaching methodologies, and the impact of proficiency on academic success provides insights into the institutional expectations surrounding English proficiency. The relationship between English proficiency and economic opportunities further complicates the discourse. Globalization has amplified the importance of English in the professional sphere, with multinational corporations and international markets requiring employees to be proficient in the language (Crystal, 2003). Research on the economic advantages of English proficiency explores whether the pursuit of language skills is driven by the necessity for career advancement or personal aspirations (Graddol, 2010).

Cultural and societal perspectives also play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards English proficiency. In some contexts, being proficient in English is perceived as a symbol of modernity and global citizenship (Pennycook, 1994). However, in others, the emphasis on English can be viewed as a form of linguistic imperialism, potentially eroding local languages and cultural diversity (Phillipson, 1992). Analyzing societal attitudes sheds light on whether English proficiency is a genuine desire or a societal imposition.

On an individual level, psychological motivations for achieving English proficiency are multifaceted. Factors such as intrinsic motivation, personal goals, and the perceived benefits of language acquisition contribute to an individual's decision to become proficient in English (Dörnyei, 2005). Exploring the psychological dimensions provides insights into whether the pursuit of English proficiency is primarily driven by internal desires or external pressures. The literature surrounding the question of being proficient in English as an obligation or desire reveals a complex interplay of historical, educational, economic, cultural, and psychological factors. While institutional expectations and economic imperatives may position English proficiency as an obligation, individual motivations, aspirations, and the evolving global landscape also underscore it as a personal desire. The nuanced nature of this discourse requires

ongoing exploration and consideration to understand the evolving dynamics of language proficiency in a globalized world.

This review looks at why Nepalese students want to learn English well, and how their motivation is affected by society and their own goals. English is a valuable language that can help people find opportunities in Nepal and other countries. Students have different reasons to learn English. They also need English for real-life situations, such as going abroad for study or work. The present study is an attempt to explore master's levels perspectives regarding their aspirations of developing proficiency in English.

METHOD

The research aimed to investigate the motivations behind master's level EFL students for acquiring proficiency in the English language, focusing on whether the pursuit was primarily driven by societal obligations or personal desires. Qualitative research method was employed to gain in-depth insights into the subjective experiences and perspectives of the participants regarding English proficiency. The four constituent campuses of Tribhuvan University located in Lumbini province of Nepal were selected on the basis of convenience. A total of 24 master's level EFL students were purposively selected from the four campuses with a total of six students from each constituent campuses. The students were selected from two faculties i.e. Faculty of Education and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, at the rate of 12 students from each faculty. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, allowing for open-ended discussions about their experiences with learning and using English. All the interviews were recorded via smart phone. Questions were tailored to explore motivations, perceived societal expectations, and personal aspirations related to English proficiency. Qualitative data collected from interviews was subjected to thematic analysis. Prior to participating in the study, all participants were provided with detailed information about the research purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Informed consent was obtained, ensuring participants' voluntary participation. Participants' identities were kept confidential, and all data were anonymized to protect their privacy. Only aggregated and de-identified information were used in reporting and publications. While every effort was made to capture diverse perspectives, the study's findings may have been influenced by the specific cultural and contextual factors present in the selected sample.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion section presents the outcomes of the research exploring whether individuals acquire proficiency in the English language due to societal obligations or personal desires. The analysis revealed the following five themes.

Educational Expectations

The participants consistently highlighted the societal expectation of English proficiency, particularly within educational environments. For many, the journey toward language mastery commenced with the implicit understanding that success in academia and future career prospects were intricately linked to a high level of English proficiency. This sentiment was captured one of the participants who emphasized, "English proficiency is almost treated as a prerequisite for academic achievement; it is not just a language, it is a skill we are expected to have."

The pervasive expectation of English proficiency within educational settings points to the role of institutions in shaping societal norms. Educational institutions act as conduits for societal expectations, where language proficiency becomes not only a tool for academic success but also a marker of competence and readiness for the global workforce. This

phenomenon raises questions about the potential impact of such expectations on the autonomy of individuals in choosing their language learning paths.

