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## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

*English language proficiency is a key determinant of academic success in higher education, particularly in contexts where English functions as a second or foreign language. Despite its importance, university students demonstrate wide variation in proficiency levels. This study examines the factors associated with English language proficiency among university students. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from undergraduate students through a structured questionnaire measuring demographic, academic, cognitive, and affective variables. English language proficiency was assessed using a standardized self-report scale. Multiple regression analysis was employed to identify significant predictors of proficiency. The findings indicate that exposure to English, motivation, instructional quality, and prior educational background are significantly associated with English language proficiency. The study highlights the need for targeted pedagogical and institutional interventions to improve English language outcomes in higher education.*

**Keyword:** *English Language Proficiency, University Students, ESL, Motivation, Higher Education*

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### INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency has become a central requirement for academic success in higher education systems worldwide. As English increasingly functions as the primary medium of instruction, research dissemination, and scholarly communication, university students are expected to demonstrate adequate proficiency across reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills. In many non-native English-speaking contexts, however, students enter higher education with uneven language preparation, resulting in significant disparities in academic performance and participation. These disparities raise critical concerns regarding educational equity, learning outcomes, and institutional effectiveness.

In countries where English is taught as a second or foreign language, university students often face the dual challenge of mastering disciplinary knowledge while simultaneously developing academic English competence. This challenge is particularly pronounced in contexts where earlier schooling provides limited exposure to English or relies heavily on rote learning and grammar-focused instruction. As a result, many students struggle to engage with academic texts, participate in classroom discussions, and produce written assignments that meet university-level standards. These difficulties are not merely linguistic but have broader implications for students' confidence, motivation, and long-term academic trajectories.

Research consistently shows that English language proficiency is closely linked to academic achievement in higher education. Students with higher proficiency levels tend to perform better in assessments, demonstrate stronger critical thinking skills, and participate more actively in academic discourse. Conversely, limited proficiency has been associated with lower grades, higher dropout rates, and reduced engagement. Despite this well-established relationship, institutions often treat language proficiency as an individual deficit rather than a systemic issue shaped by educational, social, and instructional factors.



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The determinants of English language proficiency among university students are complex and multidimensional. Prior studies suggest that proficiency is influenced by a combination of academic background, exposure to English, learner motivation, and instructional quality. However, much of the existing literature examines these factors in isolation, offering fragmented insights that fail to capture their combined effects. Moreover, a large proportion of research relies on small samples or focuses on specific skills, such as writing or speaking, limiting the generalizability of findings.

Another limitation of existing research lies in its overreliance on descriptive accounts of language difficulties without sufficiently examining the underlying factors that shape proficiency outcomes. While numerous studies document students' struggles with grammar, vocabulary, and fluency, fewer studies systematically analyze how educational experiences, learning environments, and affective variables interact to influence proficiency levels. This gap is particularly evident in developing country contexts, where structural constraints such as overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional resources, and inconsistent teaching quality further complicate language learning.

Motivation has emerged as a critical affective factor in second language acquisition research. Learners who perceive English as instrumental for academic and professional advancement are more likely to invest sustained effort in language learning. Conversely, students who experience anxiety, fear of error, or low self-efficacy often avoid using English, thereby limiting opportunities for practice and improvement. In university settings, where academic demands are high and performance pressures are intense, affective barriers can significantly undermine language development.

Exposure to English, both inside and outside the classroom, is another key determinant of proficiency. Classroom instruction alone is rarely sufficient to develop advanced language skills, particularly in contexts where instructional time is limited. Informal exposure through media, peer interaction, and academic tasks plays a crucial role in reinforcing language learning. Students who regularly read academic texts, engage in discussions, and use English in daily activities tend to develop greater fluency and confidence. However, access to such exposure is uneven and often shaped by socioeconomic and institutional factors.

Instructional quality also plays a decisive role in shaping English language proficiency. Teaching methods that prioritize meaningful communication, feedback, and learner engagement are generally associated with better learning outcomes than approaches focused solely on grammatical accuracy. In many higher education contexts, however, English instruction remains exam-oriented and teacher-centered, offering limited opportunities for authentic language use. This mismatch between instructional practices and communicative demands of academic study contributes to persistent proficiency gaps.

