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GRADE 13 COMMERCE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT A GOVERNMENT SCHOOL IN NINTAVUR EDUCATIONAL DIVISION

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Abstract

This study aims to comprehensively understand Grade 13 Commerce students' perceptions of English language learning at a government school in the Nintavur Educational Division. The research identifies challenges students face, evaluates the effectiveness of learning resources and teaching aids, and assesses overall learning experiences and teachers' attitudes. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrated quantitative and qualitative data collection, involving 74 students, two English teachers, and educational stakeholders, including the Principal and In-Service Advisor (ISA). Data were gathered through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations. Quantitative analysis revealed students' fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and concerns about pronunciation as significant barriers to learning English. The effectiveness of learning resources was met with mixed opinions, indicating uncertainty about their impact. The study also highlighted dissatisfaction with current teaching methods, with a noted disconnect between teaching practices and students' needs. Chi-Square analysis showed no significant gender differences in perceptions of learning experiences or teachers' attitudes. Qualitative insights from interviews and observations suggested gaps in textbooks and a need for more interactive and practical teaching approaches. The study concludes that addressing emotional barriers, improving teaching resources, and enhancing teacher training are critical for advancing English language education. A multifaceted approach, incorporating better pedagogical strategies, relevant resources, and supportive learning environments, is essential for overcoming the identified challenges and improving students' English language proficiency.

Keywords: commerce students' perceptions, English speaking ability, ESL, government school

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Introduction

Effective English language skills are crucial for academic and professional success, yet Grade 13 Commerce students at a government school in the Nintavur Educational Division face significant challenges in acquiring these skills. This study aims to identify and understand the difficulties these students encounter in learning English, including emotional, social, and linguistic barriers. By evaluating the effectiveness of existing resources and teaching methods, and assessing students' perceptions of their learning experiences and teachers' attitudes, this research seeks to provide insights into improving English language education. The mixed-methods approach incorporates quantitative and qualitative data, including surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, to offer a comprehensive view of the challenges and potential solutions for enhancing English proficiency among students.

Literature

Importance of English Proficiency in Education

The literature underscores the crucial role of English proficiency in educational contexts, impacting both teaching efficacy and student success across academic and professional domains. In a globalized world dominated by digital media and information communication technologies (ICT), English proficiency is essential for navigating and engaging with these platforms effectively (Wickremaratne et al., 2008). This proficiency is particularly important for teachers, as their limited English skills can adversely affect ESL learners, emphasizing the necessity for robust language training in teacher education programs (Nel et al., 2010).

Students who graduate with inadequate English proficiency often need remedial courses before they can pursue tertiary education, highlighting the need for a solid foundation in English during earlier educational stages (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012). This need extends to higher education, where English proficiency is vital for postgraduate students to succeed in academic pursuits and maintain international trade contacts (Vency et al., 2013).

Effective English language teachers are characterized not only by their language proficiency but also by their educational insight, organizational abilities, communication skills, and social and emotional competencies (Taqi et al., 2014). Developing oral English proficiency is particularly important for early literacy development, serving as a stepping stone for further literacy instruction and education in English (Owodally, 2014).

For humanitarian migrants in Australia, proficiency in oral English significantly aids their social integration, education, employment opportunities, and overall self-sufficiency (Blake et al., 2019). Assessing English proficiency through standardized tests, such as the English Literacy Skills Assessment (ELSA), can predict academic performance, with a particular emphasis on non-technical vocabulary (Opperman, 2020). Moreover, access to quality rehabilitation services for individuals with limited English proficiency highlights the broader importance of language skills in accessing essential services (Mirza et al., 2021).

The importance of a strong language base is also critical for specialized groups, such as hearing-impaired students, who benefit significantly from developing a "first language" to support

their learning (Luetke-Stahlman, 1986). The impact of teachers' limited English proficiency on ESL learners reiterates the critical role of language training in teacher education programs (Nel et al., 2010). In Oman, many students with low English proficiency require remedial courses before tertiary study, underscoring the need for effective language education (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012).

