Challenges Faced by Linguistic Minority Students in West Bengal in Learning English

Arun Bhattacharya & Sunil Kumar Jha

ABSTRACT

In the current era of globalisation and technological advancement, English is being adopted as the lingua franca for communication. The present study aims at exploring the challenges faced by the students when learning English as a second language. The sample for the study included high school students attending the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education in the district of Purulia, West Bengal, with particular reference to the schools (n = 30) in the Jungle Mahals. A well-structured questionnaire was used for collecting data from the students (n = 225). Students attending classes V to X were chosen for the study, since this group would finish their secondary school in less than five years and seek admissions to any of the higher educational establishments in the country and abroad. Based on the results of the study, suggestions and recommendations are provided.

Keywords: English, Second Language, Minority Groups, High School Students, West Bengal

Introduction

Interaction and communication are an integral part of human life. The thoughts and ideas generated are communicated through a medium of language. However, the role of language is not only limited to communication, it also extends into the vast branches of knowledge and human sciences (Thomas and McDonagh, 2013). The general importance of languages justifies the need for a scientific and objective study of the relationship between languages and education. In India, the prominence of English was spread by the British, and officially, it became a second language in Indian academics (Meganathan, 2011. pp 57). Besides primary or the first language which is the mother tongue (MT), the second language is an additional language which is largely introduced in the schools. Since the second language differs in culture, structure, and style from the first language, acquiring a second language needs additional skills, practice, and patience (Banerjee, 2016. pp 478; Nishanthi, 2018. pp 871). Globally, the English language has acquired importance and has been regarded as a must-know language from the perspective of better employment and career growth (Nishanthi, 2018. pp 871). In many schools' curriculum, a bilingual pattern with English as a Second Language (ESL) is widely acknowledged (Nishanthi, 2018. pp 871). However, from an educational point of view, academic challenges on pedagogy, methods of teaching-learning, and practices specific to English language are not yet resolved (Meganathan, 2011. pp 57; Biswas, 2013. pp 228).

According to the Indian government's recent National Education Policy (NEP 2019), every

state must prepare bilingual (regional language/mother tongue and English) high-quality educational content to enable thinking and speaking of subjects in both languages (Sen, 2015, pp 269; Kumar et al. 2021, pp e2500). However, several factors contribute to the difficulty in acquiring English as a second language, including unclear educational policies on language; biased attitude of teachers, students, parents, and societies towards English; lack of modern teaching technology; shortage of skilled, knowledgeable, and qualified language teachers; lack of teacher's training, in particular in the remote and rural areas; and the poor integration of syllabus (Banerjee 2016. pp 478; Raju and Joshith, 2017. pp 48).

In the context of West Bengal, the teaching of English has faced a lot of issues, including a political scenario (Roy, 2019. pp 1092). A strong tradition of fluency in one language, mainly Bangla, and drop-outs due to foreign language fear, has led the government to take inconsistent steps to keep English as a secondary language in schools in West Bengal. In 1982, in West Bengal, English language was banned from the primary school curriculum primarily to increase enrollment and reduce dropouts. This decision was further supported due to increased accessibility of education to all (rural population) in the regional language (Bangla). However, one of the negative outcomes was less preparedness of students for higher education and reduced opportunities in the labour market, which further persuaded the government to reverse this policy. In 2007, English was again introduced as a second language in West Bengal. The interim period of 25 years with no exposure to the English language has brought disadvantages to students and has shown poor acceptance of the English language (Sen, 2015. pp 269). After the introduction of English as a Second Language in the West Bengal Education system, few researchers have focused their study on the challenges, acceptance level, and the status of the English language in primary and higher secondary schools. The focus of this particular study is to identify the issues and challenges in learning English as a second language among high school students of the Purulia District of West Bengal.

Across primary level students from West Bengal, a general lack in the ability to write and speak English has been reported (Roy, 2019. pp 1092). To enhance the linguistic skills of students, the author proposed the use of technology, such as access to computers, use of interactive slides, audio-visual aids, mobile applications, and hiring of teachers with advanced technological knowledge, to improve the teaching-learning process. In another study, Mahanti and Divyagunananda concentrated their study on the genesis of English as a second language at the lower primary level in West Bengal (1437). Emphasis on four skills, mainly listening, speaking, reading, and writing of English was given; in addition, inter-subject correlation and use of poems and songs were emphasised to increase English vocabulary.

