

English Communication Proficiency in Global Business: Industry Demands Compared to Academic Preparation – A Multi-Country Perspective with Special Reference to India

Dr. G. Ramamurthy

Professor of English, Amrita Sai Institute of Science and Technology, Vijayawada, A.P., India.

Email: Ramamurthy.net@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The rapid globalization of business has made English communication proficiency a critical employability skill. This study investigates the gap between industry expectations of English proficiency in global workplaces and the preparation provided by higher education institutions. Using a mixed-methods approach—surveys of 612 HR managers and senior executives across seven countries (India, China, Germany, Singapore, UAE, UK, and USA) and in-depth interviews with 48 corporate leaders—the research reveals a significant mismatch in all countries, with the widest gap observed in India and China. Indian industry rates “business-ready” English proficiency (presentation skills, negotiation, email etiquette, and cross-cultural nuance) as the most deficient area among fresh graduates, despite India’s reputation for English-medium education. The paper proposes a competency-based framework and actionable recommendations for curriculum redesign.

Keywords: *English For Business, Employability Skills, Global Competence, Higher Education–Industry Gap, India, Cross-Cultural Communication.*

1. Introduction

English has evolved from a foreign language to the de facto lingua franca of international business (Neeley, 2012; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). Over 85 % of global organizations now use English as their official or primary working language (EF English Proficiency Index, 2024). Yet, employers consistently report that graduates lack the specific communicative competence required in multinational settings (British Council, 2019; QS Global Employer Survey, 2023).

India, with the world’s second-largest English-speaking population (Crystal, 2022), is often assumed to have a natural advantage. However, industry voices increasingly highlight that academic English (examination-oriented, grammar-focused) does not translate into workplace-ready communication (Bloom et al., 2022; Sharma & Sharma, 2023). Similar concerns have emerged in other high-growth economies (China, UAE) and even in traditionally strong English-speaking nations when operating globally.

This study addresses two research questions:

1. What specific English communication competencies do global employers demand most?
2. How well do higher education systems in India and selected comparator countries prepare graduates for these demands?

2. Literature Review

2.1 English as the Language of Global Business Research confirms that English proficiency correlates positively with GDP per capita, foreign direct investment inflows, and individual earnings (Ef EPI, 2024; Arcand & Grin, 2013).

2.2 Competency Frameworks Key frameworks include CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference), TOEIC/TOEFL for business, and the Global Scale of English (Pearson). However, these are largely academic constructs. Corporate studies (LinkedIn, 2023; GMAC, 2024) emphasize “soft” communicative skills: persuasive presentations, diplomatic disagreement, virtual meeting leadership, and culturally nuanced writing.

2.3 The India Paradox Despite 125 million English speakers, only about 10–12 % reach B2+ proficiency (India Skills Report, 2024). Engineering and management curricula allocate <5 % of credits to communication skills, and pedagogy remains teacher-centered and examination-driven (Ramanathan, 2021; Faust & Nagar, 2023).

2.4 Comparative Evidence China’s “College English Test” system has been criticized for similar reasons (Cheng, 2019). Germany and Singapore, conversely, integrate workplace simulations and mandatory internships with reflective English components (Handke & Schäfer, 2022; Goh & Lim, 2023).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design Mixed-methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

3.2 Quantitative Phase An online survey (35 items, 5-point Likert + ranking) was administered to HR managers and C-suite executives in companies with ≥ 250 employees and international operations. Sample (2023–2024):

- India (n=218)
- China (n=94)
- Germany (n=76)
- Singapore (n=68)
- UAE (n=62)
- UK (n=57)
- USA (n=37) Total N=612 (response rate 68 %).

3.3 Qualitative Phase Semi-structured interviews (45–70 min) with 48 senior leaders (18 India, 30 other countries) to explain quantitative findings.

3.4 Data Analysis Quantitative: Descriptive statistics, Kruskal–Wallis tests, post-hoc Dunn tests. Qualitative: Thematic analysis using NVivo 14.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Most Demanded Competencies (Global Ranking)

1. Writing clear, concise, and polite business emails (89 % rated “critical”)
2. Leading and participating in virtual meetings (86 %)
3. Delivering persuasive presentations (84 %)
4. Negotiating and managing conflict diplomatically (81 %)
5. Small talk and relationship-building across cultures (77 %)

4.2 Perceived Proficiency of Fresh Graduates (Mean Scores out of 5)

Country	Overall English Proficiency	Email Writing	Presentation Skills	Negotiation Skills	Cultural Nuance
India	3.12	3.41	2.81	2.68	2.59
China	2.94	3.28	2.66	2.51	2.44
Germany	3.98	4.22	3.91	3.87	3.94
Singapore	4.31	4.45	4.28	4.19	4.37
UAE	3.67	3.89	3.52	3.41	3.28
UK	4.42	4.51	4.38	4.29	4.11
USA	4.38	4.47	4.33	4.25	4.02

Kruskal–Wallis test: $\chi^2(6) = 312.4$, $p < .001$ for all skills.

4.3 India-Specific Insights from Interviews Indian respondents repeatedly used phrases such as: “Bookish English”, “mother-tongue influence (MTI) in accent and syntax”, “fear of speaking up in global calls”, and “inability to say ‘no’ politely”.

A CHRO of a Fortune-500 IT firm in Bengaluru stated: “We hire for technical skills, but we lose clients because of communication gaps. We end up spending the first 6–9 months just training freshers on email tone and meeting etiquette.”

4.4 Comparative Advantages Singapore and Germany mandate project-based English courses with industry mentors. The UAE’s “Emiratization” policy has paradoxically improved English training quality in the private sector. China is rapidly closing the gap through mandatory Business English certificates tied to graduation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study confirms a global gap, but the magnitude is starkest in India despite its demographic advantage. Academic preparation remains largely examination-oriented and decontextualized.

Recommendations For Higher Education Institutions (especially in India):

1. Shift from 2–3 standalone “Communication Skills” courses to an integrated, spiral curriculum across all semesters.

2. Adopt a competency-based assessment using real workplace tasks (recorded presentations judged by industry panels, email portfolios, simulated negotiations).
3. Mandate at least one credit-bearing internship with explicit English communication objectives and reflective journals.
4. Introduce mandatory training in virtual communication tools (Zoom/Teams etiquette, camera-on culture, chat discipline).
5. Establish industry–academia consortia (modeled on Germany’s “Dual Studies” or Singapore’s SkillsFuture) to co-design curricula.

For Industry: Invest in structured 3–6 month onboarding communication bootcamps rather than ad-hoc training.

For Policy Makers (India): Include “Workplace English Proficiency” as a measurable outcome in the National Education Policy 2020 implementation framework and in NAAC/NBA accreditation criteria.

Future research should track longitudinal employability outcomes after implementing the proposed framework.

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