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Bridging the Academia-Industry Divide: The Role of the English Language in Fostering Global Employability and Soft Skills in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

The growing gap between higher education and the requirements of the labour market has emerged as a major challenge for India in the context of globalization, digital transformation, artificial intelligence and the expansion of the knowledge economy. Although Indian higher education has expanded significantly in terms of enrolment and institutional capacity, employers increasingly emphasize a combination of domain knowledge, communication ability, critical thinking, adaptability, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership and digital competence. In this context, English language proficiency occupies a distinctive position because English continues to function as an important medium of international business, higher education, science, technology, research, professional networking and cross-cultural communication.

India's demographic dividend positions it as a potential powerhouse for the global workforce, particularly in the technology and service sectors. However, a persistent academia-industry gap hinders the full realization of this potential. While Indian higher education institutions produce millions of graduates annually, a significant percentage remain unemployable due to a deficit in soft skills and communicative competence. This research article examines the critical role of the English language as a foundational tool for acquiring soft skills and enhancing global employability in the Indian context. It explores how English functions not merely as a subject of study, but as the primary vehicular language for negotiation, critical thinking, cross-cultural collaboration, and leadership. This paper examines the role of English language proficiency in bridging the academia industry divide and enhancing the global employability of Indian higher-education graduates. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical methodology based primarily on secondary sources, including policy documents, higher-education frameworks, international reports, employability studies and research on English-language skills. The article further analyzes the socio-linguistic challenges within the Indian higher education system, such as the vernacular-medium versus English-medium divide, and proposes pedagogical shifts aligned with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 to integrate language learning with holistic skill development.



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Key words: English Language, Soft Skills, Global Employability, Higher Education, India, Academia-Industry Gap, Communicative Competence.

Introduction

Higher education is increasingly expected to perform a dual function: imparting disciplinary knowledge and preparing learners for productive participation in society and the labour market. In India, the expansion of higher education has created unprecedented opportunities for young people, but the transition from the classroom to employment remains challenging. Employers frequently seek graduates who can combine technical or disciplinary knowledge with communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, leadership and digital capabilities.

The traditional distinction between "academic knowledge" and "employability skills" is becoming less meaningful. Contemporary workplaces require graduates to apply knowledge in unfamiliar situations, communicate with colleagues and clients, participate in teams, prepare professional documents, make presentations, solve problems and learn continuously. Consequently, employability has become a multidimensional concept involving knowledge, skills, attitudes, personal attributes and the ability to transfer learning to workplace situations.

The transformation is particularly significant in India because the country's workforce increasingly interacts with global markets. Information technology, business-process services, financial services, tourism, healthcare, education, research, professional services, e-commerce and multinational enterprises require employees to communicate across linguistic, cultural and geographical boundaries.

English occupies an important position in this environment. It is widely used in India's higher education, corporate sector, scientific research, information technology, International business and professional communication. However, the significance of English should not be reduced to grammatical correctness or conversational fluency. Employability-oriented English encompasses the ability to communicate ideas clearly, listen effectively, participate in meetings, write professional documents, negotiate, present information, interact with customers and collaborate with diverse teams.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes this broader conception of education. It emphasizes holistic and multidisciplinary education, communication, discussion, debate, critical thinking, vocational exposure, internships and employability. It explicitly identifies communication, teamwork and resilience as important life skills.



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The landscape of global employment has undergone a radical transformation in the 21st century, driven by globalization, the digital economy, and the rise of the service sector. In this paradigm, "hard skills" or technical knowledge are no longer sufficient for sustained career growth. Employers across the globe increasingly prioritize "soft skills"—a constellation of interpersonal attributes, communication abilities, and emotional intelligence.

In India, the disconnect between academic output and industry expectations is stark. Annual employment surveys, such as the India Skills Report, consistently indicate that nearly 50% of Indian graduates are considered unemployable, with poor communication skills and inadequate English proficiency cited as primary deterrents. In Indian higher education, English transcends its historical identity as a colonial legacy; it functions as the de facto *lingua franca* of corporate India and global outsourcing. This article investigates the symbiotic relationship between English language proficiency, the acquisition of soft skills, and the subsequent enhancement of global employability for Indian graduates.

Literature Review

The intersection of language, employability, and soft skills has been extensively documented. Canale and Swain's (1980) framework of Communicative Competence highlighted that knowing a language extends beyond grammar to include sociolinguistic and strategic competencies—elements that form the bedrock of modern soft skills.