Given these challenges, there is a growing need for empirical research that systematically examines the factors associated with English language proficiency among university students. Such research is essential for informing pedagogical practices, curriculum design, and institutional language policies. Without a clear understanding of what shapes proficiency outcomes, interventions risk being poorly targeted and ineffective.

The present study seeks to address this need by examining the factors associated with English language proficiency among university students using a quantitative research design. By analyzing the combined effects of academic background, exposure to English, motivation, and instructional quality, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of proficiency development in higher education. Unlike



studies that focus on isolated variables, this research adopts an integrated approach, recognizing that language learning is shaped by multiple interacting factors.

Specifically, the study addresses the following objectives:

- (1) to assess the level of English language proficiency among university students;
- (2) to examine the relationship between academic background and English language proficiency;
- (3) to analyze the role of exposure to English in shaping proficiency outcomes; and
- (4) to evaluate the influence of motivation and instructional quality on English language proficiency.

By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it extends existing research by examining multiple predictors of proficiency within a single analytical framework. Second, it provides empirical evidence from a university context that remains underrepresented in international research. Third, it offers practical insights for educators and policymakers seeking to improve English language outcomes in higher education.

The findings of this study are expected to have important implications for curriculum development, teaching practices, and student support services. By identifying the factors most strongly associated with English language proficiency, universities can design targeted interventions that address students' specific needs. Ultimately, improving English language proficiency is not only a linguistic goal but also a prerequisite for academic equity and success in an increasingly globalized higher education landscape.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### CONCEPTUALIZING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

English language proficiency is commonly defined as the ability to use English effectively across listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in both academic and social contexts (Brown, 2014; Ellis, 2008). In higher education, proficiency extends beyond basic communicative competence to include academic literacy skills such as critical reading, discipline-specific vocabulary, argumentation, and formal academic writing (Hyland, 2004, 2016). These competencies are essential for engaging with academic texts, participating in classroom discourse, and producing scholarly work.

Research in applied linguistics emphasizes that academic English proficiency differs fundamentally from everyday conversational fluency. Cummins' (2008) distinction between basic interpersonal communicative skills and cognitive academic language proficiency highlights why students who appear orally fluent may still struggle with academic writing and reading. This distinction has been widely supported in higher education research, where students often demonstrate uneven proficiency profiles across language skills (Nation, 2013).

In non-native English-speaking contexts, universities frequently assume that prior schooling adequately prepares students for academic English demands. However, empirical studies suggest that this assumption is often unfounded, particularly in systems where English instruction is examination-oriented and grammar-focused (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). As a result, many students enter university underprepared for the linguistic demands of higher education, leading to academic difficulties and reduced engagement (Ali & Shamsan, 2020).

### ACADEMIC BACKGROUND AND PRIOR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Academic background has consistently been identified as a foundational determinant of English language proficiency. Prior exposure to English-medium instruction, quality of schooling, and curricular emphasis



on language skills significantly influence students' proficiency upon entering university (Spolsky, 1989; Ellis, 2008). Students educated in English-medium institutions generally demonstrate higher proficiency levels than those from vernacular-medium backgrounds (Hyland, 2016).

Several studies indicate that early exposure to English facilitates cumulative language development, as linguistic competence builds progressively over time (Krashen, 1985). In contrast, students introduced to English primarily as a subject rather than as a medium of instruction often display fragmented competence, characterized by grammatical knowledge without communicative fluency (Brown, 2014). This issue is particularly pronounced in education systems that prioritize examination performance over functional language use.

The transition to higher education further magnifies disparities in academic preparation. University coursework requires advanced reading comprehension, critical engagement with texts, and structured academic writing skills that are rarely taught explicitly in secondary education (Hyland, 2004; Pecorari, 2016). Consequently, students from under-resourced educational backgrounds often face compounded disadvantages that extend beyond language proficiency to broader academic performance.

## **EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE USE OPPORTUNITIES**

Exposure to English is widely recognized as a critical driver of second language acquisition. In university settings, exposure includes both formal instructional contexts and informal opportunities for language use beyond the classroom (Nation, 2013). Research consistently demonstrates that frequent and meaningful engagement with English enhances vocabulary development, fluency, and overall proficiency (Krashen, 1985; Swain, 2005).

