

Proficiency in English for the Empowerment of Women: A survey

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Abstract: English plays a vital role, in the educational system, in the metropolitan city of Kolkata and in the district of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. The advancement of globalization, media, technology and the socio-economic development have transformed the lives of women. This has led to a growing awareness among the people of West Bengal about the language English and its possible impact on the lives of people. This has especially led to the empowerment of women in the aforementioned areas of Bengal. There is a phenomenal link between English and women empowerment. This study, therefore, is an attempt to understand how proficiency in English can impact and facilitate empowerment of women. An attempt has been made to study the impact of English through a qualitative approach and through the method of survey.

Keywords: English Language, Women, Education, English Proficiency, Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Good and proper education plays a great role in moulding the future and professional career of an individual and it can develop her/his personality and earn recognition and respect in society. Education is, socially and personally, an essential part of human life. It is necessary for the growth and development of persons, wellbeing of the family, progress of society and the nation. We cannot overlook the importance of education in our lives. Social issues like inequality, gender -discrimination, religious dogmatism, intolerance and other such problems arise because of the absence of education in our society. Proper education helps to maintain personal and social standards in daily life. The more knowledge we get, the more we grow and develop in life. To be well-educated means to be a good citizen of a nation for it helps the nation to develop in leaps and bounds. The first purpose of getting a good education is to become a sensitive, discerning and productive citizen and then be successful in personal and professional life. Education makes us weigh different aspects of social, political and cultural issues and hence take judicious decisions in favour of long-term benefits for society. In such a competitive world, education has become a necessity for human being after food, clothing and shelter.

In India and in the world today, education given through just any other medium of instruction is not enough; a working knowledge of English is essential. English has become an integral part of the Indian Education System. Now, most of the communication in India takes place in English, whether it is to teach, transact or do business. As everyone knows that it is a global language (*lingua franca*) connecting people for trade and cultural purposes. English is spoken by some 1.75 billion people worldwide and the prediction is that about two billion people will be using it by 2020. It is seen that world-wide leaders, the policy-makers, entrepreneurs are learning and speaking English. A good command of English can not only enhance an individual's economic prospects but also promote international growth and competitiveness.

In a 2012 survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit, nearly 70 per cent of executives said their workforce will need to master English to realize corporate expansion plans, and a quarter said that more than 50 per cent of their total workforce will need basic proficiency in English. English is becoming a core criterion in determining employability. To use the internet profitably, an advanced knowledge of English is indispensable. English makes a significant contribution to sustainable global development. It eases trade between countries that do not share a common language. It is used as a language of convenience, facilitating dialogue and building trust where an understanding of diverse positions is crucial – notably in conflict resolution, where security forces and other uniformed services increasingly speak to each other in English. English is increasingly the *lingua franca* that holds together the international conversation and debate in areas such as climate change, terrorism and human rights. (The English Effect, 2013)

ENGLISH - THE LANGUAGE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

To empower women, education is mandatory. With women constituting almost half of the country's population, their empowerment is critical for accelerating development of the country. Education is the best way to empower women. As the African proverb says, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate an entire family". Empowering women through education has a multiplying effect. An educated woman tend to have healthier children and provide them with better education. An educated and employed woman will not only be contributing to her household income but to the national economy as well (The Vice President of India, 2020). George Washington, the first President of the United States of America, said this about his mother, "All I am I owe to my mother...I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual and physical education I received from her." From the above quotes of the famous persons, it is very clear how important education is and through education the empowerment of women.

The Government of India has, from time to time, appointed several committees. Special provisions for girls and women have been made based on the recommendations received from various Commissions and experts. Women form a significant section of our society. Education leads to the empowerment of women which in turn brings about the empowerment of society and nation. Education is a key factor for women's economic and social upliftment which, consequently, leads to prosperity, development and welfare of the family, society and the nation. Women literacy rate in our country was extremely low in the pre-independence era. So after independence, a number of National Commissions and Committees were appointed by the Government of India under the able leadership of educationists. The primary focus was on the education of women. These Government policies played a very important role in enhancing women's literacy rates. Establishment of these Commissions and formulation of relevant policies became milestones in empowering Indian Women. It enabled them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life.

