

English Language Exposure and Literacy Rate toward Language Proficiency: A Cross-country Analysis

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Abstract

Globalization has made English more important than ever. Through time, curriculum designers and teacher practitioners remain steadfast in finding ways to advance the quality of student learning. To ascertain the quality of language teaching and learning, parameters like standardized tests are set. This paper examined, at the cross-country level, the difference between the 2009 and 2013 Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) iBT scores and the effect of language exposure on the test takers' scores. It further investigated the correlation between literacy rate and English language use in the scores obtained. Using paired t-test to determine the English proficiency of the test takers and Pearson r to test the correlation of the literacy rate and language use in the scores obtained, the findings showed a significant difference in the mean scores between 2009 and 2013 scores in TOEFL. The results also revealed a strong positive linear relationship between TOEFL scores and literacy rate, while no association exists between TOEFL scores and language exposure. The quality of comprehensible input is more important than the quantity of language exposure. Active immersion in a language is still an acknowledged fact that contributes to effective language learning. Literacy remains a foundational competency that is of primary importance to language learning. It is then imperative that schools revisit language learning curricula and emphasize quality instruction through authentic language tasks and activities.

Keywords: language use, language exposure, language proficiency, literacy rate, TOEFL scores

1. Introduction

Globalization has made English more important than ever. Our present world is rapidly changing and greater challenges have been laid before us. People are willing to improve their lives by improving their competence in the English language. Along with the many issues that come along with globalization, our knowledge and proficiency in English are of paramount importance as we are expected to have cross-border interactions. It is when we acquire the skills in communication that we increase our country's competitiveness.

The critical need to learn English is necessary to advance national security. According to Qi (2016), many students in China are enrolled in private tutoring after school and more than 200 million children study English as a required subject in all primary schools in China. This supports the recognition of English as important for examinations. Similarly, Hung and Huang (2019) who explored the gap between washback effects and English language proficiency found that language learners' characteristics are associated with their proficiency levels. Such a study corroborated the findings of the vocabulary levels study of Bacus (2018) which revealed that an extensive vocabulary is associated with language proficiency. While threshold vocabulary supports language tasks in and off schools, having the ideal vocabulary sizes yields promising results in highly cognitive communication proficiency assessments. Higher vocabulary size is associated with better performance in language-related tasks.

There were several studies conducted on the necessity of communication skills. Abdikarimova (2021) affirmed that good communication skills are a source of self-confidence, which enables one to gain more control to obtain knowledge, do research, present ideas, and win arguments. In the study of Asemanyi (2015), students have been observed to have weak language backgrounds as reflected in their communicative competence. They have negative perceptions towards the course yet try to exhibit favorable attitudes towards it. While in Pakistan, English is used as a professional tool, Abassi et al. (2020) explored the factors affecting Pakistan's university students' spoken abilities in classes where English is taught as one of the subjects and not as a language of communication.

Given all other factors being equal, the individual who speaks more languages is always favored due to the cultural and social aspects that come with language ability. People with language versatility stand out from the competition if they are fluent in a lesser-known language. A study by Grin and Sfreddo (1997) revealed a correlation between income and the ability to speak several languages. It was revealed that for every additional language known is an increase of 4-20% in the income net. More specifically to the employer, one's knowledge of the English language means they are smart, culturally aware, and adaptable. However, the number of languages that should be taught ultimately depends on each country's language requirements (Piri, 2002). Similarly, Pufahl, et al. (2001) cited the status of languages within the school curriculum as one of the most influential policies concerning foreign language learning. All students are required to learn at least one foreign language in all of the European Union's member states as well as in Canada, Kazakhstan, Morocco, and

Thailand.