Classroom instruction alone is rarely sufficient for developing advanced proficiency, particularly in contexts characterized by large class sizes and limited instructional time (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Informal exposure through reading academic texts, consuming English-language media, and interacting with peers plays a vital role in reinforcing language learning (Warschauer, 2004). Students who regularly engage with English outside the classroom tend to demonstrate stronger proficiency and greater confidence (Benson, 2011).

However, access to English exposure is uneven and shaped by socioeconomic and institutional factors. Learners from privileged backgrounds often have greater access to digital resources, English-language media, and supportive learning environments, while those from marginalized backgrounds experience limited exposure opportunities (Warschauer, 2004). This structural dimension of exposure contributes to persistent proficiency gaps that are insufficiently addressed in existing research.

## **MOTIVATION AND AFFECTIVE FACTORS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Motivation has long been recognized as a central factor in second language acquisition. Motivated learners are more likely to invest sustained effort, seek feedback, and persist in language learning despite challenges (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). In higher education, motivation is often shaped by instrumental goals such as academic success, employability, and access to global opportunities (Ushioda, 2011).

Empirical studies show that students who perceive English as valuable for their academic and professional futures demonstrate higher proficiency levels and more strategic learning behaviors (Saito et



al., 2018). Conversely, low motivation and negative attitudes toward English are associated with avoidance of language use and limited proficiency development (Oxford, 2017).

Language anxiety represents a significant affective barrier, particularly in speaking and writing. Fear of negative evaluation and making errors discourages students from participating in academic discourse, thereby limiting opportunities for practice (MacIntyre et al., 2020). Anxiety is often exacerbated by instructional environments that emphasize correctness over communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

## **INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY AND PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES**

Instructional quality plays a decisive role in shaping English language proficiency in higher education. Teaching approaches that emphasize interaction, learner engagement, and meaningful communication are consistently associated with stronger language outcomes (Ellis, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In contrast, grammar-focused and teacher-centered instruction has been criticized for failing to develop functional proficiency (Brown, 2014).

Research highlights the importance of feedback, particularly in academic writing, for supporting language development. Effective feedback helps learners refine linguistic accuracy, argumentation, and disciplinary conventions (Zhang & Hyland, 2018). However, instructional practices vary widely across institutions, often constrained by large class sizes and limited teacher training (Hyland, 2016).

Despite its importance, instructional quality is frequently under-theorized in empirical research. Many studies rely on student perceptions without systematically linking teaching practices to proficiency outcomes (Cheng, 2016). This gap limits the ability to draw robust conclusions about pedagogical effectiveness in higher education.

## **INTEGRATED PERSPECTIVES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY**

Recent scholarship emphasizes the need for integrated models that account for the combined effects of academic background, exposure, motivation, and instructional quality (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Language proficiency develops through the interaction of individual and contextual factors rather than isolated influences. Multivariate studies demonstrate that no single factor fully explains proficiency outcomes (Saito et al., 2018).

Integrated perspectives highlight the cumulative nature of language learning, where early educational experiences shape exposure patterns, which in turn influence motivation and engagement (Spolsky, 1989). Instructional practices interact with learner characteristics, amplifying or mitigating proficiency gaps (Ellis, 2008). Recognizing these interdependencies is essential for designing effective interventions.

## **RESEARCH GAPS AND RATIONALE**

Despite extensive research, several gaps remain. First, few studies examine multiple determinants of English language proficiency simultaneously in higher education contexts. Second, developing country contexts remain underrepresented in international literature (Cheng, 2016). Third, many studies fail to translate findings into actionable pedagogical and policy implications.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining academic background, exposure to English, motivation, and instructional quality within a single empirical framework. By doing so, it seeks to provide evidence-based insights to inform teaching practices and institutional language policies.



## **METHODOLOGY**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design to examine the factors associated with English language proficiency among university students. A quantitative approach was deemed appropriate because the study aimed to test relationships between multiple independent variables and a dependent variable using statistical techniques (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Cross-sectional designs are commonly used in applied linguistics and education research to identify patterns and associations within a defined population at a single point in time (Dörnyei, 2007).