Personal factors also play a significant role in English language learning and academic achievement among ESL students, suggesting the integration of these factors into classroom teaching and university support systems (Phakiti et al., 2013). Addressing the challenges faced by college English programs involves providing more options for skill targets and enhancing teaching efficiency (Geng, 2016). Institutions, such as the University of South Australia, emphasize the importance of reviewing and improving English language provision in universities (Murray et al., 2016).

Successful language learning strategies, particularly among student interpreters in Korea, highlight the importance of effective learning techniques (Lee et al., 2016). Program evaluation in English language teacher education is crucial for ensuring the effectiveness of EFL teacher training (Agudo, 2017). Academic writing proficiency among bilingual deaf and hard-of-hearing students further underscores the significance of academic English proficiency for overall reading skills (Scott et al., 2017). Additionally, willingness to communicate in English among diverse language learners, facilitated by electronic text-based chat, demonstrates the role of English as a virtual lingua franca in EFL settings (Freiermuth et al., 2018).

Challenges in English Language Acquisition

Learning to speak a second language is challenging because it requires both linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. According to Carter and McCarthy (1995), learners need to master grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary (linguistic competence) and understand when, why, and how to use language appropriately (sociolinguistic competence). Speaking is the most crucial yet challenging language skill, involving an interactive process of meaning construction through producing, receiving, and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Nunan (1991) emphasizes that mastering speaking skills is essential, as success in a second language is measured by the ability to carry out a conversation. However, achieving proficiency in classroom conditions is difficult due to limited speaking opportunities compared to natural communication (Nation & Newton, 2009).

To address this, optimizing classroom time for speaking practice is crucial. Richards & Rodgers (2001) suggest using speaking tasks as core instructional units to enhance speaking abilities. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers advantages such as boosting confidence, promoting meaningful interaction, and encouraging purposeful language use (Willis, 1996). Traditional lecturing methods demotivate students, whereas teaching language through context and meaning is more effective (Ellis, 2003). Task-based learning, involving natural language use in pairs or groups, provides rich exposure to language and active involvement in the learning process (Nunan, 2004).

Karunaratne (2003) highlights that textbooks primarily focus on writing and reading skills, crucial for the GCE O/L examination, while teachers must also emphasize listening and oral skills (National Institute of Education, 2001). When teachers prioritize completing the textbook over the

syllabus, students miss out on listening and speaking opportunities. The main goal of school English courses is exam success, often leading to rushed lessons that neglect linguistic and communicative skill development. The frequent use of the mother tongue in classrooms further hinders students' English-speaking practice. This issue is exacerbated by teachers' lack of proficiency and experience, necessitating substantial re-skilling efforts (Raheem, 2004). Gajadeera (2002) notes that a shortage of competent teachers contributes to English Language Teaching (ELT) failures.

Speaking anxiety is a significant issue for ESL learners. Afrianto Daud et al. (2019) describe it as the fear of speaking publicly due to low confidence in English skills, fear, and shyness. Horwitz et al. (1986) assert that this anxiety makes speaking in class particularly challenging. Burnkart (1998) identifies three critical knowledge areas for speaking: mechanics (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary), functions (transaction and interaction), and sociocultural norms (turn-taking, speech rates, participant roles). Heriansyah (2012) found that students often remain silent due to fear of mistakes, shyness, and poor vocabulary. Anxiety stems from social reactions, linguistic challenges, and personal issues (Afrianto Daud et al., 2019). Negative feedback, fear of mistakes, and discomfort in speaking publicly are key factors (Wahyudi et al., 2015).

Students often feel pressure and go blank during speaking activities, leading to negative feedback from peers. This results in some students being mocked for their mistakes, further discouraging them. Personal factors also contribute to speaking difficulties, such as interactions with parents, friends, and teachers. According to Jones (2004), classrooms present a dilemma: they are places for learning and practice, but also environments where students are watched and judged. Negative feedback, such as being blamed or laughed at, can demoralize students, while positive feedback encourages them. Taiqin (1995) notes that students subjected to harsh criticism are often afraid of making mistakes and lack confidence. Brown (2001) identifies clustering, reduced forms, performance variables, and colloquial language as factors making speaking challenging.