Few researchers have addressed the teacher's perspective in the learning and teaching of English as a second language. In a survey including both teachers and students from secondary schools of Siliguri (West Bengal) and with different boards like CBSE, ICSE, and state board, the author found that teachers lacked the latest development in the context of English language teaching (Adhikari, 2019. pp 162). Similarly, Samanta found a conflicting and complex attitude towards the English language and grammar

among English teachers from the Howrah Sadar sub-division of West Bengal. According to the author, the teacher's poor attitude and instructional practices towards English grammar complicated the classroom practices (39). Yet in another study, Sahoo analysed the perception of the English language textbook of class VIII prepared by the Government of West Bengal (137). Based on a qualitative analysis involving class VIII students and English teachers from Purba Medinipur district of West Bengal, it was found that the content lacked clarity, thus leading to poor learner's engagement. The author emphasised on teacher factors like their personality, attitude, learning environment, and process of teaching-learning in developing interest for a foreign language like English.

Learning a second language can manifest anxiety and apprehensions among citizens. In a study from the Bankura District of West Bengal, Saha and Mete found that English language anxiety is higher in higher secondary female students compared to male students, and more evident in students from rural areas (321). According to the authors, besides socio-economic status, factors like exposure to and communication in English speaking, support from parents and society is more for male students. Class X students studying in Bengali medium secondary schools in the state of West Bengal also showed high anxiety, communication apprehension, and fear of negative evaluation for the English examination (Chakrabarti and Sengupta, 2013. pp 58). According to the authors, these factors can negatively affect the performance of students. In a large-scale study from 19 selected districts of West Bengal, Sinha found lack of motivation and poor attitude towards English as second language among higher secondary school students (176). Complex syllabus, lack of proper evaluation, objective concept, and lack of cognitive and conceptual framework were identified as the main reasons for the lack of interest among students towards the English language.

In general, in the West Bengal education system, English as a second language (L2) is introduced from class V onwards (Meganathan, 2011). Recently, NCF-2005 has prescribed guidelines to facilitate the teaching-learning process and integration of English at the lower primary level in West Bengal (Mahanti and Divyagunananda, 2018. pp 1437). Despite these guidelines, studies have shown disappointment and anxiety among students whose native language is different from the second language. Further, English language anxiety leading to poor achievement in English language is also reported (Saha and Mete, 2017. pp 325; Halder, 2018. pp 138). The situation is alarming and distressing. Thus, finding the problems and challenges encountered by students could be one way to find the root problem in learning English. Further, the reviewed literature revealed that none of the studies were focused on the status of English as a second language in Purulia District of West Bengal. Thus, the present study will help identify the issues and challenges in learning English as a secondary language among high school students of minority groups from the Purulia District, with special reference to the high schools in the Jungle Mahals of West Bengal, which are highly populated with tribal and backward classes.

Methodology

In this study, 225 high school students from the Purulia District of West Bengal were selected. Questionnaires were used to obtain students' demographic profile and their response to interest and involvement, exposure, support from

teachers and parents, problems encountered in learning English, linguistic skills, and their participation in social group activities. Data analysis included frequency and per cent analysis, t-test, and ANOVA. Tests with a p-value of less than 0.05 were considered significant and accepted. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) v24.0 was employed for all statistical analysis.