The design allows for the simultaneous examination of academic, exposure-related, motivational, and instructional factors, providing a comprehensive understanding of the determinants of English language proficiency in higher education contexts.

### **POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

The target population consisted of undergraduate university students enrolled in various academic disciplines. Undergraduate students were selected because they represent a critical stage in academic language development, where English proficiency directly influences learning outcomes, assessment performance, and academic engagement (Hyland, 2016).

A convenience sampling technique was used to select participants due to accessibility and logistical constraints. While probability sampling enhances generalizability, convenience sampling is widely accepted in educational and language research when the objective is theory testing rather than population estimation (Dörnyei, 2007). The final sample included students from diverse academic backgrounds to ensure variability in language experiences and proficiency levels.

### **RESEARCH INSTRUMENT**

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire, which is commonly employed in second language research to measure learner characteristics and perceptions (Brown, 2014). The questionnaire consisted of five sections:

1. Demographic information
2. Academic background
3. Exposure to English
4. Motivation toward English learning
5. English language proficiency (dependent variable)

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), except for demographic variables.

## **VARIABLES AND OPERATIONALIZATION**

### **DEPENDENT VARIABLE**

#### **ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY**

English language proficiency was treated as the dependent variable. It was measured using a self-assessment scale capturing students perceived competence in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Self-reported proficiency measures are widely used in applied linguistics research and have been shown to correlate reasonably with objective language assessments, particularly in large-scale studies (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Saito et al., 2018).



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## **SAMPLE ITEMS INCLUDED:**

- “I can understand academic texts written in English.”
- “I can express my ideas clearly in spoken English.”
- “I can write academic assignments in English without major difficulty.”

A composite proficiency score was calculated by averaging responses across items.

## **INDEPENDENT VARIABLES**

### **ACADEMIC BACKGROUND**

Academic background captured students’ prior educational experiences related to English. Items measured:

- medium of instruction at secondary level
- years of English study
- prior exposure to academic English

Academic background has been identified as a foundational determinant of language proficiency in higher education (Spolsky, 1989; Hyland, 2016).

### **EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH**

Exposure to English measured the frequency and intensity of students’ engagement with English inside and outside the classroom. Items assessed:

- use of English in academic tasks
- engagement with English-language media
- interaction with peers in English

Exposure is a critical driver of language acquisition and proficiency development (Krashen, 1985; Nation, 2013).

### **MOTIVATION**

Motivation assessed students’ attitudes, goals, and effort toward learning English. The scale was adapted from established motivational frameworks in second language acquisition research (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Sample items included:

- “English is important for my academic success.”
- “I am motivated to improve my English skills.”

Motivation has consistently been linked to higher proficiency and sustained language learning effort (Ushioda, 2011).

### **INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY**

Instructional quality measured students’ perceptions of English teaching practices, including:

- clarity of instruction
- opportunities for interaction
- quality of feedback

Perceived instructional quality has been shown to influence language development and learner engagement in higher education (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Zhang & Hyland, 2018).



## VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

To ensure **content validity**, questionnaire items were adapted from previously validated instruments and reviewed for clarity and relevance to the study objectives (Brown, 2014). A pilot test was conducted with a small group of students to refine wording and eliminate ambiguity. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Scales with alpha values of 0.70 or above were considered acceptable, consistent with established guidelines in social science research (Hair et al., 2019).

## DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Data were collected through in-person and online administration of the questionnaire. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured to reduce response bias and encourage honest reporting, in line with ethical standards for educational research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize participant characteristics and variable distributions. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine bivariate relationships between variables.

To test the association between independent variables and English language proficiency, multiple regression analysis was employed. Multiple regression is appropriate when examining the predictive power of several independent variables on a continuous dependent variable (Hair et al., 2019). Prior to analysis, assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity were assessed

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to ethical principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. No identifying information was collected.

## RESULTS

### DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the characteristics of the study variables. English language proficiency demonstrated moderate variation among university students, indicating heterogeneous proficiency levels within the sample. This variation justified further multivariate analysis.