Ur (1996) outlines four factors that make speaking difficult for second language learners. First, inhibition: speaking requires real-time exposure, leading to fear of mistakes and criticism. Second, having nothing to say: students often lack motivation or ideas. Third, mother-tongue use: students tend to revert to their native language for ease and comfort. Fourth, low or uneven participation: only one person can speak at a time, leading to limited speaking opportunities and dominance by some students.

Heriansyah (2012) found that common issues include lack of vocabulary, low confidence, and difficulty in expressing thoughts. These problems are categorized into linguistic (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) and non-linguistic (e.g., confidence, practice) issues. Overall, addressing both types of problems is essential for improving students' speaking skills in a second language.

Urrutia and Vega (2010) note that shyness and fear of humiliation negatively impact speaking skills. Souriyavongsa et al. (2013) argue that poorly trained teachers and a lack of foundational English background hinder students. Additionally, students' fear of mistakes, shyness, and an inappropriate curriculum contribute to low motivation and ineffective learning strategies.

Samaranayake (2016) highlights that teacher-student interactions often occur in the native language, limiting English exposure. Pedagogical constraints and a lack of communicative activities further impede language learning. Ferrari and Palladino (2007) indicate that excessive use of the mother tongue and insufficient interaction in English also obstruct second language acquisition.

Cheng et al. (2016) emphasize the significant impact of family involvement and motivation on students' English performance. Many students lack motivation as English is not essential outside the classroom. The educational background of family members also influences students, with many locals discontinuing their studies early.

Byrne (1981) suggests that large class sizes and syllabi that neglect spoken language impede oral skills development. Richards and Rodgers (2001) explain that traditional methods prioritize reading and writing over speaking and listening. Clifford (1987) asserts that despite its importance, speaking is often overlooked due to emphasis on grammar and challenging teacher-student ratios.

Teachers agreed with the identified factors inhibiting students' English-speaking competency. They moderately agreed that technical issues, such as sentence organization and pronunciation, contribute to passiveness. They strongly agreed that psychological factors, including nervousness, lack of confidence, and fear of mistakes, are significant barriers. Addressing these factors in language learning activities can help improve students' speaking skills (Suryani, Suarnajaya, & Pratiwi, 2020).

Students often struggle with English grammar, essential for forming correct sentences. This struggle leads to embarrassment and reluctance to speak. Afrianto Daud et al. (2019) mention that fear of grammatical errors is a significant barrier to speaking English. Grammar remains a critical issue for learners, affecting their confidence and perceived competence. Samaranayake (2016) states that rural students lack sufficient language input, affecting their oral proficiency. Rasheedha Banu and Nishanthi (2017) also point out that rural students have particularly low proficiency due to socioeconomic factors. They receive English input only at school, unlike urban students who have additional support from private tutors and educated parents.

Factors Impact Students' ESL Learning.

Various studies shed light on the multifaceted factors impacting ESL learning. Lin and Hwang (2018) emphasize the importance of classroom engagement and pre-class preparation, noting their positive correlation with improved oral performance. Himmatova (2023) identifies psychological factors like motivation, inherent language abilities, and cultural context as crucial influencers, highlighting the need for comprehensive approaches to enhance learning outcomes.

Alyousif and Alsuhaibani (2021) pinpoint demotivating factors among Saudi high school EFL students, including unengaging topics and ineffective teaching methods. They advocate for integrating engaging content and improved teaching strategies to boost motivation and learning outcomes. Lou and Noels (2019) discuss the association between mindsets and motivational factors, underscoring their role in guiding learners' responses.

Chou (2018) uncovers high speaking anxiety among university students in partial English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts, emphasizing the importance of speaking strategies to address communication breakdowns. Suryani, Suarnajaya, and Pratiwi (2020) identify inhibiting factors in senior high school students' English speaking, stressing the need to address affective and cognitive barriers for improved competency.

Li (2022) highlights the significance of classroom enjoyment and learner engagement in enhancing L2 outcomes, while Liu (2023) emphasizes the role of a positive school environment in reducing burnout among Chinese EFL learners. Yu, Wang, and Liu (2022) discuss the inverse relationship between motivation and burnout, underscoring the moderating influence of Emotion Regulation Strategies (ERS).