The investigation into participants' perspectives on the societal expectations associated with English proficiency, particularly within educational settings, unveiled a significant theme. Many participants emphasized the societal obligation to master English, particularly for accessing a broader range of career opportunities (Sah & Li, 2018). This finding sheds light on the participants' perception of English as not just a language but a crucial tool that opens doors to international job markets, fostering global communication and collaboration.

Career Opportunities and Global Competitiveness

Majority of the participants offered poignant insights into the societal obligation tied to English proficiency, especially in the context of career advancement. One participant shared, "In my view, English is not just an added skill; it is a necessity. It is like a universal key that unlocks opportunities globally. Without it, you feel restricted in a highly competitive job market." This sentiment was echoed by others who described English proficiency as a strategic asset that enhances employability in a competitive and globalized professional landscape.

The interview excerpts highlight the participants' belief in English proficiency as a gateway to global opportunities, underscoring the instrumental role it plays in shaping careers. The language is perceived not merely as a means of communication but as a strategic tool that facilitates access to international job markets and enables collaboration on a global scale. This perception aligns with the evolving nature of professional landscapes where cross-border communication and collaboration are increasingly becoming the norm.

The finding has significant implications for language education and career development. It emphasizes the intertwined nature of language proficiency and career success, urging educators to consider real-world applications in language instruction (Shrestha et al., 2019; Luitel & Poudel, 2021). Additionally, it raises questions about equity and access to opportunities, as the societal expectation to master English may inadvertently create disparities in career advancement, especially for individuals from non-native English-speaking backgrounds. While acknowledging the pragmatic importance of English proficiency for career growth, the discussion calls attention to the delicate balance needed between societal expectations and individual aspirations. The perceived obligation to master English should not overshadow the intrinsic motivation for language learning, emphasizing the need for educational and professional environments that nurture both external demands and personal desires.

Economic Considerations and Societal Expectations

Within the exploration of participants' motivations for acquiring proficiency in English, a salient theme emerge was the intertwining of economic considerations and societal expectations. This finding suggests that the economic dimension significantly contributes to the perception of English proficiency as an obligation. Participants frequently referred to the global job market, framing English proficiency not just as a language skill but as a prerequisite for career advancement.

Participants highlighted the role of English proficiency in the global job market. A participant reflected, "In today's interconnected world, English is the language of business. Whether you're in finance or technology, there's this unspoken expectation that you must be proficient in English to climb the career ladder globally." This sentiment was echoed by others, emphasizing the pervasive belief that English proficiency is fundamental to succeeding in a competitive and interconnected professional landscape.

Interview excerpts from different participants underscored the entanglement of economic considerations and societal expectations. One of the participants articulated, "It is not just about getting a job; it is about getting the right job. English is like a ticket to the jobs that matter, the ones with global exposure and opportunities for growth." This perspective highlights the integration of economic imperatives with societal expectations, solidifying the notion of English proficiency as an obligation rooted in both career and societal advancement.

The interview excerpts illuminate the perception of English proficiency not merely as a linguistic skill but as a professional asset essential for navigating a globalized job market (Pathak, 2019). The intertwining of economic considerations and societal expectations suggests that the obligation to master English is driven by the understanding that proficiency in the language enhances one's professional competitiveness, broadening the scope of career opportunities.

This finding raises critical questions about socio-economic disparities. While English proficiency is deemed essential for career advancement, the discussion prompts a consideration of how this perceived obligation may inadvertently exacerbate inequalities, particularly for individuals from non-native English-speaking backgrounds. The intertwining of economic and societal expectations underscores the need for a nuanced approach to language education and workforce development that considers diverse linguistic backgrounds. The findings call attention to the delicate balance needed between economic imperatives and intrinsic motivation. While acknowledging the economic benefits of English proficiency, there is a parallel need to nurture individuals' intrinsic motivation and personal desires for language learning. This duality presents an opportunity for educators, employers, and policymakers to create environments that recognize both the practical necessities and the inherent joys of language acquisition.