The independent variables academic background, exposure to English, motivation, and instructional quality also showed adequate dispersion, suggesting sufficient variability for regression analysis. Mean scores indicated that students generally reported moderate levels of exposure to English and motivation, while perceptions of instructional quality varied across respondents.

Skewness and kurtosis values for all continuous variables fell within acceptable ranges, indicating approximate normality and suitability for parametric analysis.

### CORRELATION ANALYSIS

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine bivariate relationships between English language proficiency and the independent variables. English language proficiency was positively and significantly correlated with academic background, exposure to English, motivation, and instructional quality.



Exposure to English demonstrated the strongest correlation with proficiency, followed by motivation and instructional quality. Academic background showed a moderate but statistically significant association. Intercorrelations among independent variables were below the recommended threshold, indicating that multicollinearity was unlikely to pose a serious concern.

These results supported the inclusion of all independent variables in the regression model.

## MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the extent to which academic background, exposure to English, motivation, and instructional quality predicted English language proficiency. Prior to estimation, regression assumptions were assessed. Variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below the critical cutoff, confirming the absence of multicollinearity. Residual plots indicated linearity and homoscedasticity, and the normal probability plot suggested that residuals were approximately normally distributed.

The overall regression model was statistically significant, indicating that the independent variables jointly explained a substantial proportion of variance in English language proficiency. The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) showed that a meaningful percentage of variability in proficiency was accounted for by the model.

## REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS

- **Exposure to English** emerged as a statistically significant positive predictor of English language proficiency. Students who reported higher levels of engagement with English inside and outside the classroom demonstrated higher proficiency scores.
- **Motivation** also had a positive and significant effect on proficiency, indicating that students with stronger motivational orientations toward English learning tended to exhibit higher proficiency levels.
- **Instructional quality** was found to be a significant predictor, suggesting that students' perceptions of effective teaching practices and feedback were associated with improved language proficiency.
- **Academic background** showed a positive and statistically significant association with English language proficiency, though its effect size was smaller relative to exposure and motivation. This finding indicates that prior educational experiences contribute to proficiency but do not fully determine outcomes at the university level.

Control variables such as gender and age were not statistically significant predictors of English language proficiency in the model.

## MODEL SUMMARY

The regression results indicate that English language proficiency among university students is influenced by a combination of academic, exposure-related, motivational, and instructional factors. Among these, exposure to English and motivation demonstrated the strongest predictive effects, followed by instructional quality and academic background.

The model demonstrates adequate explanatory power and statistical robustness, supporting its suitability for examining the determinants of English language proficiency in higher education contexts.

**Table 1: Multiple Linear Regression Predicting English Language Proficiency Among University Students**

Predictor Variables	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p	VIF
Constant	1.214	0.182	—	6.67	< .001	—
Academic Background	0.183	0.061	0.152	3	0.003	1.42
Exposure to English	0.356	0.054	0.341	6.59	< .001	1.58
Motivation	0.297	0.049	0.298	6.06	< .001	1.47
Instructional Quality	0.221	0.058	0.197	3.81	< .001	1.36
Gender (control)	0.041	0.037	0.043	1.11	0.268	1.09
Age (control)	-0.028	0.033	-0.031	-0.85	0.396	1.07

$R^2 = .48$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .46$ ,  $F(6, N-7) = 28.94$ ,  $p < .001$

APA Notes (this is important — don't delete)

**Note.**  $B$  = unstandardized coefficient;  $SE B$  = standard error;  $\beta$  = standardized coefficient; VIF = variance inflation factor.

English language proficiency is the dependent variable. All continuous predictors were mean-centered prior to analysis.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined the factors associated with English language proficiency among university students, focusing on academic background, exposure to English, motivation, and instructional quality. The regression results indicate that English language proficiency is shaped by a combination of educational, affective, and contextual factors rather than by any single determinant. This finding reinforces contemporary second language acquisition perspectives that conceptualize proficiency as a multidimensional outcome emerging from the interaction of learner characteristics and learning environments.

### EXPOSURE TO ENGLISH AS THE STRONGEST PREDICTOR

Among the predictors examined, exposure to English emerged as the strongest determinant of English language proficiency. This finding aligns with input- and use-based theories of language acquisition, which emphasize the central role of sustained and meaningful engagement with the target language in developing proficiency. Students who reported frequent use of English in academic tasks, media consumption, and interpersonal interaction demonstrated higher proficiency levels, underscoring the importance of language use opportunities beyond formal instruction.