Universities are usually encouraged to think of improved ways to teach and study English. Asia has adopted educational policies that, according to Stroupe (2013), are focusing emphasis on English language training. These regulations usually begin at progressively lower grade levels, lengthen the total number of years that English is required within a curriculum, and/or lengthen the number of hours necessary within a particular grade level. Local teachers frequently struggle with a lack of resources and/or insufficient institutional and professional support when trying to provide English language learning experiences that give students the support, chances for success, and proficiency levels required for professional or academic achievement beyond their school experience. Alda and Bacus (2022) averred that English teachers, in crafting the learning activities, need to revisit their students' needs, purpose, and expectations in learning English. This is to better prepare them for language proficiency demands in the workplace.

Time allocation is an important element that reflects a country's demand for learning English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL). Malilillin et al., (2016) explored the level of language use as well as the level of exposure to language proficiency. Furthermore, a proposal for the Language Education Study was developed as a response to the need for information about second or foreign language teaching and learning specifically on the levels of proficiency attained by the students in school. On the other hand, institutional programs have been started in China and Japan to pave the way for better English language instruction. In a similar vein, the Southeast Asian Education Ministers Organization's Regional Language Centre led initiatives to train educators, making Asian nations a popular choice for English language learners. Riemer (2002) posited that English-medium distance learning programs offered by western nations are expected to rise in popularity at the university level in emerging economies. This includes the online education links that Singapore and Malaysia have recently sought.

With English acknowledged as vital for communication in many countries globally, one's language deficiency may lead to certain barriers that can affect success in school and the workplace. Albeit there are previous studies that highlight the effect of English language proficiency on student performance, little attention has been given to identifying the educational and social barriers that affect the students' acquisition of language proficiency. Motivated by the premise that language proficiency is greatly affected by pressing factors such as education and language exposure, this study explored the relationships between language exposure and literacy rate to one's language proficiency.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study aims to explore a cross-country level relationship between literacy rate and English language exposure to test takers' English proficiency as measured by the results of TOEFL iBT.

Specifically, it looks into the following:

1. the TOEFL performance of the 149 countries in four language skills;
2. the TOEFL performance of countries with English as a second language (ESL) and with English as a foreign language (EFL);
3. the correlation between TOEFL scores and literacy rate and language exposure; and
4. role of English in and out of school.

1.2 Literature Review

High stakes and standardized examinations are set to test students' language proficiency. A required band score is to be met as one of the entry requirements to land a job in some countries. Considerably, the results of students' standardized English proficiency tests are required by many academic institutions worldwide (Hung and Huang, 2019). For instance, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as one of the standardized exams, is recognized by more than 11,000 universities and institutions in more than 190 nations. The TOEFL iBT (internet-based test) is regarded as the top English language assessment available for study, employment, and immigration (Delesline, 2021). It evaluates the English language proficiency of non-native speakers who wish to enroll in an academic setting where English is the primary language.

The TOEFL iBT contains four sections: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. It is recognized internationally. Three academic reading passages with ten multiple-choice questions each make up the Reading section. There are five hearing segments in the listening section. Five questions are asked during three academic lectures and two on-campus conversations. There are four speaking assignments in the Speaking portions, and test-takers must speak their answers into the microphone. Two essays in the Writing portion must be typed into the computer by test-takers. To demonstrate one is prepared for the English language requirements of a university, all four portions use legitimate academic content.

In several countries, learning content-area subjects in a foreign language has grown in popularity. When learners have attained a sufficient degree of competency in the foreign language, it is occasionally employed as the medium of instruction in non-language topics in secondary school. For instance, throughout students' time in school in Luxembourg, both French and German are utilized as the language of instruction to encourage the simultaneous study of both languages. Primary school students in immersion programs—known as "bilingual programs" in Europe—are taught content almost solely in a second or foreign language (Pufahl et al., 2002).

There is evidence of other nations' achievement in language learning. Most students can achieve communicative proficiency in at least

improved their TOEFL performance. The 2013 mean of EFL takers, 80.30, is 1.25 higher than that of 2009, 79.05. On the other hand, an increase of 1.56 is noted among ESL takers in 2013.

