

THE IMPACT OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND REGIONAL LANGUAGE ON FEMALE STUDENTS IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The connection between language and gender is significant, especially within the realm of education. In India, female students hailing from regional language backgrounds encounter distinct obstacles in higher education, particularly in relation to their command of English. In Indian higher education institutions, a notable distinction exists between female and male students, with the former predominantly hailing from regional mediums. This article emphasises the constraints imposed by language barriers on engagements with English-speaking peers and educators, resulting in a sense of inadequacy. It emphasises the importance of scholarship programs that provide English courses and mentorship, as well as language support initiatives such as tutoring and language exchanges. The article highlights the significance of English proficiency in shaping career trajectories, revealing that individuals fluent in English tend to have enhanced employability within multinational corporations and technology sectors. English serves as a medium for connection while enhancing self-assurance and professionalism, essential for success in competitive employment landscapes. The research advocates for a holistic approach, incorporating workshops, mentorship, and modifications to the curriculum, aimed at tackling disparities in education and fostering inclusive, nurturing learning spaces.

Keywords: Language, higher education, gender, proficiency, inequality

Introduction

A significant number of female students in India come from Hindi or regional medium educational backgrounds, revealing a clear difference when compared to their male peers. A female respondent shared her views, saying, “my parents do not want me to leave the state for better education and employment.”¹ The choice to enrol me in a Hindi medium educational institution stopped from the notion that earning a degree is sufficient for refining opportunities in marriage arrangements. This story exemplifies the differences in educational openings based on gender, showing how the language of instruction can significantly impact personal ambitions and career pathway. The significances show that 55% of female participants opted for Hindi as their medium of instruction, whereas only 2% decided to use both Hindi and English. It is interesting to note that 65% of the students take their postgraduate examinations in Hindi.² This highlights

¹ Excerpt from the research field.

² Data collected from the research field.

the societal emphasis on the English language, which is deeply connected to the hierarchies of caste, class, and gender in the Indian context.

In India, a substantial portion of the population uses English as a secondary language. Each state has its own unique regional language that serves as the main means of communication for its residents. However, the outline of English was put in place to promote unity amid the country's linguistic diversity. Being proficient in English is seen as a significant advantage in the workplace, helping to connect with global audiences. In the field of education, English functions as the predominant medium of instruction at various educational levels, encompassing primary education through to higher education.³ Notwithstanding this, a significant number of students, especially those originating from non-English-speaking backgrounds, encounter difficulties with the language, thereby impeding their capacity to understand lectures presented in English. This often results in limited interaction with English-speaking colleagues and educators. Similar findings have been observed in different countries, including Japan, where a notable number of students expressed feelings of anxiety or indifference towards learning the English language. Data from national population surveys indicates that a substantial percentage of both male and female employees in urban India are necessitated to utilise English for occupational functions. English instruction typically starts early in most Indian educational institutions, usually beginning in the third grade. Starting from the sixth grade, it shifts to being the main language of instruction for a small percentage of students. Most of these students are attending state-funded schools, where English is not the main language used for teaching.⁴

Students from non-English backgrounds frequently demonstrate superior performance compared to their English medium peers at the senior secondary level; however, they encounter considerable obstacles when transitioning to higher education. The students in question often encounter difficulties in comprehending lectures delivered in English, which subsequently leads to a decline in their academic performance relative to their peers who are proficient in the English medium. The results show that many students who have difficulty grasping English lectures tend to be less engaged with their English-speaking teachers and classmates. A small number of students, particularly those who understand the lectures, participate in classroom discussions and communicate with teachers and classmates in English. This gap underscores the significant societal and educational hurdles linked to language proficiency,⁵ particularly for female students coming from regional language backgrounds. Addressing these challenges requires the implementation of a coordinated strategy that establishes inclusive and supportive

³ E. Annamalai, "Medium of Power: The Question of English in Education in India," essay, in *Medium of Instruction Policies: Which Agenda? Whose Agenda?* ed. James W. Tollefson and Amy Tsui (New Jersey, USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 177–94, 179.