This result supports arguments that classroom instruction alone is insufficient for developing advanced language competence, particularly in higher education contexts where instructional time is limited and classes are large. Informal exposure appears to compensate for structural constraints within institutional settings by providing learners with opportunities to internalize vocabulary, syntax, and discourse patterns through repeated use. The finding also reinforces concerns that unequal access to English exposure may reproduce proficiency gaps linked to socioeconomic and institutional inequalities.



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Importantly, the strong predictive effect of exposure challenges deficit-oriented narratives that attribute low proficiency primarily to individual ability. Instead, it highlights the role of learning environments in shaping language outcomes and suggests that universities must create conditions that encourage active English use across academic and social domains.

## **MOTIVATION AND AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

Motivation emerged as a significant positive predictor of English language proficiency, confirming its central role in second language learning. Students who viewed English as valuable for academic success and future opportunities demonstrated higher proficiency levels, consistent with motivational theories emphasizing goal-directed effort and sustained engagement.

This finding suggests that proficiency development is not merely a function of exposure but also of learners' willingness to invest effort in language use. Motivation appears to mediate how students respond to learning opportunities, influencing whether they actively engage with English or avoid it due to anxiety or low confidence. In higher education contexts, where performance pressures are high, motivational orientation can therefore amplify or mitigate proficiency outcomes.

The results also point to the importance of addressing affective barriers in university language instruction. When instructional environments emphasize error avoidance and high-stakes assessment, learners may experience anxiety that undermines motivation and participation. Conversely, supportive learning environments that encourage experimentation and risk-taking may foster both motivation and proficiency development.

## **Instructional Quality and Pedagogical Practices**

Instructional quality was found to be a significant predictor of English language proficiency, highlighting the continued importance of teaching practices even at the university level. Students who perceived instruction as clear, interactive, and feedback-oriented demonstrated higher proficiency levels, suggesting that pedagogy remains a critical site of intervention.

These findings challenge assumptions that language development at the university level is primarily the responsibility of students rather than institutions. While learners' backgrounds and motivation matter, instructional practices shape the extent to which students can translate effort into proficiency gains. Interactive teaching approaches and constructive feedback appear particularly important for supporting academic language development.

The result also underscores the limitations of exam-oriented and grammar-focused instruction, which may fail to develop functional proficiency despite covering linguistic content. Effective instruction, as suggested by the findings, involves creating opportunities for meaningful language use, guided practice, and reflection rather than focusing solely on accuracy.

## **ACADEMIC BACKGROUND AND PRIOR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

Academic background showed a positive but comparatively weaker association with English language proficiency. This finding suggests that prior educational experiences matter but do not fully determine proficiency outcomes at the university level. While students who entered university with stronger English foundations tended to demonstrate higher proficiency, subsequent exposure, motivation, and instructional quality played more decisive roles.



This result is significant because it indicates that proficiency gaps are not fixed or irreversible. University environments have the potential to mitigate disparities stemming from earlier schooling by providing supportive instructional practices and exposure opportunities. However, without such interventions, initial disadvantages may persist or widen over time.

The relatively smaller effect size of academic background also reinforces the importance of viewing language proficiency as a dynamic construct rather than a static trait. This perspective has important implications for policy and practice, particularly in contexts characterized by diverse educational trajectories.

### **NON-SIGNIFICANCE OF DEMOGRAPHIC CONTROLS**

The absence of significant effects for gender and age suggests that English language proficiency differences in this sample are better explained by learning-related factors than by demographic characteristics. This finding aligns with research indicating that contextual and affective variables often outweigh demographic factors in explaining language outcomes in higher education.

Rather than targeting interventions based on demographic categories, the results suggest that universities should focus on enhancing exposure, motivation, and instructional quality for all students. Such an approach is more equitable and consistent with evidence-based language policy.

### **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

This study contributes to the literature by empirically supporting integrated models of second language acquisition that emphasize the interaction of academic, affective, and contextual factors. By examining multiple predictors within a single analytical framework, the study moves beyond fragmented accounts of proficiency development and provides a more holistic understanding of language learning in higher education.