In the Indian context, research by scholars like Graddol (2010) in *English Next India* projected English as a crucial economic imperative. Subsequent empirical studies have established a direct correlation between English proficiency and salary premiums in the Indian labor market (Azam et al., 2013). However, critics argue that the Indian education system often treats English as a literary subject rather than a functional skill, leading to "English phobia" among students from vernacular backgrounds, which severely stunts their confidence and soft skill development.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the major dimensions of the academia–industry divide.
- To describe the Role of English Language in Global Employability.
- To analyse the role of English in developing soft skills among higher-education students.
- To examine the relationship between English-language proficiency and graduate employability in India.
- To examine relevant provisions of NEP 2020 and UGC initiatives concerning communication and employability.



- To suggest an industry-oriented framework for English-language education in Indian higher education.
- To explore the institutional measures for improving global employability.

Methodology

The present study follows a descriptive, analytical and conceptual research design based primarily on secondary information. This article employs a qualitative, descriptive research methodology based on a secondary review of existing literature. Data is synthesized from national employment surveys, corporate hiring guidelines, academic journals focusing on English Language Teaching (ELT), and policy frameworks, specifically the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The objective is to conceptualize the pedagogical shifts required to make English language teaching a conduit for employability.

Academia–Industry Divide in India

The academia–industry divide represents the mismatch between what students learn and what employers expect.

1. Curriculum–industry mismatch

Many higher-education curricula traditionally emphasize theoretical knowledge and examinations. Employers, however, increasingly require application-oriented capabilities.

For example, a commerce graduate may know accounting principles but may lack the ability to:

- communicate with clients;
- prepare a professional email;
- explain financial information;
- participate in a meeting;
- present data;
- negotiate with customers.

The problem therefore lies not necessarily in the absence of knowledge but in the inability to **translate knowledge into workplace performance**.

2. Limited practical exposure

Internships, projects, fieldwork and industry visits provide opportunities for students to understand workplace expectations. NEP 2020 explicitly encourages internships with local industry, businesses and other organizations as a means of connecting education with practical learning and improving employability. ([Education Government](#))

The UGC's internship framework similarly describes internships as opportunities for students to experience actual work situations under the supervision of external professionals. ([UGC](#))



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3. Examination-oriented learning

An examination-oriented system may reward memorization more than communication, creativity and problem-solving. A student can obtain high academic marks without receiving sufficient opportunities to demonstrate professional communication.

4. Faculty–industry disconnect

Faculty members may have limited exposure to contemporary workplace practices. Industry professionals, therefore, can contribute through guest lectures, mentoring, curriculum development, internships and assessment.

Role of English Language in Global Employability

1. English as a professional communication tool

English is important in many Indian workplaces because it facilitates communication among employees from different linguistic backgrounds and between Indian and international organizations.

Workplace English includes:

- professional speaking;
- business writing;
- email communication;
- presentations;
- report writing;
- meetings;
- interviews;
- negotiation;
- customer interaction;
- online communication.

2. English and employability interviews

Recruitment processes frequently include interviews, group discussions, presentations and communication assessments.

Candidates must be able to:

- introduce themselves confidently;
- explain their qualifications;
- discuss projects;
- answer behavioural questions;
- describe problems they have solved;
- express opinions;
- participate in group discussions.

Thus, English proficiency can influence not only whether an individual receives an interview but also how effectively they demonstrate their actual competence.



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3. English and professional writing

Professional employment requires writing beyond conventional academic examinations.

Students need to learn:

- CV/resume preparation;
- cover letters;
- official emails;
- project reports;
- executive summaries;
- business proposals;
- minutes of meetings;
- professional social-media profiles.

The ability to write concisely and appropriately is increasingly valuable.

4. English and presentations

Presentation skills are particularly important in:

- corporate employment;
- teaching;
- research;
- management;
- entrepreneurship;
- information technology;
- marketing;
- consultancy.

Language proficiency helps students structure arguments, explain evidence and respond to questions.

English as a Foundation for Soft Skills

English language education can become a platform for developing multiple soft skills.

Table 1: English and associated employability skills

English-learning activity Soft skill developed

Group discussion	Teamwork and leadership
Debate	Critical thinking and argumentation
Presentation	Confidence and public speaking
Role play	Interpersonal skills
Interview simulation	Self-presentation
Report writing	Analytical and professional writing
Case study	Problem-solving
Peer discussion	Listening and collaboration
Negotiation exercise	Persuasion and conflict management
Project work	Teamwork and responsibility



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Thus, English should be taught through **communicative and experiential methods** rather than exclusively through grammar and literature.

English, Digital Transformation and Artificial Intelligence

The emergence of artificial intelligence is changing the nature of workplace communication.

