ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AS A DETERMINANT OF ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS IN SPORTS DISCIPLINES

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Abstract

This article presents a literature review synthesizing research from the fields of sports science, applied linguistics, and sports management to argue that English proficiency is not merely an auxiliary skill but a core competency for success in the modern sports industry.

Key words*: linguistic gatekeeping, force multiplier, linguistic assimilation, language of science, leader emergence*

Аннотация

В данной статье представлен обзор литературы, синтезирующий исследования в области спортивной науки, прикладной лингвистики и спортивного менеджмента, чтобы обосновать тезис о том, что владение английским языком является не просто вспомогательным навыком, а ключевой компетенцией для достижения успеха в современной спортивной индустрии.

Ключевые слова: *лингвистический гейткипинг (языковой отбор), мультипликатор усиления, языковая ассимиляция, язык науки, возникновение лидерства*

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada sport fanlari, amaliy tilshunoslik va sport menejmenti sohalaridagi tadqiqotlarni jamlagan adabiyotlar tahlili taqdim etilgan bo‘lib, ingliz tilini bilish zamonaviy sport industriyasida muvaffaqiyatga erishish uchun yordamchi ko‘nikma emas, balki asosiy kompetensiya ekanligini asoslashga qaratilgan.

Kalit so‘zlar: *lingvistik chegaraviy nazorat, kuchaytiruvchi omil, lingvistik assimilyatsiya, fan tili, yetakchilikning shakllanishi*

Introduction

The sports industry has undergone a paradigm shift over the past three decades, transforming from a domain of localized competition into a global, multi-billion dollar economic sector (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018). This globalization is characterized by the transnational flow of athletes, coaches, capital, and media. Within this context, the English language has emerged as the *lingua franca* of international sport. For students pursuing careers in this field—whether on the field, in the clinic, or in the front office—linguistic competence in English is increasingly a determinant of professional opportunity and success. While technical skills, physical prowess, and tactical acumen remain foundational, this paper posits that English proficiency acts as a "force multiplier", amplifying the impact of these core competencies. This article reviews existing literature to systematically outline the significant and multifaceted role of English for sports students.

Discussion

A significant body of research highlights the centrality of English proficiency for accessing top-tier sports education. Institutions renowned for sports programs, such as Loughborough University in the UK and various NCAA Division I schools in the US, mandate proof of English proficiency (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL) for international admissions.

Research by Mazak and Herbas-Donoso (2014) on “linguistic gatekeeping” demonstrates that standardized English tests function as critical filters, often determining whether talented athletes can access academic scholarships and high-performance training environments. For many sports students, particularly from non-English speaking backgrounds, the athletic scholarship pathway in the United States is the primary route to combining higher education with elite-level competition. According to the NCAA, international student-athletes must meet specific academic and English proficiency requirements to be eligible (NCAA, 2021). Without the requisite language skills, exceptional athletic talent can be rendered ineligible, stalling a student's career before it begins.

For the athlete, English proficiency is inextricably linked to career longevity, financial success, and brand management. Literature in sports sociology and economics points to the “premium” placed on English-speaking athletes in global labor markets.

Maguire (2011) notes that leagues like the English Premier League (EPL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA) function as central hubs in the global sports labor market. Athletes migrating to these leagues face the imperative of “linguistic assimilation”. Studies on migrant athletes, such as those by Krouwel, de Boer, and van der Meulen (2017), reveal that English proficiency is a key factor in on-field success, as it facilitates complex tactical understanding, fosters trust with teammates, and enables effective communication with coaching staff. Conversely, athletes with limited English often face social isolation, reduced on-field coordination, and increased vulnerability to exploitation by agents and management.

Furthermore, the modern athlete is a media commodity. Boyle and Haynes (2009) argue that in the age of digital media, an athlete's marketability is heavily tied to their ability to engage with a global audience. Post-game interviews, press conferences, and personal branding on platforms like Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) are predominantly conducted in English. Athletes who can articulate their narratives fluently are more likely to secure lucrative endorsement deals and cultivate a positive public image.

Sports students are increasingly required to be proficient in sports science, which encompasses physiology, biomechanics, nutrition, and psychology. A consistent finding in the literature on academic disciplines is that English dominates as the language of scientific dissemination.

Ammon (2012) describes English as the “language of science”, noting that a vast majority of high-impact, peer-reviewed journals are published in English. For sports students engaged in research or pursuing careers as strength and conditioning coaches, physiotherapists, or sports nutritionists, the ability to access, interpret, and apply the latest research is non-negotiable. A study by Salager-Meyer (2014) on scientific publishing confirms that non-native English speakers face a significant barrier to entry, as the most current and validated methodologies are primarily documented in English. A sports student who lacks English proficiency is therefore reliant on secondary interpretations and may lag behind the latest advancements in their field, compromising their professional efficacy.

Beyond the technical and economic dimensions, literature on intercultural communication in sports emphasizes the role of English in fostering team cohesion and leadership. The modern sports team is a microcosm of globalization, often comprising players and staff from a dozen or more nationalities.

Research by Jarvie (2012) highlights that in such multilingual environments, a shared language is essential for building trust, resolving conflicts, and developing a unified team culture. English frequently serves as this common language. Furthermore, scholars like Rees and Segal (2020) have explored the concept of “leader emergence” in sports, finding that effective

communication skills, particularly in the team’s common language, are a stronger predictor of leadership than physical skill alone. Sports students who are proficient in English are thus better positioned to become team captains, player liaisons, and future coaches—roles that demand clarity, empathy, and the ability to unite diverse groups toward a common goal.

Conclusion

The literature unequivocally supports the assertion that knowing English is not merely an advantage but a significant determinant of success for sports students. As the sports industry continues to globalize, the demand for professionals who can navigate its linguistic landscape will only intensify. English proficiency enables sports students to access elite education, maximize their athletic potential, engage with cutting-edge science, and become effective leaders in multicultural environments. For sports students, investing in English language skills is an investment in their professional future, equipping them with the necessary tools to compete and excel on the world stage.

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