Loewen and Sato (2018) explore interaction's importance in second language acquisition (SLA), emphasizing its core constructs and various influencing factors. Finally, Lai, Hu, and Lyu (2017) investigate learners' out-of-class language learning experiences with technology, recognizing the impact of attitudes, support, and proficiency levels on these experiences.

Rationale for the Study

The lack of English language proficiency among students in the Nintavur Educational Division is a significant concern for educators and policymakers. Despite over a decade of English education, many students struggle to speak the language effectively. This study seeks to understand why students, who excel in other subjects, fail to achieve proficiency in English after 13 years of study. The Presidential Task Force noted that many students cannot use English at an acceptable level despite extensive learning (NEC, 1997).

Students often supplement their school education with private English tuition, yet their speaking skills remain inadequate. This persistent issue highlights the need for a thorough investigation into potential causes, including curriculum deficiencies, teaching methods, socio-economic backgrounds, and rural settings. This study focuses on Grade 13 Commerce students in Nintavur, who, despite high academic achievements in other areas, lack English proficiency.

Notably, students from Nintavur have secured top ranks in national exams and gained admission to prestigious universities. However, their academic performance at the university level is hindered by poor English communication skills. Past students have cited language barriers as a major obstacle in their higher education and professional success.

The local community's growing recognition of English's importance has led to a shift in parental attitudes. Parents now prioritize English speaking proficiency over grades. Previous studies have largely focused on urban areas, neglecting rural contexts like Nintavur. This study aims to fill this gap, considering the unique socio-economic challenges and educational backgrounds of students in this region. Comprehensive research in this area is crucial to developing effective strategies for improving English speaking skills among these students.

Aim and Objectives

To comprehensively identify and understand Grade 13 Commerce students' perceptions of English language learning at a government school in the Nintavur Educational Division. This study focuses on the challenges students encounter in learning English, evaluates the effectiveness and appropriateness of English language learning resources and teaching aids, and assesses the overall learning experiences and teachers' attitudes towards learning.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate the Grade 13 Commerce students' perceptions of English language learning at a government school in the Nintavur Educational Division. The methodology integrated both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to align with the study's objectives.

The study involved Grade 13 Commerce students at a Government School in the Nintavur Educational Division. The sample consisted of 74 (boys n=54, Girls n=20) students, aged 17-18, who had been studying English as a second language since Grade 3. Additionally, the study included two current English teachers, recent English teachers, the school's English Language Coordinator, the Principal, the In-Service Advisor (ISA), and the Assistant Director of Education (ADE).

A structured questionnaire was developed to gather quantitative data on various aspects related to the challenges faced by students in learning English and the effectiveness of the learning environment, teaching practices, resources, teaching aids, and teacher's attitude. The questionnaire included items related to:

- Challenges encountered by students in learning English
- Evaluation of Effectiveness and appropriateness of English language learning resources and teaching aids.
- Perception of the overall learning experience and Perception of teacher's attitude towards students' learning

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students, teachers, the English Language Coordinator, the Principal, the ISA, and the ADE to gain in-depth qualitative insights into the identified challenges and the effectiveness of teaching practices, resources, and teaching aids. The interviews allowed participants to express their experiences, opinions, and suggestions regarding English language learning.

Focus Group Discussions were organized with the Grade 13 Commerce students to facilitate interactive discussions on their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in learning English. FGDs provided a platform for students to share their views collectively, allowing for a deeper exploration of the identified issues.

Observations were conducted to assess the learning environment, teaching practices, and the utilization of resources and teaching aids during English language classes. The observations

focused on classroom dynamics, student-teacher interactions, and the effectiveness of instructional methods.

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using statistical methods, including descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, to quantify the perceived challenges and effectiveness of various aspects related to English language learning. Qualitative data from interviews, FGDs, and classroom observations were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to identify patterns, themes, and insights regarding the challenges encountered by students and the effectiveness of the learning environment, teaching practices, resources, teaching aids, and teacher's attitude.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines and regulations concerning research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were maintained throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

The Challenges Students Face While Learning English.