Results and discussion

As per the demographics, among the selected participants, a majority were male (66.7%) in the age group 14-15 years (64.0%). The students mainly belonged to a family with three-five members (66.7%), with an annual income of less than two lakhs, and with very few graduates in the family (12.4%). With respect to parents' educational qualifications, fathers mainly had high school education (53.3%), while 50.2% of the students' mothers never attended any school (Table 1). A low participation of female students was observed, indicating gender bias in education. It is likely that girls are not encouraged to pursue higher school education due to multiple reasons like safety, educational cost, and societal pressure. This was also evident in the mother's educational qualifications, where many mothers never attended school.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	150	66.7
	Female	75	33.3
Age	14-15 years	144	64.0
	16-18 years	81	36.0
Number of members in the family	3	50	22.2
	3-5	150	66.7
	> 5	25	11.1
Have any graduates	No	197	87.6
	Yes	28	12.4
Family annual income (rupees)	< 2 Lakhs	100	44.4
	2-4 Lakhs	75	33.3
	> 4 Lakhs	50	22.2
Occupation	Government Job	50	22.2
	Private	25	11.1
	Self-employed	100	44.4
	Others	50	22.2
Father's educational qualification	High School	120	53.3
	Technical Course/Diploma	89	39.6
	Graduate	16	7.1
Mother's educational qualification	Never attended school	113	50.2
	High school	100	44.4
	Graduate	12	5.3

Table 2 illustrates the difference in challenges in learning English as a second language, based on the student's age and gender. T-test showed a significant difference in interest and involvement (t = 11.207, p < 0.01) and support from parents (t = 7.76, p < 0.01) between male and female students. Compared to male participants, female participants took less interest in reading and writing in English, remembering the difficult words, and finishing English assignments. Further, parents supported their boys to read English, took more interest in English lessons, and bought English books for boys. Gender discrimination, wherein a male child or student was encouraged to learn English, more than a female student, was noted. The present finding was in agreement with Saha and Mete, wherein the authors found that, compared to females, urban male students had a higher achievement in English, suggestive of higher competency in English among males from urban areas (321).

With respect to age, t-test showed a significant difference in interest and involvement (t = "2.92, p < 0.01), exposure (t = 4.08, p < 0.01), support from teachers (t = "3.76, p < 0.01), support from parents (t = "4.47, p < 0.01), problems encountered in learning English (t = "6.31, p < 0.01), linguistic skills (t = 6.41, p < 0.01), and participation in social programmes (t = "3.33, p < 0.1), between students in the age group 14-15 years and 16-18 years. Students in higher grades (16-18 years) showed less interest in the English language. They found difficulty in reading and writing in English, and even remembering English words. In the context of exposure, compared to students 14-15 years old, students in the age group 16-18 years rarely watched news and TV or listened to English programmes. They made fewer attempts to learn new English words or use library books and the Internet to do their homework. Students 16-18 years old encountered more problems in learning English, such as difficulty in reading, wrong pronunciation, and poor focus. They found themselves under pressure to speak English. However, 16-18-year-old students received more support from teachers and parents in learning English. Students 14-15 years old agreed that they faced issues with linguistic skills, like the inability to write emails to friends and cousins, and make conversation with teachers. In addition, difficulty in making people understand what they wanted to say in English and poor understanding of English content provided in the curriculum was higher among the lower grade students. Participation in social group activities was poor in both the age categories; however, students 14-15 years old participated less frequently in English writing and speaking competitions.

Overall, it was found that the students of the higher secondary school took less interest in the English language. It could be anticipated that lack of proper English teaching and learning at lower grades or primary level may translate to lower interest when the students graduate to higher grades. Other challenges were lower exposure to the Internet, news, TV programmes, novels, newspaper, or radio programmes in English. In addition, linguistic skills, like the ability to write emails to friends and cousins and make conversation with teachers, were found missing. Students also had difficulty making people understand what they wanted to say in English and a few were incapable of understanding the English content that was provided in the curriculum, suggestive of poor English teaching-learning process in the higher secondary level.

Table 2: Difference in Challenges in Learning English as a Secondary Language, based on Student's Age and Gender

	Age (Mean ± SD)		t value	Gender (Mean ± SD)		t value
	14-15 years	16-18 years		Male	Female	
Interest and involvement	3.31 ± 0.31	3.46 ± 0.36	-2.922**	3.23 ± 0.32	3.68 ± 0.16	11.20**
Exposure	3.61 ± 0.52	3.34 ± 0.39	4.088**	3.53 ± 0.49	3.47 ± 0.50	0.958
Support from teachers	2.66 ± 0.48	2.88 ± 0.22	-3.766**	2.72 ± 0.47	2.78 ± 0.29	-0.941
Support from parents	2.33 ± 0.52	2.78 ± 0.98	-4.471**	2.73 ± 0.81	2 ± 0.16	7.769**
Problems encountered in learning English	2.79 ± 0.61	3.29 ± 0.47	6.317**	3 ± 0.59	2.92 ± 0.63	0.97
Linguistic skills	3.67 ± 0.30	3.41 ± 0.28	6.417**	3.57 ± 0.34	3.6 ± 0.29	-0.737
Participation in social groups	2 ± 0.61	1.68 ± 0.79	-3.330**	1.93 ± 0.68	1.8 ± 0.75	-1.334

