

## Challenges in Developing Communicative Competence among the Indian Chess Players (ESP).

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### ABSTRACT

In this globalised world, the English language plays an essential role in helping exchange ideas among different people regardless of their geographical areas with the help of information and communication technologies. English has become a link language in today's world and is considered the most widely spoken language. In the field of Sports, the English language has an indispensable role to play. The stakeholders of different Games and Sports in various countries and states conduct a huge number of competitions every now and then to promote their respective games at multiple levels, which include district, state, national, and international levels, comprising the world championship, Asian Games, Commonwealth Games and Olympic Games. As different people from diverse backgrounds participate in these events, a common language for communication among the executives, officials, coaches, and players is needed, and here English becomes the lingua franca. The article deals with the competence level among national and international chess players. It addresses the linguistic issues that the chess players face inside and outside the tournament halls, or while taking personal coaching from reputed coaches in the country. It also reflects how the players learn and acquire the language depending on their environments. The study shows that those who belong to places with English language exposure have higher competence levels. According to Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory, one acquires a language when a person is in an environment where he gets the exposure. Similarly, players who have English exposure have higher competence levels than those who haven't had the opportunity. The present study highlights the great need for a platform where players can learn and acquire the language and develop

specific strategies to teach English to sports players, which will further help them advance their careers.

**Keywords:** Language, environment, communication, socio-cultural, player and competence.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND STUDY

Sports have become a platform for many to show their talent in various fields. Sportspersons from all around the world gather at various sporting events to compete against each other. Many events, starting from the State Level to the National Level, and international events like the Asian Games, Commonwealth and Olympiads have been organised by various sports stakeholders, trying to promote their discipline. In this globalised world, the English language has an indispensable role to play, especially in the field of sports. As different people from diverse backgrounds and geographical areas participate and compete in these events, the requirement of a common language for communication among the executives, officials, coaches and players of diverse backgrounds from different places is arises, and English stepped in as that language to communicate among them. The English language has now become a “Link language”. It is an international language that is embedded in the cultures of all the countries where it is used, and so it has become a tool to communicate in all sorts of institutions. The paper is based on the data collected by the researcher. The researcher has been working in the field of ‘Chess’ as an arbiter, player, and coach.

## A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF PLAYERS’ LANGUAGE NEEDS:

This paper analyses the significance of English as a means of communication as well as a means of negotiation among sportspersons and the problem faced particularly by Players of Chess due to the communication gaps between the players, coaches, and referees while participating in national and international events. It also investigates the various environments which influence language acquisition abilities. The instances of communication gaps due to a lack of competence in English language skills are used to support the arguments in this paper.

As the English language has become essential for these sportspersons to communicate, many put in their efforts to speak in the English language and at the same time, the players face problems while communicating in

the English language due to specific reasons. These reasons may be a lack of vocabulary, fear of being grammatically wrong, pronunciation problems, etc. These issues have been clearly analysed in the communicative competence theory, which was an influential article published in the year 1980 by the applied linguists Canale and Swain, where they argued that the ability to communicate required four different sub-competencies: a) Grammatical competencies, b) Sociolinguistic competence c) Discourse competence and d) Strategic competence. However, for these sportspersons, English competence is required for specific purposes. As the Sportspersons claim new heights in their career, engagement in language activity, for instance, interviews, taking or attending classes or conferences, and commentary, etc., increases. Many instances of communication gaps between the players and arbiters or media persons have been witnessed during different chess championships held in the country, nationally as well as internationally. As the players, referees, and organisers belong to different diverse and geographical backgrounds, it is not an easy task for them to communicate in English as their competence in English Varies.

An example of communication gaps observed inside the tournament hall is discussed. A player calls the arbiter for a touch piece move or three-fold repetition, the player has to explain to the arbiters how the touch piece violation happened and, for the threefold repetition, the player has to mark the moves which the player claims for the three-fold repetitions and inform the arbiter in a language known to him. In such a case, if there is any language barrier, there arises a communication gap, which creates a hindrance in making fair decisions as per the laws of chess. Another essential factor that creates such a communication gap is the academic and environmental background of the sportspersons. A person with more exposure to an English-speaking environment can acquire the targeted language or second language acquisition (English language in the given context) faster than one without the environment.

#### COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE:

Communicative competence means the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in several social contexts. It is not just about knowing grammar or vocabulary, but about understanding when, where, and how to communicate in a way that aligns with cultural norms and social

expectations. In other words, it is the art of knowing what to say, how to say it, and when to say it.

Unlike Chomsky's 'Linguistic competence', this concept introduced by Dell Hymes in the 1970s, goes beyond linguistic accuracy and focuses on socio-cultural aspects. It includes four key components: grammatical competence (knowing the rules of language), sociolinguistic competence (understanding social context), discourse competence (organizing ideas coherently), and strategic competence (using strategies to overcome communication barriers). Furthermore, there are various definition on communicative competence, some are of the opinion that competence equates with skill (Burner,1973) and (Corder,1973) which can be taught and learned unlike Chomsky's notion on competence while Taylor (1988) and Stern (1983) equate competence with proficiency. Whereas, Canale and Swain (1980) opine that communicative competence includes three components- grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence, and are of the consensus with Hymes that effective communication requires more than grammatical rules and that rules of grammar would be useless without rules of use.

Communicative competence is crucial in our interconnected world. It helps bridge cultural gaps and fosters empathy. By developing communicative competence, one becomes more adaptable and sensitive to the nuances of human interaction. These theories on communicative competence have reshaped language teaching methods, and educators have shifted the mode of rote memorization of grammatical rules to real-world communication skills, encouraging students to have the four basic communication.

### THE SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION.

Socio-Cultural Theory was originally developed by psychologist Lev. Vygotsky. It is a psychological and educational model which focuses on the role of social interactions, cultural norms and community values which shape human behaviour and development. Furthermore, Vygotsky highlights the concepts of learning and acquiring languages and states that children construct knowledge actively by observing the social activity happening around them, and so they develop social learning before shaping cognitive development. Vygotsky believed that learning is deeply embedded in social and cultural norms and shows how individuals learn

and grow through their interaction with others, where they internalise the knowledge through shared experience and how cultural tools such as language, customs and practices help them organise and express thoughts.

Another core concept of this theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). It is in this space where learners learn effectively as the period allows optimal guidance and support from an expert. So, ZPD is a gap between what a learner can do alone and what they can achieve with help. Moreover, in Sociocultural theory, Vygotsky emphasizes the concept of scaffolding this temporary support from an expert to learners to perform their tasks correctly, and leads to them eventually relying on themselves after they have acquired the skills.

#### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

The objectives of this paper are to investigate the English language competence of chess players in India, the linguistic challenges they face, language acquisition, and the impact of sociocultural factors on the player's English competence.

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The Study is exploratory research using a survey questionnaire as data collection tool. The questionnaire which is disseminated through Google form comprises of closed and open-ended questions.

**Sample Size:** The sample is taken from 25 participants in three different chess tournaments- that is:

- a. 22nd Northeast Fide Rating Chess Championship-2024, Tripura
- b. South Point School Open International Grandmaster Chess Tournament, Guwahati
- c. National Junior Championship 2024. Karnal Haryana.

The data collected are analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data are analysed using % and frequency, while the qualitative data are analysed and interpreted descriptively. The survey question includes six sections: the first section is to collect personal information, which also consists of the schooling background- a central component to check the English competence level, mainly while focusing on the socio-cultural factor; the second section is to check the English language competence,

the third is to observe the linguistic challenges, the fourth is to analyse the impact of socio-cultural factors, the fifth is to check the communicative competence of the chess player and the six is an open-ended question focusing on improving the English language. Some of the theories used to check the competence of English are communicative competence theory, socio-cultural theory and English for specific purposes, which includes the theory of strategic competence.

**DATA INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS:**

All the players who took part in the mentioned tournaments are Indian from ten different states, with 88% being male and 12% female. Among them, 48% have competed at the national level, 40% at the international level, and the remaining 12% at the district or state level. In terms of educational background, 50% come from CBSE schools, 41% from state boards, and 9% from other educational boards.