This study explored the challenges encountered by Grade 13 Commerce students at a Government School in the Nintavur Educational Division while learning English. The investigation delved into various aspects, including emotional and psychological barriers, confidence levels, fears of making mistakes, and pronunciation concerns. The Table 1 displays descriptive statistics representing the students' responses to different statements reflecting their experiences and perceptions regarding learning English. The mean values and standard deviations offer insights into the degree of difficulty or concern associated with each challenge.

Table 1
The Challenges Students Face While Learning English

	N	Mean	SD	Kurtosis	
				Statistics	Std. Error
I am afraid of making mistakes while speaking.	74	3.7703	1.39025	-.141	.552
I am not confident when I speak in English.	74	3.0135	1.28738	-1.099	.552
I am worried when I have to communicate with others in English.	74	3.4324	1.43423	-1.214	.552
I get nervous when I listen and respond to someone in English.	74	3.4595	1.30530	-.844	.552
As I am not sure of my pronunciation, I avoid initiating a conversation in English.	74	2.9054	1.40614	-1.367	.552
My friends and neighbours often ridicule me when I initiate conversations in English.	74	2.8784	1.26006	-.986	.552
I talk to myself in English whenever there is nobody around to talk to.	74	3.2973	1.45931	-1.334	.552
I talk to my parents, siblings and relatives in English.	74	3.3243	1.15993	-.568	.552
I feel enticed to emulate someone, may be a news reader or a leaned politician or a celebrity for an	74	3.9865	1.15264	1.062	.552

example, whose English language proficiency is really inspiring.					
I get criticized and receive scathing attack when I talk to someone in English in a gathering or public.	74	3.1216	1.36445	-1.129	.552
Valid N (listwise)	74				

According to the Table 1, the findings indicate that a significant number of students expressed a fear of making mistakes while speaking English (Mean = 3.77, SD = 1.39). This fear could potentially hinder their willingness to engage in English communication. Similarly, a considerable portion of students reported a lack of confidence when speaking in English (Mean = 3.01, SD = 1.29), indicating a notable challenge in feeling assured and comfortable while using the language.

Moreover, many students admitted to feeling worried when having to communicate with others in English (Mean = 3.43, SD = 1.43), and they experienced nervousness when listening and responding to someone in English (Mean = 3.46, SD = 1.31). These emotional responses suggest that students may face considerable stress and anxiety during English language interactions.

Another notable challenge highlighted in the data is the students' uncertainty about their pronunciation, leading them to avoid initiating conversations in English (Mean = 2.91, SD = 1.41). Furthermore, some students reported being ridiculed by friends and neighbors when attempting to converse in English (Mean = 2.88, SD = 1.26), indicating potential social barriers and negative peer experiences. Despite these challenges, many students indicated efforts to improve their English proficiency. A significant number reported engaging in self-talk in English when alone (Mean = 3.30, SD = 1.46) and conversing with family members in English (Mean = 3.32, SD = 1.16), demonstrating proactive approaches to language practice and skill development.

Additionally, students expressed an inclination to emulate individuals with impressive English language proficiency, such as news readers, learned politicians, or celebrities (Mean = 3.99, SD = 1.15), indicating the influence of role models in shaping their language learning aspirations. However, some students reported facing criticism and harsh judgment when speaking English in public or group settings (Mean = 3.12, SD = 1.36). This negative feedback could potentially impact students' confidence and willingness to engage in English communication in social contexts.

In summary, the findings from Table 1 shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by Grade 13 Commerce students in learning English, encompassing emotional, social, and linguistic aspects. These insights provide valuable groundwork for understanding students' experiences and formulating strategies to address their needs effectively.

The Effectiveness of English Language Learning Resources and Teaching Aids

The effectiveness and appropriateness of English language learning resources and teaching aids were evaluated using descriptive statistics. Students' opinions on the quality and utility of learning materials, including textbooks and digital tools, were analyzed to determine how well these resources meet their learning needs and align with curriculum objectives from their perspective. Tables 2, and 3 present the results on the effectiveness and appropriateness of these resources.