⁴ Supriya Chaudhuri, "Higher Education Policy and English Studies in India," essay, in *Reconsidering English Studies in Indian Higher Education*, ed. Suman Gupta et al. (New York, USA: Routledge Publication, 2015), 22–38, 25.

⁵ Ajit Mahanty, Minati Panda, and Rashim Pal, "Language Policy in Education and Classroom Practices in India: Is the Teacher a Cog in the Policy Wheel?," essay, in *Negotiating Language Policies in Schools Educators as Policymakers*, ed. Kate Menken and Ofelia Garcia (New Delhi, India: Routledge Publication, 2010), 211–31, 215.

educational environments to acknowledge and rectify the linguistic and gender disparities prevalent in Indian higher education institutions.

The Role of English Proficiency in Indian Higher Education

The proficiency in the English language poses a significant obstacle for students navigating higher education in India, impacting their academic experiences and opportunities. In general, candidates are required to successfully complete a state-sponsored and overseen entrance examination to gain admission to institutions of higher education. This assessment is available in multiple regional languages, showcasing the rich linguistic diversity found across the nation. However, in these institutions, English serves as a secondary language, leading to varying levels of English proficiency among students upon their admission. The English language serves as the primary medium of instruction within the three academic disciplines: arts, sciences, and commerce. As a result, the understanding and application of the English language exhibit considerable variation both across and within these specific fields of study.

The belief that understanding of English is crucial for success in higher education contrasts with India's constitutional framework, which does not mandate English medium education as a right.⁶ Despite the presence of English medium institutions, the overwhelming demand often leads to extensive waiting lists for eager students seeking admission. There is a limited number of educational institutions, particularly a notable shortage of state-funded English medium options in higher education. This situation leads to a lack of English proficiency among students.

The ethical issues that arise when institutions provide only English as a medium of instruction, while lacking sufficient English language support, are quite significant. The requirement for students to manage an educational environment mainly in English, while also taking entrance exams in regional languages, could lead to considerable disadvantages for many individuals.

The Impact of Regional Languages on Female Students

Every year, a large number of undergraduate students in India pursue their initial degree programs in a variety of regional languages, including Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Kannada, Punjabi, Oriya, Malayalam, and Assamese. The instruction of disciplines including economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, and geology in these languages enhances the diversity and richness of the academic landscape. The students under consideration represent a valuable pool of future scholars and professionals, highlighting the critical need to improve the quality of their higher education experiences.

The offering of courses in fields like economic geography, historical-critical geography, political science, and psychology in Hindi and different regional languages by many state universities in

⁶ Padmini Boruah and Ajit Mohanty, "English Medium Education in India: The Neoliberal Legacy and Challenges to Multilingual Language Policy Implementation," essay, in *Neoliberalization of English Language Policy in the Global South*, ed. Ali Jalalian Daghigh, Jariah Mohd Jan, and Sheena Kaur (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2022), 51–72, 58.

India is a commendable advancement. Still, being skilled in the English language remains a crucial requirement for engaging in this broad educational system. Most English instruction takes place in private institutions located in urban areas, which limits access for many students. Consequently, only a small percentage of college-aged individuals in India show a strong understanding of the English language.

Students choosing to further their education in a regional language can enrol in undergraduate programs in different states, where classes are conducted in their native language. In some states, public universities provide courses in various subjects using regional languages, promoting an inclusive educational environment. It is important to find a balance between making language accessible and recognising that being proficient in English can open up more opportunities, including jobs in competitive markets and access to global academic resources.

The intersection of gender, language, and educational opportunity is becoming more apparent in this context. Female students, particularly those from regional language backgrounds, frequently face additional challenges in their pursuit of higher education.⁷ To tackle these challenges effectively, it's crucial to develop a thorough strategy that includes improving English language support in educational institutions, ensuring fair access to quality education, and fostering an inclusive environment that values linguistic diversity. It is essential that every student, regardless of their language background, has access to the necessary resources and support to thrive in higher education, as this is vital for fostering a fairer and more inclusive society. Implementing comprehensive reforms in educational policies and practices, such as targeted language support programs and inclusive teaching approaches, is crucial to bridge the gap in language proficiency and academic performance, especially for female students in Indian higher education.