The player’s English language competence was categorized into four skill levels based on language proficiency.

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMPETENCE:**

**Table 1: English Language Proficiency Rating**

English Language Proficiency Level	Percentage	Number of Responses (n)
Beginner	32%	8
Intermediate	52%	13
Advanced	12%	3
Fluent/Native-like	4%	1

The majority of the players (52%) rate their English Language Proficiency Level as intermediate, while the least rate is Native fluency(4%).

**Table 2: Methods of Learning English**

Method of Learning English	Number of Responses (n)	Percentage
School/Formal Education	20	80%

Method of Learning English	Number of Responses (n)	Percentage
Coaching/Training Centers	3	12%
Self-Study (Books, Online, etc.)	8	32%
Exposure in an English-Speaking Environment	7	28%
Other	3	12%

Most of the players (80%) learn English through school or formal education.

**Table 3: Frequency of English Use in Chess Tournaments.**

Frequency of English Use in Chess Tournaments	Percentage	Number of Responses (n)
Always	36%	9
Often	48%	12
Sometimes	12%	3
Rarely	4%	1
Never	0%	0

The majority of the players (48%) use English in Chess Tournaments often, and another 36% always use English in Chess Tournaments.

**Table 4: Situations where English is used during chess tournaments.**

Situation	Number of Responses (n)	Percentage
Communicating with Officials	19	76%
Interacting with Coaches	11	44%
Discussing Strategies with Teammates	9	36%
Reading Tournament Rules/Instructions	14	56%
Other	9	36%

The Situations in which the majority of the players use English during chess tournaments are communication with officials (76%) and reading tournament rules/instructions (56%).

LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES

Table 5: Reported Difficulties in Communicating in English

Communication Difficulty	Percentage	Number of Responses(n)
Yes	76%	19
No	8%	2
Sometimes	16%	4

The majority of the players (76%) have faced difficulties communicating in English during Chess Tournaments.

Table 6: Challenges faced by the Chess Player in Communication

Challenge Type	Number of Responses(n)	Percentage
Difficulty Understanding Instructions	4	16%
Struggling to Express Ideas	13	52%
Miscommunication with Coaches/Officials	2	8%
Limited Vocabulary Related to Chess	3	12%
Other Non-Verbal or Technical Difficulties	3	12%

The Majority of the players (52%) struggle mostly with **expressing ideas**, highlighting a critical need for structured communication training in chess.

Table 7: Model to overcome the challenges

Method to Overcome Challenges	Number of Responses(n)	Percentage
Use of Translators/Interpreters	6	24%
Relying on Teammates for Help	2	8%
Improving English Skills Through Practice	12	48%
Using Non-Verbal Communication (Gestures, etc.)	2	8%
Other	5	20%

The data discloses that nearly half of respondents (48%) prioritize improving English skills through practice as the primary approach to overcoming communication



challenges, while 24% rely on translators/interpreters, indicating a split between self-development and external assistance strategies.

#### LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND ENVIRONMENT

**Table 8: Language used for communication by the Indian Chess Player.**

Language Used for Communication	Percentage	Number of Responses (n)
English	44%	11
Hindi	20%	5
Mother Tongue	20%	5
Non-Verbal Clue	16%	4

The data reflected that the English language (44%) was used while interacting with fellow chess colleagues, whereas Hindi and mother tongues were tied at 20%. Non-verbal clues (16%) also play a significant role, reflecting diverse adaptation strategies.

**Table 9: Environmental Factors of Language Learning.**

Environmental Factor	Number of Responses(n)	Percentage
Exposure to English-Speaking Communities	12	48%
Access to English-Language Media	14	56%
Attending English-Medium Schools	12	48%
Interaction with English-Speaking Coaches/ Players	12	48%

The majority of respondents (56%) specified that access to English-language media was the top environmental factor which helped them learn the language, and all the other statements scored 48 % each.