Right to Education is now a fundamental right. Education is the basic requirement for empowerment. Yet the 'Malalas' of the world faced the threat of bullets in their heads, if they tried to exercise this right. The Right to Education is also linked with prohibition of child marriages. Women's rights are a vital part of Human Rights. It is now being realized, more than ever, that the denial of human rights to women, especially right to equality, right to education and employment and right to essential healthcare upsets a nation's socio-economic development. This, in turn, detracts from the establishment of a just and fair society where all can freely exercise their fundamental rights in a well-regulated political environment. These rights need to be examined in the current 'culture' of violence against women. Talking about human rights, Prof. Amartya Sen, the Noble-winning economist says, "There is something deeply attractive in the idea that every person anywhere in the world, irrespective of citizenship or territorial legislation, has some basic rights, which others should respect." (Philosophy and public Affairs, 2004)

Chiara Gonzi in her thesis titled 'Language Education as a Tool for Empowering Women' has focused on the importance of empowering women and the role played by the English language in this process. She states that there is a link between language learning and knowing more than one language; this can help to empower women from a social and economic point of view. She has made a specific study on the Nepalese women and how the English language became a tool for their educational and socio-economic empowerment. The researcher has provided a theoretical perspective on the connection between girls' language education and women's empowerment and the specific ways in which girls' and women's education transforms the world. (Gonzi, 2004)

This study is an endeavour to contribute to our understanding of the position of women by investigating the level of proficiency of English among Indian women through a qualitative approach. It attempts to provide an insight into the need for English language expertise among women for their empowerment in various spheres of life. It also tries to provide insights for the planning of sustainable intervention strategies for the development of English language for the empowerment of women.

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of the research is to document the impact on and usefulness of English in the lives of women. The aim, in general, is to investigate: The importance of the knowledge of English for women and the extent to which English language can contribute to the socio-economic empowerment of Indian women.

METHODOLOGY

For the research, the Survey Method has been followed using relevant and thought-provoking questionnaires. Primary and Secondary data have been collected. For this study, data and information have been collected from schools, teachers, parents, students, offices and other working places.

TOOLS

For data collection, the basic type of tool used is questionnaire. Questionnaires were provided to students, parents, and teachers, management authorities/Head of the Institutions, employers and employees.

The first set of questions was given to get general opinion and collect information on the backgrounds of the persons concerned. The second set of questions was on the topic of the importance of English in life. The third set of questions was on the importance of English in the areas of works. The fourth set of questions was concerning the area where English is required in a larger scale.

RESEARCH AREA

The research was based on the semi-urban and rural district of North 24 Parganas in West Bengal.

PROCEDURE

To collect the sampling, the researcher visited 23 schools personally and collected data for further study. For the sampling, 400 students, 110 parents, 100 teachers, 50 management authorities/Head of the Institutions were interviewed. The researcher visited 50 Employers and employees in their working places like shopping centres, restaurants, and other offices to collect data.

Students belonging to various categories of schools affiliated to CISCE, CBSE, The West Bengal State Board were given questionnaires to answer. Parents, teachers, Heads of institutions, employers and employees too were chosen from diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, circumstances, ideas, professions, grounding and expertise in order to get precise and accurate responses.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Below we have the graphic illustration, data analysis and interpretation done graphically and statistically of the few questionnaires which are of very important and significant value.

| Table No. 1 | | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| All the women should know English | | | | | |
| <i>Category of interviewers</i> | <i>Total No of participants</i> | <i>Strongly Agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> | <i>Disagree</i> |
| Students | 400 | 51 | 37.75 | 2.25 | 9 |
| Parents | 110 | 41.82 | 43.64 | 0.90 | 13.64 |
| Teachers | 100 | 34 | 48 | 04 | 14 |
| Institutional Head | 20 | 22 | 68 | 06 | 04 |
| Employee/ Employer | 50 | 28 | 58 | 0 | 14 |