Table 2
Effectiveness Of English Language Learning Resources

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Disagree	5	6.8
	Not sure	39	52.7
	Agree	30	40.5
	Total	74	100.0

According to the Table 2, 6.8% of respondents find English language learning resources ineffective, while 52.7% are unsure about their effectiveness. A significant 40.5% agree that the resources are effective. This indicates that although a substantial portion of respondents sees the resources as beneficial, over half are uncertain, suggesting a need for clearer evaluation and communication of their value. The small percentage of disagreement highlights that only a few view the resources as ineffective, but the high level of uncertainty points to areas for potential improvement in how these resources are perceived and utilized. The Chi-square statistics were used to determine if the distribution of responses varied by gender, as shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3
Effectiveness of English Language Teaching

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Strongly disagree	14	18.9
	Disagree	60	81.1
	Total	74	100.0

The table 3 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of responses regarding the effectiveness of English language teaching. Out of 74 respondents, 14 (18.9%) strongly disagreed that the English language teaching was effective, while the majority, 60 respondents (81.1%), disagreed. This indicates that a significant proportion of respondents did not find the English language teaching to be effective. All respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed, with no neutral or positive responses, reflecting a general dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the teaching methods.

Learning Experience and Perception of Teacher's Attitude towards Students' Learning

The Chi-Square Test of Independence is used to investigate the relationship between gender and categorical perceptions of learning experiences and teacher attitudes. This analysis focuses on aspects such as the classroom environment, teaching methods, and engagement, aiming to understand how teacher support and behavior influence students' motivation, confidence, and overall learning outcomes. Table 4, and 5 present the Chi-Square Test of Independence of students' learning experiences by gender.

Table 4
Crosstab Of Students' Learning Experiences by Gender

			Students' Learning Experiences			Total
			Disagree	Not sure	Agree	
Gender	Female	Count	2	11	7	20
		Expected Count	2.4	13.0	4.6	20.0
	Male	Count	7	37	10	54
		Expected Count	6.6	35.0	12.4	54.0
Total		Count	9	48	17	74
		Expected Count	9.0	48.0	17.0	74.0

The Chi-Square Test of Independence examined whether there is a relationship between gender and students' perceptions of their learning experiences. Table 4 presents the crosstabulation of students' learning experiences categorized as Disagree, Not Sure, and Agree, across genders. For females, the observed counts were 2 who disagreed, 11 who were unsure, and 7 who agreed. For males, there were 7 who disagreed, 37 who were unsure, and 10 who agreed. The expected counts closely align with the observed counts, suggesting a similar distribution of responses between genders.

Table 5
Chi-Square Tests of Students' Learning Experiences by Gender

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.242 ^a	2	.326
Likelihood Ratio	2.119	2	.347
Linear-by-Linear Association	1.603	1	.206
N of Valid Cases	74		

Table 5 shows the Chi-Square test results, with a Pearson Chi-Square value of 2.242 and an asymptotic significance (p-value) of 0.326. This p-value exceeds the common alpha level of 0.05, indicating that there is no statistically significant relationship between gender and students' learning experiences. Consequently, the results suggest that students' perceptions of their learning experiences are not significantly influenced by gender in this sample. The Chi-Square Test of Independence analyzed whether there is a significant relationship between gender and students' perceptions of teachers' attitudes towards learning, as shown in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6
Crosstab of Teachers' Attitudes Towards Learning by Gender

			Students' Perception on Teacher's Attitude towards Students' Learning			Total
			Disagree	Not sure	Agree	
Gender	Female	Count	3	14	3	20
		Expected Count	2.2	14.1	3.8	20.0
	Male	Count	5	38	11	54

	Expected Count	5.8	37.9	10.2	54.0
Total	Count	8	52	14	74
	Expected Count	8.0	52.0	14.0	74.0

Table 6 displays the crosstabulation of students' perceptions of teachers' attitudes, divided into Disagree, Not Sure, and Agree categories, by gender. For females, the observed counts were 3 who disagreed, 14 who were unsure, and 3 who agreed. For males, there were 5 who disagreed, 38 who were unsure, and 11 who agreed. The expected counts are close to the observed counts for both genders, indicating a balanced distribution.