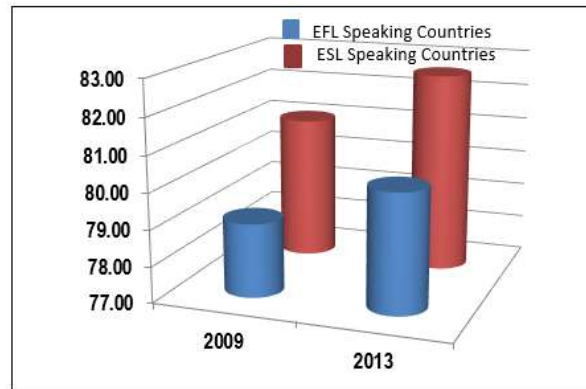


Figure 1. TOEFL Performance of ESL and EFL-Speaking Countries

Figure 1 also demonstrates that ESL participants perform better than the EFL takers. The result can be attributed to language exposure which is supported by theories on language acquisition. Centrality is on the tenet that language is learned by abstracting information obtained from the environment where language use and language use settings are given emphasis. The findings suggest that student's language skills are related to how much of their language exposure was in those languages. When the environment is saturated with English language input, students have greater exposure to the target language which helps them acquire new items and retain items previously encountered (Saville-Troike & Barto 2016).

Correlation between TOEFL Scores and Literacy Rate and Language Exposure

Literacy, in its broadest sense, describes one's ability to read and write to express thoughts and ideas in various contexts. All literacy rates used in this study from CIA World Factbook are based on this most common definition. On the other hand, UNESCO's definition of literacy refers to the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, design, communicate, and learn to use printed and written materials relating to a variety of contexts." Along with language exposure, the literacy rate is also hypothesized to be related to TOEFL scores. That is, it is expected that countries with high literacy rates in general tend to have better scores on tests because of the foundational skills acquired in the early years of schooling. As seen in Table 2 literacy rate has a strong positive relationship with that of TOEFL scores among the 149 countries. On the other hand, a negligible relationship was identified between TOEFL scores and language exposure as shown by the p-value of 0.216.

Table 2. Correlation between TOEFL Scores and Literacy Rate and TOEFL Score and Language Exposure

Variables	Pearson r	p-value
Literacy rate	0.583**	0.000
Language Exposure	0.102ns	0.216

*significant at $\alpha=0.01$

Literacy skills are highly important when taking the TOEFL test that focuses on communicative competence—the ability to demonstrate knowledge of the English language in relevant contexts. The findings revealed a negligible relationship between TOEFL scores and language exposure as shown by the p-value of 0.216. These support what Haynes (n.d.) claimed that children need comprehensible input. The more time students spend soaking up English in the mainstream classroom does not guarantee that they will learn the language. Rodrigo et al., (2004) affirmed the effectiveness of comprehensible input. Corollary to this, classes with more comprehensible input significantly outperformed those with less input specifically on communicative tasks and grammar-based language assessments.

Role of English In and Out of School

Figure 2 shows the role of English in education. Of the 149 countries, only 45 countries or 30% considered English as a medium of instruction (MOI) while a majority, 104 or 70% use their mother tongue as a language in education. Several researchers claim that language policy in education has some bearing on the student's language proficiency. Goldenberg and Coleman (2010) associated English language proficiency with increased employability. Many organizations use the results of standardized English language tests with a required minimum language proficiency level in professional registration and workplace promotion.