*Significant at $p < 0.05$; **Significant at $p < 0.01$

Table 3 illustrates the difference in challenges in learning English as a second language, based on parent's educational qualifications and income. Father's educational qualification had an impact on interest and involvement ($F = 5.29$, $p < 0.01$), support from teachers ($F = 9.28$, $p < 0.001$), support from parents ($F = 11.72$, $p < 0.01$), problems encountered in English ($F = 22.38$, $p < 0.1$), linguistic skills ($F = 5.27$, $p < 0.01$), and participation in social groups ($F = 10.60$, $p < 0.01$). Likewise, mother's educational qualification had an impact on interest and involvement ($F = 4.35$, $p < 0.01$), exposure ($F = 3.30$, $p < 0.01$), support from parents ($F = 4.83$, $p < 0.01$), problems encountered in English ($F = 16.07$, $p < 0.01$), and linguistic skills ($F = 4.29$, $p < 0.01$). In this study, parents' linguistic skills were not recorded. Thus, it is possible that many of these students may be first-generation learners of the English language. A parent's English language skills can strongly improve a child's linguistic skills (Petchprasert 50). On the contrary, Kalaycý Özfound that parents' level of education had no impact on the child's learning of the English language; however, parents' perception of involvement in English language development, such as awareness of child's English language education, their guidance and help in doing homework, and relationship with teachers

benefited children in learning English (832).

In addition, income had an impact on interest and involvement (F = 171.16, p < 0.01), exposure (F = 143.31, p < 0.01), support from teachers (F = 47.32, p < 0.01), support from parents (F = 19.43, p < 0.01), problems encountered in English (F = 30.74, p < 0.01), and linguistic skills (F = 4.29, p < 0.01). Families with a higher income of > 4 lakhs could afford cable and Internet connections, thereby facilitating access to news or programmes in the English language. In addition, high-income parents can also buy English books and games to improve their child's English skills. In agreement with the present finding, Petchprasert posited that in a household with higher income, children may have a better chance of exposure to books and language skill development (50).

Table 3: Difference in Challenges in Learning English as a Secondary Language, based on Parents' Educational Qualification and Income

Categories	Father's educational qualification (Mean ± SD)			F value	Mother's educational qualification (Mean ± SD)			F value	Income in Rupees (Mean ± SD)			F value
	High school	Technical Course/ Diploma	Graduate		Never attended school	High school	Graduate		< 2 Lakhs	2-4 Lakhs	> 4 Lakhs	
Interest and involvement	3.39 ± 0.31	3.31 ± 0.38	3.60 ± 0.32	5.298**	3.32 ± 0.32	3.42 ± 0.36	3.56 ± 0.33	4.350**	3.16 ± 0.29	3.75 ± 0.18	3.25 ± 0	171.168**
Exposure	3.53 ± 0.49	3.53 ± 0.47	3.24± 0.51	2.704	3.58 ± 0.46	3.45 ± 0.51	3.3 ± 0.52	3.309*	3.9 ± 0.22	3.07 ± 0.38	3.4 ± 0.40	143.310**
Support from teachers	2.85 + 0.28	2.62 + 0.47	2.58 + 0.68	9.286**	2.74+ 0.37	2.77 + 0.43	2.5 + 0.69	2.266	2.79 + 0.34	2.94 + 0.20	2.33 ± 0.51	47.326**
Support from parents	2.69 ± 0.81	2.32 ± 0.62	1.94 ± 0.31	11.722**	2.58 ± 0.78	2.45 ± 0.72	1.9 ± 0.31	4.836**	2.75 ± 0.89	2.47 ± 0.53	2 ± 0.40	19.433**
Problems encountered in learning English	2.80 ± 0.54	3.06 ± 0.62	3.75 ± 0	22.381**	2.82 ± 0.55	3.05 ± 0.62	3.75 ± 0	16.078**	2.69 ± 0.48	3.33 ± 0.43	3.± 0.76	30.746**
Linguistic skills	3.54 ± 0.36	3.59 ± 0.28	3.8 ± 0	5.271**	3.53 ± 0.33	3.6 ± 0.31	3.8 ± 0	4.299*	3.65 ± 0.39	3.47 ± 0.25	3.6 ± 0.20	7.630**
Participation in social groups	1.74 ± 0.53	2.14± 0.83	1.61 ± 0.72	10.605**	1.97 ± 0.69	1.81 ± 0.72	1.7 ± 0.73	1.841	1.9± 0.77	1.87 ± 0.74	1.9 ± 0.50	0.055