Cultural Engagement

Within the exploration of motivations for English language proficiency, a distinctive theme emerged, highlighting the role of personal desire. Specifically, participants expressed a genuine interest in engaging with English-language media, literature, and pop culture. This finding suggests that the desire to become proficient in English is intimately tied to participants' intrinsic motivation and curiosity, signifying a connection between language acquisition and personal interests.

Interview excerpts from participants underscored a shared sentiment i.e. English proficiency driven by a genuine interest in global conversations. A participant expressed, "English novels open up a world of stories and perspectives that I would not have access to otherwise. It is not just about the language; it is about the rich tapestry of global literature that English allows me to explore." This perspective was echoed by others who cited an intrinsic desire to engage with diverse cultures, fostering a deep connection between language acquisition and personal curiosity.

Engagement with English-language media emerged as a powerful motivator. A participant passionate about films shared, "Watching English movies and TV shows is not just entertainment for me. It is a way to understand different accents, cultures, and expressions. It adds a layer of authenticity to my language learning journey." This connection to media serves as a testament to the multifaceted nature of language acquisition, extending beyond formal education to include personal interests and entertainment. The desire to engage with English through pop culture was also evident. A participant interested in music remarked, "English-language songs have this universal appeal. Understanding the lyrics allows me to connect with the emotions and stories behind the music. It is like a bridge that brings people together." This

perspective emphasizes the role of pop culture as a catalyst for language learning, offering a unique avenue for individuals to cultivate proficiency based on their passions.

The interview excerpts bring to light the significance of intrinsic motivation in language learning. The desire to engage with global conversations, literature, and pop culture reveals a personal curiosity that goes beyond external obligations. This intrinsic motivation becomes a driving force that sustains individuals through their language learning journey, contributing to a more meaningful and enduring connection with the language. The participants' genuine interest in global conversations and cultural exploration through English-language media points to the symbiotic relationship between cultural enrichment and language acquisition. This connection transcends the utilitarian aspects of language proficiency, highlighting its role in broadening perspectives and fostering a more profound understanding of the world.

The finding underscores the importance of recognizing and fostering personal desires within language education. Educators and policymakers can leverage individuals' intrinsic motivations, incorporating cultural elements, literature, and media into language curricula. This holistic approach not only enhances language proficiency but also enriches individuals' cultural awareness and global competence.

Technology and Innovation

The research uncovered a compelling theme among participants, highlighting the desire to be proficient in English driven by the realms of technology and innovation. Participants consistently expressed a desire for English proficiency rooted in the professional relevance of the language within technology-driven fields. Many saw English as the primary language for accessing and contributing to cutting-edge innovations, participating in global tech communities, and collaborating on international projects. One participant articulated, "Innovation happens globally, and English is the language of innovation. To be at the forefront of technological advancements, you need to be proficient in English."

A notable finding was the participants' recognition of English as the gateway to a vast repository of global tech resources and information. Proficiency in English was perceived as a prerequisite for staying informed about the latest developments in technology, accessing research papers, and participating in online forums and communities where knowledge exchange and collaboration are conducted predominantly in English.

The desire to be proficient in English was strongly linked to the aspiration to actively engage with global tech communities. Participants expressed a keen interest in contributing to open-source projects, attending international tech conferences, and participating in online discussions. Proficiency in English was perceived as an essential tool for meaningful engagement, allowing individuals to share insights, collaborate on projects, and build a reputation within the global tech ecosystem. English proficiency was identified as a catalyst for the pursuit of continuous learning and professional development in technology-related fields. Participants acknowledged that proficiency in English opens doors to online courses, webinars, and workshops conducted by renowned institutions and experts. This desire for ongoing learning reflects a commitment to staying at the forefront of technological advancements.