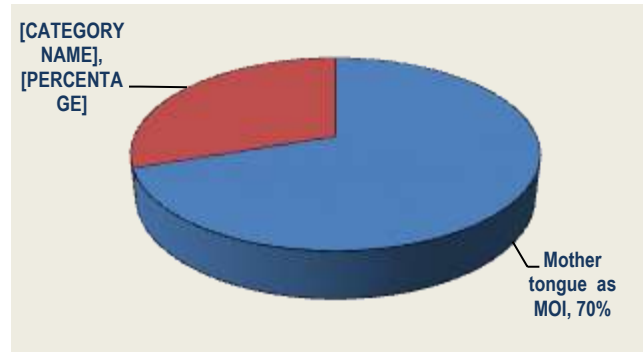


Figure 2. Medium of Instruction

The test takers of TOEFL, as revealed in Figure 2, generally use their mother tongue as a language of education. Both regional and local languages have complementary roles to play in language instruction. However, the benefits the students gain from exposure to the English language in varied contexts contribute to an increased proficiency that leads to personal and economic development. Studies show that English has been increasingly adopted as a medium of instruction and the language of academic publication in EFL countries. For instance, Hilmarsson-Dunn (2009) reported how German and Japanese journals shifted to English to make the articles accessible to readers and researchers. In addition, Swedish medical research is now adopting an all-English policy. Not only is the language of instruction shifting to English but also the language of academic texts in many countries in Europe and elsewhere. The reason for this is that English texts reach a wider audience.

4. Discussion

The TOEFL assessments provide rich data when it comes to proficiency levels of non-native English-speaking students. The significant increase in the scores in 2013 as presented in Table 1 can be attributed to the increasing demand for learning English to respond to global needs. Such proficiency in English is vital to global trade and in forging relationships between and among global economies, hence, many countries have further stressed English language education. Notably, new and innovative approaches have gained popularity over traditional ones (Alda, 2018). As such, English language programs are strengthened. For instance, the teaching of English has been the focus of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies. English in foreign language instruction is now a top focus for educational reforms and development initiatives in several non-English speaking economies. By hiring foreigners to teach English or support native English teachers, Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea undertook significant attempts to boost the use of English in their respective countries (Clark, 2014). Additionally, the data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) revealed that a group of 30 nations including the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, demonstrate fervor toward studying English.

Between 2000 and 2012, almost 4.5 million enrolled students did not reside in their country of citizenship. About 44% of those 4.5 million students study in one of the English-speaking countries: the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa. It can be inferred from the data that at least half of the 4.5 million international students studying around the world come from nations where English is not the official language or the first language. With this, the problem of language readiness has evolved as a result of the large number of non-native students traveling across borders to study English. Standards are established to make sure that students can handle the linguistic difficulties that arise in a global industry. As a result, measures like standardized assessments are used to evaluate the effectiveness of training. Therefore, it is continually a challenge for academic institutions to consider better ways to learn English as well as better ways to teach the language.

Notably, the aims of learning the English language have shifted from being able to understand and be understood to communicating with multilingual speakers from different parts of the world for various purposes like social, cultural, and economic (Alda & Bacus, 2022.) In this regard, Fernandez (2012) and Sukying (2021) asserted that there are still significant differences between the strategies and techniques used to teach English among L2 learners. However, this has not stopped EFL-speaking nations from performing well on standardized language examinations. Additionally, motivations for studying English differ for L2 students. If they reside in an English-speaking country, they will undoubtedly have a communication need to learn English to go about their day-to-day activities and to live comfortably. However, a student studying English as a foreign language is much more likely to be doing so for academic purposes. Teaching strategies then will be different.

In addition to how English is taught differently in EFL and ESL countries, language learning motivation is also crucial. It should be noted that in EFL countries, students learn English for career progression or to pass examinations. With English as the language of opportunity, one's proficiency means widened employment prospects. Second to Mandarin, English is a widely spoken language in more countries than any other language and one's proficiency in English allows possibilities and promises for work locally and internationally. Considerably, English as a foreign language may also be part of the school curriculum in countries where English has no special status. Teachers of EFL generally assume that students are literate in the use of their mother tongue as an auxiliary language in learning.

An exploration of reasons for using the first language includes the learner's age and level of English comprehension (Alshayban & Alghammas, 2020). Such findings inform language teachers to improve learning outcomes by understanding reasons for reverting to the use of the first language. On the other hand, the contexts are quite different in ESL countries wherein one has to learn English or be disadvantaged. English is learned not just as a subject but as a medium of communication.