Generative AI can assist with:

- drafting emails;
- preparing reports;
- summarizing documents;
- translating text;
- improving grammar;
- generating presentations;
- supporting research.

However, AI does not eliminate the importance of communication. Instead, it changes the skills required. Graduates must be able to evaluate AI-generated content, formulate appropriate prompts, verify information, communicate with colleagues and exercise professional judgment.

The World Economic Forum reports that technological skills are growing rapidly while human skills such as analytical thinking, resilience, collaboration and creative thinking remain essential. ([World Economic Forum](#))

Therefore, the future model should be:

English + Human Communication + Digital Literacy + AI Literacy + Critical Thinking rather than English versus technology.

NEP 2020 and Employability-Oriented Higher Education

NEP 2020 provides a strong policy foundation for bridging the academia–industry divide.

The policy advocates:

- holistic education;
- multidisciplinary learning;
- communication;
- discussion and debate;
- critical thinking;
- vocational education;
- internships;
- experiential learning;
- technology integration;
- multilingualism;
- life skills.

It specifically states that higher education should develop soft skills such as communication, discussion and debate along with disciplinary specialization. ([Education Government](#))



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NEP 2020 also encourages internships with local industry, businesses and other organizations to expose students to practical learning and enhance employability. (Education Government)

The policy therefore provides an institutional opportunity to reposition English from a conventional subject toward an **integrated employability competency**.

UGC and Employability Skills

UGC initiatives increasingly recognize the importance of graduate attributes and employability.

The UGC's institutional-development guidance recommends incorporating employability skills across disciplines, including communication skills, English skills, digital literacy, career development, entrepreneurship and job readiness. It also identifies critical thinking, creative thinking, analytical thinking, adaptive thinking, social intelligence, cross-cultural competency, decision-making and conflict resolution as important competencies. (UGC)

The UGC's Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes emphasizes a student-centric, multidisciplinary and flexible higher-education structure aligned with NEP 2020. (UGC)

These policy developments create an opportunity to integrate English communication into every discipline.

English as the Gateway to Global Employability

The Currency of the Global Knowledge Economy

Multinational Corporations (MNCs) operating in India particularly in IT, ITES (BPO/KPO), finance, and consulting require employees who can interact with global clients. English serves as the operational currency in these environments. A candidate may possess exceptional coding abilities or financial acumen, but without the ability to articulate ideas, write coherent emails, or participate in client calls, their technical skills remain underutilized.

The Filtering Mechanism in Campus Placements

In the Indian campus placement ecosystem, English proficiency acts as an initial filtering mechanism. Group Discussions (GDs), Just-a-Minute (JAM) sessions, and HR interviews are almost exclusively conducted in English. Recruiters use these interactions to assess a candidate's clarity of thought, assertiveness, and articulation—all of which are inextricably linked to their command over the English language. Consequently, students from elite English-medium urban schools have a distinct advantage over equally intelligent peers from rural or regional-language backgrounds.

English as the Vehicular Language for Soft Skills

Soft skills are rarely taught in isolation; they are acquired and demonstrated through language. The English language serves as the scaffolding for several critical soft skills:

➤ Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication



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Effective communication goes beyond vocabulary; it encompasses tone, pacing, and body language. The pedagogy of spoken English inherently trains students in non-verbal cues (eye contact, posture) and active listening. Mastery of professional English—understanding the difference between formal and informal registers, email etiquette, and presentation skills—translates directly into workplace readiness.

➤ **Interpersonal Skills and Cross-Cultural Competence**

Global employability requires working with diverse, geographically dispersed teams. English provides the linguistic bridge for cross-cultural interactions. Understanding the pragmatics of English—such as idioms, humor, indirectness, and politeness strategies (e.g., using modal verbs like "could" or "would" to soften directives)—equips Indian students with the cultural intelligence required to navigate global workplaces without causing unintended offense.

➤ **Critical Thinking and Problem Solving**

The ability to analyze complex situations, debate alternatives, and propose solutions requires advanced linguistic structuring. When students are trained to structure arguments in English (e.g., using cohesive devices, thesis statements, and supporting evidence), they are simultaneously being trained to organize their thoughts logically. Language and cognition are deeply intertwined; articulating a problem in a second language often forces a more deliberate, analytical cognitive process.

➤ **Confidence and Self-Efficacy**

In the Indian socio-psychological context, fluency in English is heavily equated with intelligence and social status. Conversely, a lack of English proficiency leads to a severe lack of confidence. By providing students with the tools to express themselves effectively in English, higher education institutions inadvertently boost their self-efficacy, empowering them to take initiative, lead teams, and network—quintessential leadership soft skills.