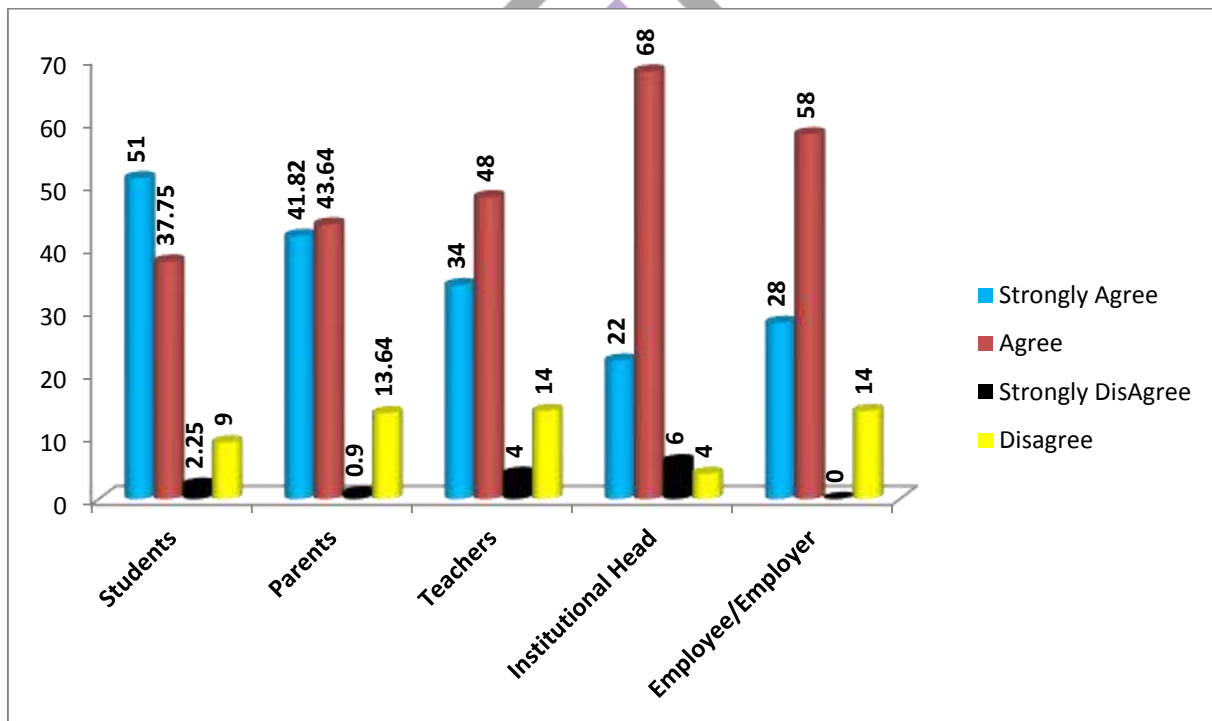


Figure No. 1 Bar Chart
Graph to represent the importance of the knowledge of English by women

After studying to the questionnaire given and the result collected from a number of students, parents, teachers, management, employer and employee regarding the opinion whether the women should know English it is astonishing to note that all the groups have agreed upon to say that the women should know English. 22% - 51 % have strongly agreed upon of the opinion. The percentage of people strongly disagreeing is only 0% - 4%. So it is important to note that the families and society have come to realize that women need to study and not just study and but also study English for the betterment of family and society which in turn will ensure the empowerment of women.

| Table No. 2 | | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------------|-------|-------------------|----------|
| For the women empowerment English is necessary | | | | | |
| Category of interviewers | Total No of participants | Strongly Agree | Agree | Strongly Disagree | Disagree |
| Students | 400 | 31.25 | 46.5 | 3.75 | 18.5 |
| Parents | 110 | 45.46 | 43.64 | 3.64 | 7.26 |
| Teachers | 100 | 42 | 36 | 02 | 20 |
| Institutional Head | 20 | 20 | 62 | 04 | 14 |
| Employee/ Employer | 50 | 24 | 48 | 12 | 16 |

