

Original Article

English Learning in the Digital Age: Socio-Cultural Backgrounds and Their Impact on Undergraduate Education in Panchgani

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This study explores the complex relationship between socio-cultural background and English language learning among undergraduate students in Panchgani, India, with particular emphasis on how traditional social determinants interact with the emerging realities of the digital age. Language learning, especially in a multilingual context like India, cannot be reduced to a purely cognitive or classroom-based process; rather, it is deeply embedded in cultural practices, family structures, and social environments. Against this backdrop, the research examines how factors such as gender, family education and occupation, place of residence, socio-economic condition, and access to digital technologies influence the acquisition of English. Adopting a descriptive research design, the study employed the survey method to collect data from first-year undergraduates at Smt. Meenalben Mehta College, Panchgani. Two tools were developed and administered: an English Proficiency Test, designed to assess the core skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary, and a Socio-Cultural Profile questionnaire that captured the diverse backgrounds of the students. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, tabulation, and SPSS software to establish patterns and relationships. The findings reveal clear socio-cultural influences on English proficiency. Female students consistently outperformed their male peers, suggesting stronger motivation and discipline. Science students exhibited higher proficiency compared to those in Arts and Commerce, largely due to curriculum demands. Semi-urban learners showed distinct advantages, benefitting from balanced exposure and community support. Furthermore, socio-economic stability, parental education, and digital access emerged as decisive predictors of competence. Conversely, limited exposure outside the classroom and economic disadvantages restricted progress. The study concludes that socio-cultural background continues to exert a strong influence on English learning, even in the digital era. It recommends innovations in curriculum, integration of technology, targeted remedial interventions, and community engagement to promote more equitable and effective language acquisition.

Keywords: Socio-cultural background, English proficiency, digital age, undergraduate education, Panchgani.

Introduction

English in India occupies a paradoxical position. It is both a foreign language and a deeply entrenched part of the educational, economic, and cultural fabric of the nation. For decades, policymakers, educators, and linguists have debated its role as a second language, a lingua franca, and a global gateway. Despite its prominence, English learning outcomes remain uneven across regions, institutions, and social groups. Students' ability to learn English is shaped by much more than classroom teaching: it is influenced by their gender, family support, place of residence, economic status, and access to digital tools. Panchgani, a semi-urban educational hub nestled in the hills of Maharashtra, provides a unique context for such an investigation. The town is known for its boarding schools and multilingual environment, but it also contains a mix of rural, urban, and semi-urban populations.



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The undergraduate college selected for this study reflects this diversity, with students coming from varied socio-cultural backgrounds. Studying Panchgani thus allows for insights into how socio-cultural diversity intersects with English learning in a digitalising India. The digital age has added new dimensions to language acquisition. Students now access English not only through classrooms but also via smartphones, social media, online courses, and digital entertainment. Yet, access to these tools is uneven, and their educational value depends heavily on socio-cultural factors. While some students harness digital media to enhance their English, others lack the resources or guidance to do so effectively. This article seeks to analyse these complex dynamics. Derived from a completed Minor Research Project, it explores the intersection of socio-cultural background and digital-age learning in shaping English proficiency among undergraduate students in Panchgani.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study lies in recognising that language learning is never culturally neutral. Each student carries into the classroom a history of family practices, linguistic exposure, peer interactions, and socio-economic realities that either facilitate or hinder English acquisition. While pedagogical methods are important, they cannot fully explain differences in performance. Instead, attention must be paid to the broader social environment in which learning occurs.

India's educational policy emphasises equality of opportunity, yet disparities persist. Students from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds often begin college with significantly lower English proficiency than their urban or affluent counterparts. Panchgani, with its mix of rural migrants, local residents, and semi-urban populations, offers a microcosm of these disparities. Additionally, the digital age has introduced both opportunities and inequalities. On the one hand, technology provides free or low-cost access to English resources. On the other, it accentuates divides between students with internet access and those without. Thus, the study is timely in assessing how traditional socio-cultural factors interact with emerging digital realities to shape English learning.

Objectives

The study pursued the following objectives:

1. To prepare a socio-cultural profile of undergraduate students in Panchgani
2. To determine the essential components of English proficiency (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary)
3. To construct and administer an English Proficiency Test aligned with undergraduate curricula
4. To examine students' socio-cultural backgrounds in relation to their performance in English
5. To investigate the degree to which socio-cultural variables influence language learning in the digital age

Hypothesis

The research was guided by the following hypothesis:

There is a significant relationship between socio-cultural background and English language proficiency among undergraduate students. The study assumed that students' proficiency levels would vary systematically according to socio-cultural factors such as gender, family background, residence, economic condition, and digital exposure.