Importance of English in Employment

As we know, English, the language connects people from different regions, cultures and nations. By default, due to the fact that the British ruled most parts of the world and they could conveniently sow the seeds of English language and culture in those countries. Though not intended, the British gave a common language to the world which has helped in sharing any kind of information fast and clear without any translation. Though the British left their colonies a long time back, their efforts and reforms in the field of education are yielding results now.

Role of Communication in English for Employability

Communication means the exchange of information, ideas, feelings and thoughts. The type of communication which is used in the corporate world is business communication. A person who is considered employable only when he gets the necessary



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qualification, experience, interest, learning attitude and expertise in the field where he wants to seek employment.

Effective communication includes the ability to communicate effectively in any language. Academicians and researchers those who are in favour of English for effective communication would say that English is the official language in most of the companies in cities these days. The reality is that the companies consider the candidate's ability or inability to speak fluently in English as one of the major selection criterion. The mere domain knowledge won't guarantee one a good job. The situation in most of the companies has changed from a scene where all employees are isolated and would concentrate on their individual performances.

'Team work for better success' is the mantra followed by most companies. So there is no space for individual glory. Employees are expected to be interactive and communicative with others in the team and outside.

Corporate expectations

As the ability to speak and write in English is considered very important by the recruiters at the time of recruitment, let us discuss the expectations of corporate world in this regard. Companies want people who can basically read and understand written words in the form of instructions, reports, letters, memos, notices and other any form of official documents. The ability to express formal communication in oral as well as in written form is equally considered important by the prospective employers. As one moves higher in the vertical direction in the organisational hierarchy, it becomes naturally necessary for an employee to be good presenter,

Challenges in the Indian Higher Education Ecosystem

Despite the clear demand, Indian higher education struggles to deliver English-driven soft skill training due to several structural issues:

1. **The Vernacular Divide:** Students transitioning from regional medium schools to English medium higher education face immense cognitive load. Instead of learning soft skills, they spend their energy merely decoding the language.
2. **Archaic Pedagogy:** English departments often focus on British literature, rote memorization of grammar rules (prescriptive linguistics), and passing examinations, rather than functional, communicative language teaching (CLT).
3. **Siloed Curriculum:** "Communication Skills" or "Soft Skills" are often relegated to a single, mandatory semester-long course in the first year, ignored by the core engineering or science departments, rather than being integrated across the four-year curriculum.



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4. **Untrained Faculty:** Many English teachers are experts in literature but lack exposure to corporate culture, making it difficult for them to design syllabi relevant to industry demands (e.g., drafting business proposals or conducting mock audits).

Pedagogical Interventions and the Way Forward

To transform English language education from a theoretical discipline into an employability accelerator, Indian higher education must adopt the following strategies:

- **Implementation of NEP 2020 Mandates**

NEP 2020 emphasizes multidisciplinary education and the removal of rigid barriers between arts, sciences, and vocational skills. Institutions should leverage this to create credit-bearing courses that merge English with professional skills (e.g., "Technical Writing for Engineers," "Business Communication for Management").

- **Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)**

Instead of isolating English, higher education should adopt CLIL approaches, where core subject faculty (e.g., a Computer Science professor) collaborate with English faculty to ensure students are learning both the technical content and the required English terminology and presentation skills simultaneously.

- **Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)**

The curriculum must shift from textbook learning to task-based learning. Activities should include simulated workplace scenarios: crisis management role-plays, drafting pitch decks, mock client negotiations, and collaborative problem-solving tasks.

- **Leveraging Technology and AI**

As discussed in contemporary educational discourse, integrating AI-driven communication labs, speech recognition software, and virtual reality (VR) environments can provide vernacular-medium students with a safe, judgment-free space to practice English speaking and presentation skills at their own pace.

Major Findings

The study identifies the following major findings:

1. **English proficiency is an important employability competency**, particularly in sectors involving professional, international and digital communication.
2. **English alone is insufficient.** Employability depends on the interaction of disciplinary knowledge, communication, soft skills, digital capabilities and workplace experience.
3. **Communication skills are closely linked to other soft skills.** Group discussion, presentation and project activities simultaneously develop teamwork, leadership, confidence and critical thinking.