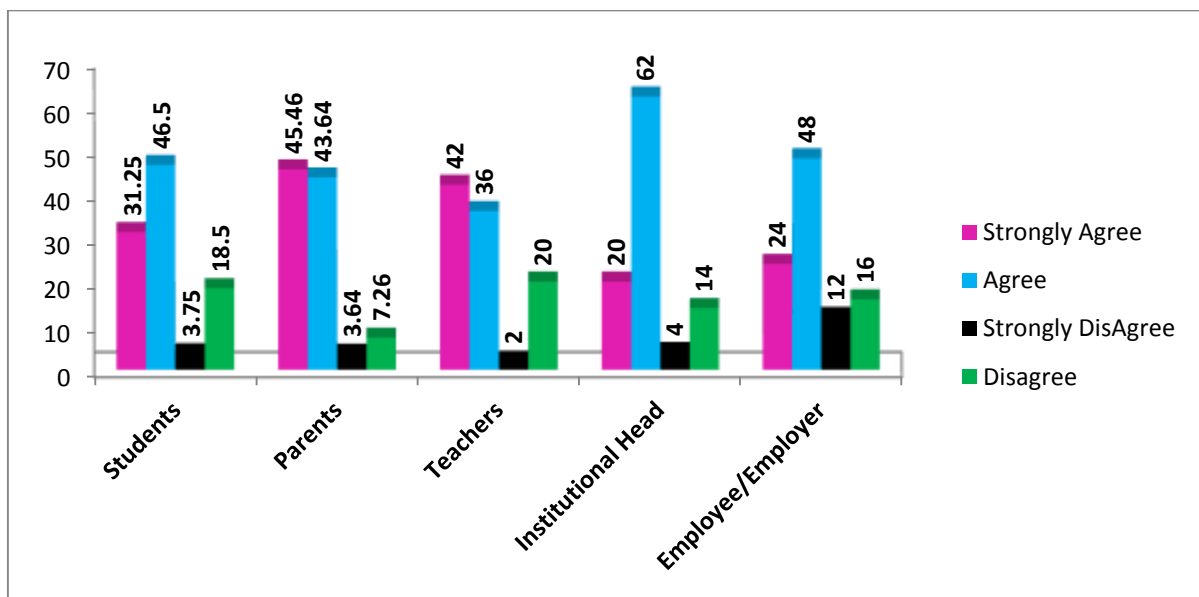


Figure No. 2 Bar Chart
Graph to represent the importance of English for women empowerment

In the world, in India and in our society, the necessity of women empowerment has become a requisite for the development and progress of society and families. Therefore, a questionnaire was distributed to various groups to find out their opinion regarding the role played by English towards women empowerment. It is astonishing to notice that 45.46% of people strongly agree to the proposition, 48% agree and only 18.5 % persons and 12% persons strongly disagree to the proposition. From these statistics, the overall picture that emerges is that English is an important means of empowering women.

FINDINGS

English language plays a vital role in the general development of women with an increased participation in all spheres of life. It is very important for them to acquire proficiency in English to gain more confidence in their workplace and help them communicate effectively. Thus, this helps them to achieve great heights in their jobs. Today, we have women ministers, pilots, cricketers, and football players to name just a few. An improved economic status helps the women to lead respectable lives in their homes and outside. Educated women not only tend to promote education of their children, but also improve the overall environment of their homes. A woman with talents and knowledge of English is a big asset in today’s society.

English helps in women’s empowerment mostly in two ways. It opens up a plethora of job opportunities leading to economic independence of women. It is the window through which women can get the exposure to the outer world through a huge knowledge bank. Proficiency in English helps them to grow as persons independently and helps them to connect to the outside world easily. Learning English opens access to the world. Women are able to obtain higher education at foreign universities, get jobs in different countries and become independent. Through proper English education, women can develop their academic and leadership skills, interact and influence others, boost their self-esteem, take appropriate actions and decisions in order to lead a better, dignified, and healthy life both in households and society at large. Women constitute 50 % of the world's population. Only when women are empowered can their equality and rights be properly ensured. English education will widen their horizons and open more areas for them. Besides, an educated woman means an educated family.

CONCLUSION

In my research paper I have paid particular attention to women empowerment and the role played by the English language in all this. In today's world, women empowerment is one of the most discussed issues and concerns. English proficiency provides a woman confidence in the common platform and in the workplaces. A woman with talent and proficiency in English can contribute much to the family and to society. The basic way to empower women in West Bengal is primarily through education. Education refines a person and acts as a medium of empowerment.

Based on the study and analyzing the data collected from the questionnaires and interviews and interpreting the findings, it can be said that English should be given prominence in the state schools from Nursery Class to Class XII. For any higher education, this language is very important as most of the books (national and international publications) are available in this language. The digital and communication world is controlled by English. English schools still hold a place of prestige in West Bengal and in the country. English holds a greater significance in Kolkata in West Bengal, it being a metropolitan city.

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