Methodology

Research Method and Design

The study adopted a descriptive research design, using the survey method to collect data. Descriptive research was appropriate because it focuses on describing current conditions and exploring relationships between variables without manipulation. The survey method allowed systematic collection of socio-cultural and linguistic data from a relatively large group of students.

Sampling

The population consisted of first-year undergraduate students from Arts, Commerce, and Science streams at Smt. Meenalben Mehta College, Panchgani. From this group, 80 students were selected as the sample. Care was taken to include students from rural, urban, and semi-urban residences, ensuring representation across socio-cultural contexts.

Research Tools

Two major tools were developed:

1. **English Proficiency Test (EPT):**
 - Comprised five sections (listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary), five marks each.
 - Items were drawn from the undergraduate syllabus of Shivaji University.
 - Designed with expert consultation to ensure validity and reliability.
2. **Socio-Cultural Profile Questionnaire:**
 - Collected data on age, gender, family structure, parental education, occupation, income, residence, media exposure, and study environment.
 - Developed in both English and Marathi for clarity.
 - Validated through expert review and pre-testing.

Procedure

Preparation

The initial stage of the research involved careful preparation of tools required for data collection. The English Proficiency Test was designed to assess the core skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary. To ensure the validity and reliability of the test, it was reviewed by subject experts and aligned with the undergraduate syllabus. The Socio-Cultural Profile questionnaire was also prepared in both English and Marathi to make it accessible to all participants. This tool was designed to collect comprehensive information about students' family background, socio-economic status, residential setting, and exposure to media and technology. Both tools were refined after expert feedback and pilot testing before being finalised for actual use.

Data Collection

Once the tools were ready, the process of data collection began. The English Proficiency Test was conducted under supervision in the college setting to maintain fairness and uniformity in administration. Alongside, socio-cultural data were gathered through Google Forms, which students completed with guidance from the researcher. Oral instructions were also provided whenever required, ensuring that students clearly understood the questions and responded accurately. This approach facilitated the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data from the same group of participants.

Data Analysis

After data collection, the responses were systematically coded and entered into tabulation sheets. Descriptive statistics were used to highlight patterns, and SPSS software was employed for further analysis. Students' scores in the proficiency test were grouped into five categories, Poor, Below Average, Average, Good, and Excellent providing a clear classification framework. These categories were then compared with socio-cultural variables to examine the relationship between students' backgrounds and their performance in English.

Analysis and Data Interpretation

The analysis sought to uncover how socio-cultural variables influenced English proficiency. Key findings are summarised below:

Gender Differences

Female students outperformed male counterparts. Nearly half of the female participants scored in the "Good" category, while most male students clustered in the "Average" or "Below Average" groups. This suggests that female learners displayed higher motivation and consistency in English learning, echoing trends in other sociolinguistic studies.

Academic Discipline

Science students recorded the highest English proficiency, with over 80% performing in the "Good" category. Commerce students largely fell into the "Average" range, while Arts students showed a more balanced distribution between "Average" and "Good." The greater emphasis on English-medium resources in science education may explain this trend.

Place of Residence

Semi-urban students performed better than both rural and urban peers. Rural students often lacked exposure to English outside the classroom, while urban students displayed mixed outcomes, possibly due to socio-economic disparities. Semi-urban students benefitted from a balance of exposure and community-level support.

Socio-Economic Status

Economic stability strongly correlated with proficiency. Students from higher-income families had access to private tuition, better study environments, and digital resources, which enhanced their English skills. Those from low-income families struggled to match these advantages.

Technological and Media Exposure

Students with access to smartphones, social media, and English-language entertainment showed higher proficiency. Moderate and purposeful use of technology, rather than excessive or absent use, correlated with the best outcomes.

Family and Community Environment

Parental education and guidance proved decisive. Students whose parents had secondary or higher education performed better in English, reflecting the role of cultural capital. Supportive family environments and community resources also positively influenced outcomes.