*Significant at p < 0.05; **Significant at p < 0.01

From the findings, it can be inferred that a multitude of factors like linguistic, administrative, teachers, students, and socio-cultural factors can create challenges in learning English as a second language (Biswas, 2013. pp 228). From these perspectives, suggestions and recommendations are outlined to facilitate teaching and learning the English language. A requirement of clear educational policies, in particular, the language policy, is recommended. In India, English is regarded as an associate official language. However, the education policy on the English language is not clear. It is recommended that policy on the English as a second language be clear and adapt to the changing demands and aspirations of the younger generations. Further, there is a requirement for proficient English teachers at all levels of education. In this regard,

a teacher's education and teacher training programmes in the English language is crucial. Clear guidelines on the requirement of teachers' skills and knowledge in English and their qualifications must be formulated. Further, there must be a provision for the teacher training programmes to facilitate the teaching-learning process (Meganathan, 2011. pp 57; Roy, 2019. pp 1092). Another prerequisite is the availability of study material to support teaching and learning of English. The state and central governments should select well-known publishers with experience and skill in the English language to develop English materials, specifically, the textbooks for primary and higher secondary school children.

In addition, there is a need for an environment that could enable learning of the English language. In this context, school authorities must hire proficient English teachers and establish libraries with English books and games to improve English vocabulary. State authorities should create an environment outside the school, such as public libraries, to increase exposure to the English language and to encourage community residents to communicate in the English language. Parents with poor knowledge of the English language, gender discrimination in education, and societies' non-supportive attitude can be a hindrance to the students to learn the English language. To overcome this, the state government must make education mandatory for both genders in higher school. Adoption of technological innovations can make the learning of a language interesting. A multimedia approach can be adopted to motivate students to learn English (Zhen, 2016. pp 182). To enable this, the government and Internet providers must ensure the availability of networks. Further, the use of computers, laptops, and smartphones, and other resources, such as integrated audio-video slides, animation slides, and graphics can be used by teachers in a classroom teaching to deliver the various concepts of English grammar (Roy, 2019. pp 1092).

With special reference to the Purulia District of West Bengal, the state government should set up fully residential schools, like the Integrated Government School in Bandwan in Purulia. The facilities should be free of cost to encourage students from very poor and uneducated families to enrol in school education. In addition, the state government should monitor the teaching and learning process of the English language in primary schools. Failure to educate primary children in English language skills can create a gap in English skills, which will persist in higher grades. The government must take steps to hire and retain efficient as well as trained English teachers in the government primary schools. Some government schools have been lacking English teachers for more than 15 years, and in such cases, teachers with non-English qualifications are encouraged to teach English. To overcome this issue, the state government should see to the availability and hiring of subject teachers with a qualification in English.

Conclusion

The present study mainly addresses the student-centric challenges in learning English as a second language. Findings indicate that demographic characteristics like age, gender, parents' educational qualifications, and income made a significant difference in a child's learning of English as a second language. The present study was limited to students of the Purulia District of West Bengal. A further study analysing the teacher's perspective towards English as a second language will provide more insight into

the challenges.

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Arun Bhattacharya & Dr. Sunil Kumar Jha

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