Linguistic Challenges for Female Students

In the northern states of India, many female students enrolled in central universities show a strong connection to their regional languages and display a great deal of confidence in using these languages at home. However, the transition to using English in academic settings often creates a sense of intimidation for these individuals. This intimidation highlights a major issue: students from regional language backgrounds frequently face insufficient chances to develop their English skills before entering these universities. Consequently, these individuals face significant obstacles in their educational journeys, as they need to communicate with instructors in English and comprehend lectures across various subjects delivered in the English language. A language barrier greatly limits access to essential instructional content and reduces the quality of educational experiences for individuals.

⁷ Vani Borooah and Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal, "English as a Medium of Instruction in Indian Education: Inequality of Access to Educational Opportunities," essay, in *Reclaiming Development Studies: Essays For Ashwani Saith*, ed. Murat Arsel, Anirban Dasgupta, and Servaas Storm (London, United Kingdom: Anthem Press, 2021), 197–226, 205.

In India's higher education system, female students frequently experience difficulty communicating effectively in English due to their low language proficiency. There is a notable difference in English communication skills among students from different language backgrounds, which significantly impacts their understanding of lectures.⁸ The significant influence of regional languages allows these students to engage more comfortably with academic materials when using their native languages instead of English. As a result, many people find themselves heading back to their home areas without adequate skills in the English language after finishing their studies at these schools.

The language used for instruction significantly impacts students' decisions when it comes to selecting their undergraduate degree programs. In today's competitive landscape, many rural students face considerable difficulties in mastering English communication as they strive for higher education opportunities. This research examines the impact of the medium of instruction on female students' enrolment decisions in higher education and their interaction with the academic curriculum. A considerable body of research indicates that a significant proportion of female students exhibit insufficient proficiency in English. This issue is especially evident among students from lower caste and class backgrounds, with female students experiencing the most significant negative impacts.

In many rural areas, parents opt to enrol their daughters in regional medium schools primarily to secure a degree rather than emphasising a thorough understanding of the subjects, potentially affecting the quality of education and skill development. This viewpoint reduces education to just a means of acquiring a qualification, rather than fostering the growth of critical thinking and practical skills. Analysis of the collected data reveals that among the 20 female students sampled, nine belong to various caste groups, with six from Scheduled Castes (SC), one from Scheduled Tribes (ST), and four from Other Backward Classes (OBC), highlighting the intersection of caste backgrounds with female students' educational journeys.⁹

Within a cohort of one hundred undergraduate students in the department, it is observed that 60% originate from the Western Maharashtra region. Out of the ten female students surveyed, eight mentioned that they had a regional background where Marathi was the medium of instruction, while just two reported attending English medium schools. Among the ten study participants, three resided in hostels and had rural backgrounds. The diverse backgrounds of female students, particularly those from the Maratha caste, suggest that many opted for regional medium colleges due to the substantial costs associated with English medium education.¹⁰ Their main goal remained focused on obtaining a degree, with little concern for the quality of education received.

In the context of globalisation, English has emerged as the dominant language of the twenty-first century. Improving English communication skills among urban students is a thoughtful approach

⁸ Karuna Chanana, "Treading the Hallowed Halls: Women in Higher Education in India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 12 (March 18, 2000): 1012–22, 1021.

⁹ Data collected from the research field.

¹⁰ Data collected from the research field.

to the opportunities brought about by globalisation. On the other hand, rural students, who mainly communicate with their families in regional languages, face considerable challenges in acquiring comparable skills. In urban educational settings, educators often attribute insufficient English proficiency to a perceived lack of effort from students and their families. This viewpoint often overlooks the systemic obstacles that stem from limited exposure to languages outside of the students' native languages.