**Table 10: The importance of English Language Skills.**

Importance Level	Percentage	Number of Responses (n)
Very Important	24%	6
Important	52%	13

Importance Level	Percentage	Number of Responses (n)
Neutral	20%	5
Not Important	4%	1
Not at All Important	0%	0

The majority (76% combined) of the players responded that English language skills are either important or very important, and only 5 % considered them unnecessary.

**Table 11: English Language Learning Method**

Learning Method	Number of Responses(n)	Percentage
Acquire it while playing tournaments	17	68%
Learn it through Mentor	8	32%
While learning chess through an online platform	12	48%
Other alternative learning method	7	28%

The majority (68%) of the players responded that they acquired the language while playing tournaments in different places, whereas online platform occupies almost half (48%) and learning through mentors and other alternative methods are 32% and 28 %, respectively.

**Table 12: The table representing the statement and the responses of the players**

Statement	Responses	
	Yes % (n)	No % (n)
Your environment has influenced your English Language Skills	88% (22)	12% (3)
You would benefit from a platform/ program to improve English for chess	64% (16)	36% (9)
You have a positive attitude towards the use of English for communication	100% (25)	—
You have English conversation exercises with a competent mentor or peers	40% (10)	60% (15)

Statement	Responses	
You understand the meaning of chess-related terms (register) used in tournaments	100% (25)	—
Your mentor/peers/arbiters help you by explaining the meaning of the terms	20% (5)	80% (20)

The findings indicate that most of the respondents (88%) acknowledge that their English language skills have been shaped by their surroundings, while 64% believe they would improve their English-speaking skills from special training programs. All the participants gave positive responses to English for communication purposes, though only 40% indulged in the active conversation process. Interestingly, all the respondents are familiar with chess terminology regardless of the fact that only 20% receive an explanation of the term from their peers/instructors/arbiters/officials.

**Table 13: English Proficiency Test**

Sl.No	Statement	Mean Score
1	Correct use of vocabulary/grammar	3.72
2	English in social contexts	3.52
3	Common expressions	4.32
4	Organize/express sentences	4.20
5	Comprehend speeches	3.44
6	Participate in conversations	3.84
7	Accent/rhythm/intonation	3.28
8	Adapt to new speakers	4.16
9	Initiate conversation	4.44
10	Verbal/non-verbal strategies	3.64
11	Comprehend instructions	4.24
12	Explain chess rules	4.64
13	Complain/explain in tournaments	4.68
14	Discuss strategies	4.76
15	Comprehend tournament rules	4.64

The data reflected in Table 13 shows that chess players possess impressive English

language proficiency for game-related purposes. The areas which are included in high proficiency level (3.68-5.00) are Discussing strategies (4.76) scoring the highest, which shows exceptional ability in analytical chess dialogue, Complain/ explaining in tournaments (4.68), Explaining chess rules (4.64), Comprehend tournament rules (4.64), Initiate conversation (4.44), Adapt to new speakers (4.16), Organize/express sentences (4.20), Comprehend instructions (4.24), Common expressions (4.32) and vocabulary/grammar (3.72). While areas of moderate proficiency (2.34–3.67) include social communication (3.52), and verbal/non-verbal strategies (3.64), listening comprehension (3.44) and accent/rhythm/ intonation (3.28) emerge as relative weaknesses, though still above the low-proficiency threshold. Though there is no score falling below 3.00, there is always room for improvement in the moderate areas, and there is a dire need to strengthen social interaction skills, pronunciation, listening skills, etc.

**Table 14: Specific Areas of English where chess players need to focus on-**

Specific Areas of English	Percentage
Chess-Specific Vocabulary	56
General Communication Skills	76
Reading and Understanding Tournament Rules	60
Writing Skills (Emails, Reports, etc.)	48
Other areas not specifically mentioned	12

The data shows that the Majority (76%) mostly valued General Communication Skills.