Literature supports the assumption that opportunities for language exposure (emphasizing on sociocultural approach) provided to language learners are important for language acquisition to occur (Gómez, 2015). It means that students at an early age should be provided with scaffold interactions with someone who can expand what students already know. The results further imply that it should not be merely quantity alone but the quality of comprehensible input provided to language learners. Sivertzen (2013) revealed significant vocabulary increases among children who had more exposure to English as opposed to those who continued to get their regular level of input. Contrary to Chomsky's theory that language structures are innately present, the interactionist perspective highlights the influence of social interactions using the target language on language development. This is possible by establishing the relationship between the inherent features of the language input and the corresponding output as evidenced by the learners' language competence (Gómez, 2015).

As input is central in language acquisition, Sivertzen (2013) stressed that an increase in the input of the English language in class will lead to the acquisition of better English skills, measured in terms of increased vocabulary and discourse competence. He purported that under a naturalistic setting with more than 18 years of formal instruction, a second language learner, would need at least a year and a half to attain language mastery. Further, input becomes more impactful when the language learners are given opportunities to use the target language in natural immersion. Naturally, both the quality and quantity of English language input are vital for language learners to learn the grammar of the language.

The negligible relationship between TOEFL scores and language exposure contradicts the study of Hammer et al. (2014) highlighting the connection between early language learning and length of exposure to each language. Such findings draw out implications to the importance of literacy at an early age. The study of Branum-Martin, et al. (2014) supports that quality input provided during preschool and primary years at home is positively related to language skills development. It is also worth noting here that this does not only refer to English as the target language but even to the learning of the child's mother tongue. The study of Navarro et al. (2016) affirms that children learn better and acquire a second language more efficiently if they have mastered first their first language. The student's first language skills and proficiency provide a good foundation for learning other languages like English.

Several researches support that language policy in education has some bearing on the student's language proficiency. Hilmarsson-Dunn (2009) believes that universities have pivotal roles in increasing one's knowledge of their first language (L1) by holding out against a shift to English at the tertiary level. Having the option to choose a language to use in learning is a key factor in any successful study. However, not only is the language of instruction shifting to English but also the language of academic texts in many countries in Europe and elsewhere. The reason for this is that English texts reach a wider audience. Although both groups' performances in TOEFL iBT are comparable despite the difference in exposure and contacts in mainstream classes, most would greatly invest to attain English proficiency to be able to survive economically in the global arena.

The need for language proficiency concerning the goal of advancing oneself in an uneven battlefield of the workplace has placed language alongside development. Heugh (2013) made a distinction between language *as*, *for*, and *in* the course of development. Language *as* development refers to "the provision of language teaching and language projects where language provision is an end in itself." Language *for* development is the use of language as an essential tool for the development of sectors like business, science, media, and others. Language *in* development pertains to the language's role in national development acknowledging the place of language in the socio-economic aspects of a country.

As opposed to the previous three categories, which focus more on the roles and purposes of language, (the) language of development category relates to the actual language employed, in terms of its lexico-grammatical and discourse features. The discourse that attaches itself to development challenges and is employed by many project stakeholders is known as the language of development. Therefore, language teachers need to redesign their language classrooms so that the teaching and learning designs should give language learners endless opportunities to utilize the language.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

English language proficiency is influenced by considerable factors. Among the identified factors in the area of education, the literacy rate has a stronger positive relationship to TOEFL scores than English language use. It strengthens the notion that literacy remains a foundational competency that is of primary importance to language learning. On the other hand, the findings of the study revealed English language exposure as a social factor is dependent on the comprehensible input that a learner receives in school and beyond. Schools should revisit the language learning curriculum and emphasize quality instruction through authentic language tasks and activities.

Since this study was conducted using the TOEFL iBT results in 2009 and 2013, the study has potential limitations which point toward future research utilizing the current TOEFL iBT results.

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