This study explores the difficulties faced by female students when shifting from Hindi to English as their main language of instruction. A comprehensive analysis conducted over two semesters, utilising pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, involved a sample of 80 female students. The findings indicated that 12 participants lacked proficiency in English at the onset of their college experience, subsequently facing instances of language discrimination in both academic and social contexts. It is noteworthy that the educational and occupational backgrounds of the participants' parents did not have a significant impact on their perceptions of discrimination. A notable increase in English proficiency was linked to a decrease in both the internalised feelings of inferiority and the language discrimination faced by these students. The sample size limitations might influence how broadly the results can be applied; nonetheless, the findings suggest that language intervention could improve the experiences of female students in higher education.

It is noteworthy that about 80% of regional language speakers come from rural areas, with a sizable portion being women. The challenges associated with education conducted in a language other than the native tongue are particularly significant, especially within states where Hindi is not the primary language spoken.¹¹ It is essential to show empathy and provide support for marginalised groups. Female students show increased vulnerability to discrimination based on their regional language backgrounds, which is evident in both academic and social settings.¹²

Out of the 20 female students involved in the study, 55% chose Hindi as their preferred medium of instruction but they have to use English for academic engagement, while 10% opted for a mix of both Hindi and English. A significant 65% of participants wrote their papers or dissertations in English. Interestingly, it was noted that 80% of the female students used Hindi for communication, indicating their limited proficiency in English.¹³ This situation highlights the necessity of being proficient in English to meet the academic standards set by faculty from diverse backgrounds, especially considering the reduced prestige often associated with Hindi. This scenario necessitates additional investigation and an empathetic pedagogical strategy aimed at empowering girls from remote and marginalised communities. An in-depth analysis of the interplay among language, gender, and access to education is essential for formulating effective interventions aimed at mitigating these disparities within the context of higher education in India.

¹¹ Data collected from the research field.

¹² Vai Ramanathan, "English Is Here to Stay: A Critical Look at Institutional and Educational Practices in India," *TESOL Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 211–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587718>, 220-221.

¹³ Data collected from the research field.

Strategies for Enhancing English Proficiency and Addressing Language Barriers

Given the need to enhance English proficiency and reduce language barriers in higher education, a set of targeted recommendations can be put forward to help students effectively develop their English language skills. A foundational approach involves incorporating an English course tailored for the undergraduate curriculum. This course is designed to provide students with essential reading, writing, and speaking skills that are applicable to their specific areas of study. Placing English language learning within academic subjects helps students find greater relevance and use for their language skills, leading to a more engaged and motivated learning experience.

Revising the examination pattern is an important step in tackling language-related challenges. Modern evaluations often focus more on language skills than on true comprehension and the practical use of knowledge. Students who may have difficulty with English language skills could experience reduced pressure if assessments focused more on mastering content.¹⁴ The suggested adjustment of examination frameworks, free from language limitations, would help students effectively demonstrate their understanding of the subject. Introducing assessments that focus on critical thinking and problem-solving in particular areas of study can empower students, allowing them to showcase their true abilities.

Additionally, ongoing counselling sessions run by qualified professionals can significantly aid students in their academic endeavours. Continuously evaluating student engagement in lectures, along with their academic results, is essential for pinpointing specific anxieties and challenges that could negatively impact their educational journey. These can involve feelings of not being enough, increased stress, or fluctuations in emotions. Fostering a setting that prioritises mental well-being and emotional stability allows institutions to cultivate a nurturing environment that promotes successful learning. Regular counselling services can provide students with useful coping strategies and resources to tackle the challenges of language barriers and academic pressures.

Conducting a thorough review of books and teaching materials is essential to address regional language challenges effectively and enhance the integration of English vocabulary in educational environments. Books and other reading materials should be designed to accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds, helping students grasp subject-related concepts without facing unnecessary difficulties in understanding the language. Using clear and easy-to-understand English vocabulary that matches students' language experiences can help make the shift to English-medium instruction smoother and more effective. Making these revisions could help clarify complex terms, making it easier for students to engage with their academic resources.