Table 7
Chi-Square Tests of Teachers' Attitudes Towards Learning by Gender

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.668 ^a	2	.716
Likelihood Ratio	.650	2	.723
Linear-by-Linear Association	.611	1	.434
N of Valid Cases	74		

Table 7 provides the results of the Chi-Square test, with a Pearson Chi-Square value of 0.668 and an asymptotic significance (p-value) of 0.716. This p-value is significantly higher than the standard alpha level of 0.05, suggesting that there is no statistically significant relationship between gender and students' perceptions of teachers' attitudes towards learning. Therefore, the findings indicate that gender does not significantly affect how students perceive their teachers' attitudes.

Insights from Interviews with English Teachers on Improving Students' English Language Skills

Interviews with two English teachers currently teaching Grade 13 Commerce classes revealed insights into challenges faced by students learning English. Both teachers highlighted significant issues with existing textbooks, which predominantly focus on reading and writing skills, neglecting speaking and listening. They noted that the lack of emphasis on speaking skills, due to the GCE O/L examination's focus, leads to insufficient practice and poor speaking ability among students.

Teacher One criticized the textbooks for not engaging students and suggested incorporating more real-life dialogues and interactive activities. They emphasized the importance of motivation and a supportive classroom environment to build students' confidence. Teacher Two echoed these concerns, pointing out that current textbooks fail to motivate students and that grammar-focused lessons are ineffective for improving speaking skills. They recommended using visual aids and creating a supportive atmosphere to enhance language learning.

Both teachers agreed that integrating speaking components into the examination and improving textbook content are crucial for developing students' English proficiency. They stressed

the need for better educational policies and teacher involvement in textbook design to address these issues effectively.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with 42 students, including a mix of high-performing, average, and weaker students, to explore their challenges and suggestions related to learning English. The discussion, guided by both closed and open-ended questions, revealed that only a few students engaged with English-language media like BBC's Hard Talk and TV shows such as "Friends." Most participants had limited exposure to English, indicating a gap in language immersion and practice. Many students expressed a lack of interest in English, primarily focusing on core subjects required for university admission.

Students reported various barriers to improving their English, including fear, nervousness, shyness, and grammar issues. Despite some students' desire to improve their English for future careers and their exposure to supportive home environments, many struggled with confidence and practical usage. The discussion highlighted the need for more engaging English-language resources, consistent practice opportunities, and a supportive learning environment. Participants suggested increasing English conversations, creating conducive environments for speaking, and designing a more relevant and engaging syllabus.

Classroom Observations

Two Grade 13 English lessons were observed to assess teaching practices and student engagement.

Observation 01: In Grade 13 Commerce-A, the teacher, with 25 years of experience, conducted a lesson using the 3Ps strategy (Presentation, Practice, Production). The lesson focused heavily on grammar, covering various question types, which consumed more than half of the lesson time. The Practice stage involved an information gap activity aimed at increasing student participation. Despite high student engagement, there was limited student talk time and unclear instructions, leading to confusion. The traditional classroom setup and teacher's limited mobility impacted rapport and interaction. The lesson's focus on grammar rather than practical speaking activities limited its effectiveness in improving spoken English.

Observation 02: In Grade 13 Commerce-B, the lesson centered on group activities where students described pictures. The teacher, with 17 years of experience, facilitated group work effectively, moving around the classroom and providing support. While students were encouraged and corrected through peer feedback, many were shy and spoke in their mother tongue. The teacher's clear instructions and effective use of group activities were strengths, though addressing students' basic problems before the activity could have enhanced understanding. The teacher maintained good rapport and provided constructive feedback, but special attention is needed for students with low English proficiency.

Overall, both observations highlight the need for balancing grammar instruction with practical speaking practice and improving student participation and teacher-student interaction.

Interviews on English Language Learning Challenges

An interview with the school principal revealed several key issues affecting English language learning. The principal criticized the complexity of English textbooks, noting that they are often too advanced for students from underprivileged backgrounds. He suggested that textbooks should include more practical dialogues and simpler content relevant to students' everyday lives. Despite the introduction of "English Day" to encourage speaking, the principal noted a lack of enthusiasm from teachers and pointed out that many teachers do not speak English at home, impacting their effectiveness.