### OBSERVATION ON THE INDIAN CHESS PLAYERS’ COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH

In the aforementioned Championship, many participants from different states participated and competed against each other for the title of the Championship. The researcher observes that private or CBSE students can speak and communicate better than Kendra Vidyalaya students. In the case of the 22nd Northeast Fide Rating Chess Championship-2024, Tripura, South Point School Open International Grandmaster Chess Tournament, Guwahati 2024, and National Junior Chess Championship, the people who come to participate from the southern part of India are more familiar with the English language as compared to those who arrive from the

Northern Part of India. These issues are the results of the participant's exposure to the English language environment, which could be due to their schooling or college background or the regional and geographical factors where these participants live. However, the assumption mentioned above cannot be applied to the players from places like Delhi, Mumbai and other metropolitan cities in India. These players or persons who live in metropolitan cities have been engaging in numerous interactions and have the opportunities to communicate in both their mother tongue and English in their day-to-day lives, and as a result, are familiar with both languages. An example of second language acquisition acquired as a result of the exposure and the environment a person receives can be reflected in the case of the recent Chess Olympiad gold medallist and the world chess championship challenger Dommaraju Gukesh from Chennai, as he revealed in an interview taken by chess base India that he hasn't attended regular classes at his school (Velammal Vidyalaya school, a well-known reputed school in Chennai) after class IV as he decided to give his full dedication to chess. However, the youngest world chess challenger in 2024, Dommaraju Gukesh, is fluent in English speaking skills. Although the players from the southern, northern, eastern, and western parts of India developed their English-speaking proficiency slowly, they were able to communicate as they got more exposure while frequently participating in many events. However, some of the factors that influence communicative competence in English still exist, such as lack of vocabulary knowledge, ungrammatical utterances, semantically added utterances, pronunciation, etc. The players, arbiters and coaches indicate that in such a situation, they are not able to comprehend the message conveyed by the speaker sometimes due to the influences of the mother tongue language while speaking English. This difference in tone and the variations found in the English that they speak creates a hindrance while delivering a fair play of that particular game or event. Also, the instances of semantically added utterances like "pawning the pawn instead of saying promoting the pawn" create confusion for the opponent, arbiters, fair play officers, etc. Sportspeople sometimes find themselves lacking words to fill the gaps while communicating with others. This frequently occurs while they are facing an unexpected interview or in situations where they find themselves unable to contribute to a conversation that they are not familiar with.

Such a situation may occur, and to compensate for such communication breakdowns, one should have strategic competence. Canale and Swain are of the opinion that an excellent knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is insufficient on its own for effective communication.

#### STRATEGIC COMPETENCE:

Strategic competence is an aspect of communicative competence, which refers to the ability to overcome difficulties when communication breakdown occurs (Celic-Mureia, Dornyei and Thurrell, 1955). It includes both verbal and non-verbal communication to compensate for communication breakdown, and language learning strategic competence involves the ability to use communication strategies to compensate for gaps in one's language proficiency. Strategic competence may occur in both the First Language or Mother tongue (L1) and the Second Language (L2). A lack of strategic competence could be the reason for situations when students with a solid knowledge of English grammar and a wide range of vocabulary get stuck and unable to carry out their communicative intent. However, there are learners who can communicate successfully despite having a limited repertoire of words. They rely almost entirely on their strategic competence. Strategic competence provides more chances to develop their interlanguage system.

For instance, a local chess player from the peripheral region who does not have much exposure to the English language who has come to take part in a chess tournament in Delhi participates in the tournament and, during the game, wants to promote an extra queen on the board but unfortunately forgets the term 'Queen'. The player, instead of giving up on the communication breakdown, could have used verbal strategic competence by explaining that he wanted a piece which could move any number of squares diagonally, vertically, and horizontally. Alternatively, the player could refer to it as the most powerful piece in the chess game or use non-verbal strategic competence by pointing at the piece 'Queen'. This way, the arbiter (Judge) will understand the speaker's message, even without the player using exact words or terms, thus helping to ensure effective communication.

## MAIN FINDINGS:

This section presents the key insights derived from the analysis of the survey responses and gives us the opportunity to have a strategy to develop and help improve the players' skills. In the context of chess matches in India, the data highlights the high frequency of the use of English during the tournaments and the language is predominantly used while reading tournament rules and instructions (56%). However, more than half of the respondents rated their English language proficiency as intermediate, and the majority (76%) of them faced difficulties in communicating in English, predominantly in expressing ideas (52%). Although most of the players learn English through formal education/ school (80%), they express that they need more practice to improve their English communication skills.