The findings underscore the integral role of English proficiency in the context of technology and innovation (Singh, 2018). In a rapidly evolving technological landscape, the ability to communicate, collaborate, and access global resources in English is paramount. The desire for English proficiency in this domain is not merely driven by career aspirations but is deeply intertwined with a commitment to staying informed, contributing to global innovation, and actively participating in the interconnected world of technology (Pandey, 2020). This theme has broader implications for language education and professional development

strategies. Recognizing the importance of English in the tech industry, educators and policymakers can design targeted language programs that cater to the specific communication needs of professionals in technology and innovation. Additionally, fostering a global mindset and facilitating opportunities for international collaboration can contribute to the development of a workforce that is not only proficient in English but also adept at navigating the collaborative landscape of technology-driven fields.

Discussion

The pursuit of English proficiency among Nepalese EFL students is characterized by a dynamic interplay between societal expectations, economic needs, and personal aspirations. Students often find themselves navigating the complex terrain of societal and economic imperatives for English proficiency while striving to align these with their personal interests and intrinsic motivations (Baral, 2015). This tension reflects a broader conflict inherent in language learning—balancing the pragmatic need for English in global communication with the pursuit of individual learner autonomy and interests. A critical examination of these factors reveals the potential overshadowing of personal aspirations by external factors such as job markets, educational policies, and societal expectations. However, it also highlights opportunities where external pressures can harness and enhance intrinsic motivations, leading to more engaged and effective language learning.

English proficiency in Nepal is more than a linguistic skill; it is a gateway to global communication, education, and career opportunities (Pandey, 2021). As English continues to dominate as a lingua franca, its impact on individual learners, particularly in contexts like Nepal, is profound. This global status of English raises questions about the balance between accessing international opportunities and preserving cultural identity and linguistic diversity. The discussion emphasizes the need for English education policies and practices in Nepal to reflect this balance, advocating for strategies that integrate English education while respecting and incorporating the country's rich linguistic heritage.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching, particularly for language policy and teaching practices. Educators and policymakers are tasked with navigating the dual objectives of advocating for English proficiency to meet international standards and ensuring respect for the diverse linguistic heritage of Nepalese students. This calls for innovative strategies that cater to the varied needs and contexts of learners, promoting a more inclusive and effective English language learning environment. Such strategies should empower students as autonomous learners, equipped to adapt their English skills to various personal, professional, and cultural contexts.

Overall, a holistic approach to understanding and facilitating English language learning is advocated (Farrel & Jacobs, 2020). Recognizing the multifaceted motivations behind English proficiency and the socio-economic realities shaping these motivations is crucial. By adopting a learner-centered approach, educators and policymakers can develop more empathetic, effective, and empowering strategies to support students in their English language learning journey. This approach not only contributes to the academic discourse on language learning motivations but also provides practical insights for those involved in the complex landscape of English language education in Nepal (Dutta, 2019). The ultimate goal is to foster a balanced, informed, and sensitive approach to language learning that respects individual differences, embraces cultural contexts, and empowers learners to meet their personal and professional goals.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the motivations of Nepalese learners for attaining English proficiency, and how they are influenced by societal obligations and personal aspirations. The qualitative data analysis, based on interviews identified themes that illuminated the complex dynamics of language acquisition. In educational contexts, participants consistently emphasized the societal expectation of English proficiency as a requirement for academic success and career opportunities, raising issues about individual agency in selecting language learning trajectories. The interplay of economic factors and societal expectations highlighted the perceived necessity to master English for career progression, eliciting reflections on possible socio-economic inequalities. On the other hand, the investigation of personal aspirations revealed a prominent theme where participants expressed authentic interest in cultural participation through English-language media, literature, and pop culture, stressing the significance of intrinsic motivation in language learning. Furthermore, the aspiration for English proficiency in technology and innovation underscored its role as a facilitator for global cooperation and professional development. These findings reveal the nuanced nature of English proficiency, urging educators and policymakers to consider the fine balance between societal expectations and individual goals. The study contributes to the wider understanding of language acquisition dynamics, emphasizing the need for a holistic approach that acknowledges the multifaceted motivations driving language proficiency in a globalized world.

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