Conclusions

The present study confirms the central hypothesis that socio-cultural background plays a decisive role in shaping English language proficiency at the undergraduate level. Far from being an isolated academic skill, the acquisition of English is deeply intertwined with social and cultural realities. Variables such as gender, academic discipline, place of residence, socio-economic condition, and exposure to digital technologies each influenced students' performance in meaningful ways. The analysis makes it evident that success in English learning is not merely a matter of individual effort but is significantly determined by the environment in which the learner grows and studies. One of the most striking findings of the study is the advantage enjoyed by students from semi-urban areas. These learners

demonstrated higher levels of proficiency, benefitting from an environment that offered both exposures to English and manageable competition. Unlike rural students, who often lack infrastructural and linguistic support, or urban students, who face vast disparities within their peer groups, semi-urban students were positioned at a balance point that facilitated steady progress. Equally noteworthy is the stronger performance of female students, who consistently displayed higher motivation, discipline, and achievement in English learning. This shift highlights evolving gender dynamics in Indian education, where women are increasingly claiming academic space once dominated by men.

Disciplinary differences also surfaced as important. Science students performed better than their peers in Commerce and Arts, largely because their academic curriculum demanded greater engagement with English texts, terminology, and concepts. In contrast, rural students remained disadvantaged, revealing the structural inequities that continue to shape Indian education. Finally, the study underscores the ambivalent role of technology in the digital age. For those with access to smartphones, internet connectivity, and English-language media, technology acted as a powerful enabler, broadening horizons and accelerating learning. However, unequal access risks creating new divides, reinforcing socio-economic inequalities. Ensuring equity in digital access is therefore essential if technology is to be a bridge rather than a barrier in English learning.

Recommendations

Pedagogical Innovations

One of the foremost recommendations of this study is the need for pedagogical innovation in English language classrooms. Traditional lecture-based teaching methods often fail to address the diverse needs of learners who come from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Therefore, teachers should integrate interactive methods such as debates, role plays, storytelling, and group discussions. These techniques not only enhance communication skills but also help students gain confidence in using English in real-life situations. In addition, special attention must be given to students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds, who often enter undergraduate education with less exposure to English. Tailored support in the form of remedial classes, bridge courses, and peer-mentoring programmes can help such students overcome their initial disadvantages and participate more effectively in classroom learning.

Curriculum Design

The curriculum itself should be redesigned to reflect the socio-cultural realities of learners. Often, English learning materials are detached from students' everyday experiences, making them feel alien and irrelevant. By incorporating culturally familiar themes, local stories, and contextualised examples, students are more likely to engage meaningfully with the subject. Moreover, as the digital age reshapes the way students interact with knowledge, the curriculum should also integrate digital literacy components. Teaching students how to use online dictionaries, language-learning apps, and digital platforms responsibly will not only enhance their English skills but also prepare them to participate productively in a technology-driven academic and professional environment.

Technological Integration

Another significant recommendation is the integration of technology into language education. The study found that access to digital tools and platforms had a direct impact on English proficiency. Establishing language laboratories and digital classrooms can create an immersive learning environment where students can practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing with the aid of multimedia resources. In addition, institutions should ensure that students from low-income families are not excluded from these opportunities. Providing subsidised internet access, affordable data packages, and low-cost devices will help bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to technology for all learners.

Parental and Community Engagement

Language learning cannot be confined to the classroom alone; it requires reinforcement in the home and community. Parents play an important role in encouraging the use of English and supporting their children's academic aspirations. Hence, colleges should conduct regular parent-teacher meetings with a focus on language development strategies. These meetings can sensitise parents to the importance of creating a supportive environment at home, even if they themselves are not fluent in English. Beyond the family, community involvement is equally vital. Local libraries, cultural organisations, and youth clubs can be engaged in promoting English through reading circles, cultural events, and community-driven language activities, thereby creating an ecosystem that sustains language growth outside formal education.

Policy and Administration

At the policy level, targeted interventions are required to support students who are at risk of falling behind. Colleges and universities should introduce scholarships, fee concessions, and financial aid schemes to encourage disadvantaged students to continue their education. Additionally, remedial programmes in English should be institutionalised to provide sustained support to underperforming groups. Partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and digital learning platforms can also play a significant role in supplementing classroom teaching. Such collaborations can bring in additional resources, innovative teaching practices, and mentoring opportunities for students.



Further Research

Finally, the study highlights the need for further research to broaden and deepen understanding of the issue. While this investigation was confined to Panchgani, similar studies should be conducted in neighbouring districts and other socio-cultural contexts to generate comparative insights. Such research would help identify whether the patterns observed here are specific to Panchgani or reflect broader trends in Maharashtra or India as a whole. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are essential to trace the long-term impact of socio-cultural background on students' academic performance, employability, and career progression. Tracking students over several years would provide valuable data on how socio-cultural and digital factors continue to shape their lives beyond undergraduate education.

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