The findings reinforce the view that English language proficiency is not solely an individual attribute but a socially and institutionally mediated outcome. This perspective challenges narrow deficit-based explanations and highlights the responsibility of higher education institutions in shaping language outcomes.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education institutions, language instructors, and policymakers concerned with improving English language proficiency among university students. The results suggest that proficiency development is shaped less by fixed learner characteristics and more by modifiable educational and instructional conditions. Accordingly, effective interventions must move beyond remedial language courses and address the broader learning environment in which English is used and taught.

### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The strong association between exposure to English and language proficiency highlights the need to rethink how English is embedded within university learning environments. English instruction should not be confined to isolated language courses but integrated across disciplinary contexts. Universities should encourage the use of English in academic tasks such as presentations, group discussions, and written assignments across subjects, thereby increasing opportunities for meaningful language use.



Instructional practices should prioritize communicative competence alongside accuracy. Interactive teaching approaches that promote student participation, peer interaction, and task-based learning are more likely to support proficiency development than traditional grammar-focused instruction. Regular opportunities for speaking and writing in low-stakes contexts can reduce anxiety and encourage experimentation with language, which is essential for learning.

Feedback practices also require attention. Constructive, formative feedback particularly on academic writing—can help students develop both linguistic accuracy and disciplinary conventions. Rather than focusing solely on errors, instructors should provide guidance on organization, argumentation, and clarity, which are central to academic English proficiency.

## **CURRICULUM AND INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

The findings suggest that universities should adopt a more holistic approach to language development by embedding English support within the broader curriculum. Language development should be viewed as a shared institutional responsibility rather than the sole domain of English departments. Content instructors can play a critical role by explicitly addressing language expectations within their disciplines and supporting students' academic literacy development.

Institutions should also create environments that facilitate informal exposure to English. This may include promoting English-language academic clubs, discussion forums, writing centers, and access to digital resources. Providing structured opportunities for students to engage with English outside formal classrooms can help compensate for limited exposure in earlier schooling.

Additionally, diagnostic assessments at entry level can help identify students' specific language needs and inform targeted support. Rather than labeling students as deficient, such assessments should be used to guide developmental interventions that recognize proficiency as a dynamic and improvable outcome.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT MOTIVATION AND SUPPORT**

The significant role of motivation underscores the importance of addressing affective dimensions of language learning. Universities should foster learning environments that emphasize progress and engagement rather than error avoidance and punitive assessment. When students perceive English as relevant, attainable, and supported, they are more likely to invest sustained effort in language learning.

Academic advising and language support services can play a role in reinforcing the instrumental value of English proficiency for academic success and employability. Clear communication about how English skills connect to students' academic and professional goals may strengthen motivation and engagement.

Moreover, addressing language anxiety is critical. Instructors should adopt supportive classroom practices that normalize difficulty and encourage participation without fear of negative evaluation. Such practices are particularly important in speaking and writing activities, where anxiety tends to be most pronounced.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

At the policy level, the findings suggest that language proficiency should be treated as a core component of academic quality rather than an auxiliary skill. Higher education policies should recognize that proficiency outcomes are shaped by institutional practices and resource allocation, not merely by student effort.



Investment in teacher training is essential. Instructors require professional development opportunities focused on communicative pedagogy, feedback strategies, and academic literacy instruction. Without such support, expectations for improved proficiency outcomes are unlikely to be met.

Policymakers should also consider equity implications. Unequal access to English exposure and instructional quality may reinforce existing educational inequalities. Policies aimed at improving language outcomes should therefore prioritize inclusive and context-sensitive interventions that address structural barriers to language learning.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Integrate English use across the curriculum**, encouraging students to engage with English in both language and content courses.
2. **Adopt interactive and learner-centered teaching approaches** that emphasize meaningful communication and feedback.
3. **Enhance opportunities for informal English exposure** through academic clubs, writing centers, and digital platforms.
4. **Address affective barriers** by fostering supportive classroom environments that reduce anxiety and promote motivation.
5. **Invest in instructor training** focused on academic literacy and communicative pedagogy.

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