The majority of respondents (56%) specified that access to English-language media was the top environmental factor, followed closely by exposure to English-speaking environments, English-medium schools, and interactions with English-speaking coaches/players (all at 48%). This shows that both digital and social play nearly an equal role in developing communication skills. Exposure to the environment is also one of the main learning methods, as 68% acquire English during tournaments and 48% while learning chess through online platforms. All respondents (100%) value English and understand the chess terminology. Significant gaps remain in structured learning as only 40% practice conversations and just 20% receive term explanations from mentors. Players demonstrate strong chess-specific communication (as reflected in Table 13) but need improvement in general skills (3.28/5 for accent/intonation). This aligns with the survey results that 76% of players prioritize general communication skills, and 56% focus on chess vocabulary. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the players are confident about English language proficiency as their rating is high enough, as reflected in Table 13 (English proficiency test) and also contradictory to the statement given in the earlier table, for example, in Table 5 and Table 6 the players reported that (76%) of them find difficulties in communicating in English and 52% of them struggle to express their ideas. This contradiction highlights the need for further research to assess actual language competence and the potential value of having a language-learning platform for sportspersons.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

In light of the issues that the paper has addressed, the players have highlighted the importance of English language skills in our global village; the survey results reveal that it is one of the most used languages for communication. The players sometimes find themselves struggling to express their ideas, creating a situation which leads to difficulties in communication. To improve their English language skills, the participants are of the opinion that they can improve their speaking skills by improving their vocabulary, discussing with their colleagues, parents, and experts, and practice reading and speaking

An effective way to increase English competence among chess players would be by introducing English for a specific purpose, focusing on speaking skills. The level of communicative competence required by chess players is to be able to use the English language to communicate with their peers, coaches, and judges without any gap, and it is different from the level to be achieved in other fields. Further detailed studies can be done on how to improve the English communicative Competence of the players. The study shows that sportspersons who have been exposed to English-speaking environments display better proficiency and strategic competence, and they perform better in interviews and peer discussions, which will again enhance their skill. Another finding which helps the participant improve their language skills is the use of media and different forms of social media, and as per the survey results of this article, it is necessary to recommend that the Indian players have a platform to learn English, specifically focusing on communicative skills which could help them in developing their Communicative Competence.

## DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH FOR SPORTS PERSONS:

To bring fairness while conducting and participating in sporting events like chess, it is necessary for the player to acquire the English language. The Federation, the state association, or any other stakeholder of sports has a responsibility to provide a platform and organise special camps, especially for sports persons, to help them learn the target language. Diverse techniques can be used to improve the speaking skills of these players. The techniques to be used should mostly focus on practical approaches to diverse activities.



Some of the examples as per the communicative language teaching theory to help improve speaking skills are:

- i. To make them familiar with the words or the sports terminology of the specific games and sports. In chess, many terminologies like check, checkmate, castle, stalemate, diagonal, squares, horizontal, vertical, skewer, fork, pin, double attack, discover attack, defence, file, rank, interference, decoy, demolition, or any other name of pieces like king, queen, knight and many more terms related to chess are there. Since the chess player has an obvious interest in chess, it is easier for the chess player to remember these above-mentioned words and these words, in some ways, help the player realise their meaning and help in learning the language in a comparatively easy way.
- ii. Involving them in a dialogue performance, or allowing them to imitate and act as a character of a play or by providing and letting them read novels or books on any topic of their interest.
- iii. Organising talks where fellow players discuss and analyse the rules and regulations of any particular games and sports.
- iv. Encouraging them to speak in the target language.

The aforementioned methods can be introduced to the player to help them acquire the target language. Acquiring the target language will boost their confidence and allow them to participate in many more events nationally and internationally. Such an initiative will certainly help the player to improve their skills and grow towards their career. Once these sportspersons have acquired the English language as a whole, it will be beneficial and easier for the stakeholders to participate in and organise sports events.

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