The principal also highlighted insufficient resources and teacher commitment issues, with some teachers not attending professional development opportunities. Parents and students also expressed dissatisfaction with sporadic syllabus coverage and difficulties in understanding lessons.

In a follow-up interview with the In-Service Advisor (ISA), it was noted that textbooks from grades three to eleven often lack continuity and practical relevance. Teachers tend to translate texts into the students' mother tongue rather than using engaging methods like role-plays. The ISA recommended improvements such as better-designed textbooks, enhanced teacher training, and increased use of audio-visual materials to support language learning. The ISA also pointed out that both teachers and students often fail to engage adequately with English outside the classroom, further hindering language acquisition.

Discussion

The analysis of the challenges faced by Grade 13 Commerce students in learning English reveals a complex interplay of emotional, social, and linguistic factors that significantly impact their language acquisition process. The data highlights that students experience a range of difficulties, from emotional barriers such as fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence to practical concerns about pronunciation and social ridicule. These challenges reflect broader issues in language learning, including insufficient exposure to English, limited engagement with practical speaking activities, and ineffective teaching methods.

The fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence, as indicated by the high mean values in the survey, suggest that students are hesitant to participate in English communication due to apprehensions about their proficiency. This fear is compounded by social factors, such as ridicule from peers and uncertainty about pronunciation, which further discourages students from practicing English. These findings are consistent with existing literature on language learning, which emphasizes the role of emotional and social factors in shaping students' language acquisition experiences (Horwitz, 2001; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991).

In terms of learning resources, the survey results indicate a notable level of uncertainty about the effectiveness of English language materials. While a portion of students view the resources as effective, a larger segment remains unsure, suggesting that the current resources may not fully address students' learning needs or align with their expectations. This finding underscores the importance of evaluating and refining educational materials to enhance their relevance and utility for students.

The effectiveness of English language teaching methods also emerged as a significant concern. The majority of students expressed dissatisfaction with the current teaching practices, highlighting a disconnect between teaching methods and students' learning needs. This dissatisfaction points to a need for pedagogical improvements, including a greater focus on interactive and communicative approaches that foster practical language skills.

The Chi-Square analysis reveals no significant gender differences in students' perceptions of their learning experiences and teachers' attitudes. This suggests that the challenges and perceptions related to English language learning are generally consistent across genders, indicating that interventions should be designed to address the needs of all students rather than targeting specific gender groups.

Interviews with English teachers and observations of classroom practices further illuminate the issues at hand. Teachers identified gaps in current textbooks and instructional approaches, particularly the lack of emphasis on speaking and listening skills. The observations highlighted that while some teaching practices were effective, there is a need for a more balanced approach that incorporates both grammar instruction and practical language use. The suggestions from teachers, such as integrating more real-life dialogues and interactive activities, align with best practices in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The focus group discussion and interviews with the school principal and In-Service Advisor reinforce the need for improved resources and teaching methods. The principal's critique of textbook complexity and the ISA's recommendations for better-designed materials and enhanced teacher training are crucial for addressing the identified challenges. The emphasis on creating engaging and practical learning environments, as well as increasing teacher commitment and professional development, is essential for fostering effective language learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights several key challenges faced by Grade 13 Commerce students in learning English, including emotional barriers, social pressures, and inadequacies in teaching resources and methods. The findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to improve English language education, encompassing both pedagogical strategies and resource development.

To enhance students' English language skills, it is crucial to address the emotional and psychological barriers by creating a supportive and encouraging learning environment. Teachers should focus on building students' confidence and reducing their fear of making mistakes through interactive and communicative teaching methods. Additionally, revising and improving English language resources to include practical speaking and listening components, as well as aligning them with students' needs, is essential.

Professional development for teachers should be prioritized to ensure effective implementation of innovative teaching strategies and to address the gaps identified in the current practices. Engaging students with relevant and motivating materials, increasing their exposure to English, and fostering a positive attitude towards language learning are pivotal steps toward achieving better language proficiency outcomes.

Overall, a comprehensive approach that integrates improved teaching methods, better resources, and supportive learning environments is necessary to overcome the challenges identified in this study and to enhance the English language learning experience for Grade 13 Commerce students.

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