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4. **The academia–industry gap is multidimensional.** It cannot be solved merely by adding an English course to the curriculum.
5. **Experiential learning is essential.** Internships, projects and industry interaction provide contexts in which communication skills become functional.
6. **NEP 2020 provides a supportive policy framework.** Its emphasis on multidisciplinary learning, communication, soft skills, vocational education and internships directly supports employability-oriented higher education. (Education Government)
7. **Industry expectations are changing rapidly.** The WEF's 2025 evidence indicates that human skills remain critical alongside technology skills. (World Economic Forum)
8. **English-language interventions can produce measurable employment benefits.** Recent experimental evidence from urban India suggests that English-focused training can improve employability and estimated wages. (ScienceDirect)
9. **Equity must remain central.** English should be provided as an additional capability rather than used to stigmatize students educated through Indian languages.
10. **AI increases rather than eliminates the need for communication competence.** Graduates must combine AI literacy with human communication, critical thinking and judgment.

Suggestions and Policy Recommendations

1. Establish English-for-Employability Centres

Every higher-education institution should establish a dedicated centre or cell for English communication and employability.

2. Integrate English across disciplines

English should not remain confined to English departments. Economics, Commerce, Science, Humanities, Management and technical disciplines should include discipline-specific communication.

3. Introduce mandatory internships

Internships should be embedded within undergraduate programmes and assessed as part of academic credit.

4. Develop industry-linked curricula

Industry representatives should participate in curriculum design and periodic revision.

5. Adopt competency-based English assessment

Assessment should focus on actual communicative performance rather than grammar alone.

6. Establish language laboratories

Colleges should provide students with opportunities for listening, pronunciation, speaking and presentation practice.

7. Provide additional support for disadvantaged learners

Students from rural and regional-language backgrounds should receive bridge courses, mentoring and additional practice without stigmatization.



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8. Strengthen faculty development

Teachers should receive continuous professional development in communicative pedagogy, technology and workplace English.

9. Use alumni networks

Successful alumni can provide mentoring, mock interviews and workplace exposure.

10. Establish employability portfolios

Every student should graduate with a portfolio containing:

- CV;
- professional email samples;
- presentations;
- project reports;
- internship certificate;
- digital profile;
- evidence of communication competencies.

11. Develop university–industry communication labs

Industry and universities can jointly create simulated workplaces where students practise meetings, interviews, presentations and customer interactions.

12. Introduce international benchmarks

Institutions may use CEFR-aligned descriptors where appropriate to provide clearer descriptions of language competencies. British Council work in India has highlighted the potential value of CEFR for clearer employability-related language standards. (British Council)

Conclusion

In the context of Indian higher education, the English language can no longer be viewed merely as an academic subject or a symbol of colonial heritage; it is a vital economic lifeline. It is the primary conduit through which soft skills are understood, practiced, and projected. If India is to truly harness its demographic dividend and transition from a back-office outsourcing hub to a global leader in innovation and knowledge services, it must democratize high-quality English language education. By shifting the pedagogical focus from literary appreciation to functional communicative competence, and by embedding language training within the core professional curriculum, Indian higher education can bridge the academia-industry divide and produce globally ready graduates.

The academia industry divide is one of the central challenges facing Indian higher education. The problem cannot be reduced to unemployment or lack of technical education. It is fundamentally a question of whether graduates can transform academic knowledge into workplace performance. English language proficiency can play a significant role in this transformation. It provides students with a medium through which they can communicate knowledge, participate in professional networks, present ideas, collaborate with teams and engage with global organizations. More importantly, when English is taught through debates, presentations, projects, interviews, group discussions and workplace simulations, it



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becomes a vehicle for developing broader soft skills. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that contemporary employers increasingly value a combination of technical and human capabilities. The World Economic Forum identifies analytical thinking, resilience, leadership, creative thinking, technological literacy, empathy and active listening among major core skills. Indian employability evidence similarly highlights the continuing importance of communication, critical thinking and learning agility.

NEP 2020 provides a strong policy foundation for this transformation by emphasizing holistic education, communication, multidisciplinary learning, vocational education, internships and employability. UGC initiatives reinforce the importance of communication and employability-oriented graduate attributes.

However, English should not become an instrument of social exclusion. India's linguistic diversity must be respected, and English should be developed as an additional capability that expands opportunity. The objective should therefore **be multilingual competence with global communication ability**. The future of Indian higher education lies in moving from a model of **degree acquisition to competency development**, from **classroom learning to experiential learning**, and from **institution-centred education to collaborative university-industry ecosystems**.

A successful employability strategy can therefore be summarized as:

Disciplinary Knowledge + English Communication + Soft Skills + Digital/AI Literacy + Industry Exposure + Continuous Learning = Global Employability.

If universities, industry, government and students work together to implement this integrated model, English-language education can become a powerful bridge between India's higher-education system and the evolving requirements of the global labour market.

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