To effectively tackle the gap between students' regional language backgrounds and English-medium instruction, educators must take into account the linguistic diversity that exists in their

¹⁴ Md Shaiful Islam and Mahani Bt Stapa, "Students' Low Proficiency in Spoken English in Private Universities in Bangladesh: Reasons and Remedies," *Language Testing in Asia* 11, no. 1 (October 1, 2021): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-021-00139-0>, 23.

classrooms. Grasping the local language backgrounds of students, as well as the educational institutions they have attended before, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of teaching methods. Adapting instructional methods to incorporate appropriate terminology, utilising accessible language for effective communication, and presenting information in a lucid and uncomplicated fashion are critical strategies that can enhance understanding. Furthermore, the regular integration of discipline-specific vocabulary can enhance students' familiarity with the terminology, thereby facilitating retention and comprehension.

To help alleviate students' fears and worries about using the English language, teachers should consider including mock assessments and practice sessions in their teaching methods. These initiatives could help clarify the examination process and make students more comfortable with the language of instruction. Thorough evaluations of exam materials, along with helpful feedback, can help reduce stress and encourage a mindset focused on growth among students. Encouraging open discussions about the topic, along with creating a supportive space for students to express their understanding, can significantly reduce the pressures related to using language.

Establishing a bidirectional committee comprising educators, students, and language experts is crucial for evaluating and improving teaching and learning methods to enhance English proficiency among female students in higher education. This committee facilitates collaborative efforts to address language barriers and enhance language learning outcomes for female students. This committee serves as a dynamic platform where educators and students collaborate to identify language-related challenges, develop tailored solutions, and implement context-specific interventions to improve English proficiency among female students in higher education.¹⁵ By fostering collaboration and shared decision-making, the committee enhances language learning outcomes and supports the academic success of female students. Promoting open communication between teachers and students enables schools to establish an environment focused on meeting the needs of learners through continuous improvement.

Moreover, educational institutions can benefit from integrating technology into their language learning approaches. Using language learning apps, online resources, and multimedia tools provides students with extra ways to practise their English skills outside of the classroom. The resources provided cater to various learning styles, allowing students to progress at their own speed, which in turn boosts their confidence in using the language. Introducing online discussion forums, peer tutoring programs, and collaborative projects can greatly enhance students' English skills while also promoting social interaction and teamwork among those involved.

Involving families and communities in the language learning process has shown positive outcomes in supporting students' language development. Schools are essential in helping parents

¹⁵ Sahar Fadel and Hussam Rajab, "Investigating the English Language Needs of the Female Students at the Faculty of Computing and Information Technology at King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia," *English Language Teaching* 10, no. 6 (May 25, 2017): 69–82, <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n6p69>, 73.

understand the importance of English skills for their daughters' academic and career paths.¹⁶ By taking this approach, they can create a nurturing home atmosphere that promotes language learning. Workshops and informational sessions aim to empower families, allowing them to take an active role in their daughters' education. This method encourages a shared dedication to tackling and overcoming language obstacles.

Enhancing English proficiency among female students in Indian higher education demands a comprehensive approach involving curriculum design, examination reform, counselling services, resource development, and community engagement initiatives. By adopting these strategies, educational institutions can create a more inclusive and supportive environment, empowering female students to succeed academically and effectively navigate the complexities of a globalised world. This proactive strategy aims to enhance the outcomes of individual students and create a more equitable higher education landscape in India, removing language proficiency as an obstacle to success.

Conclusion

This article underscores the urgent need for educational authorities in India to address language barriers in higher education, especially concerning female students. There is a distinct necessity for the establishment of more effective policies regarding the language of instruction at all undergraduate levels. Nonetheless, the constraints of the sample sizes and the cross-sectional aspect of the data hinder our understanding of the issues discussed in this study. The results show that learners who wish to learn English alongside their native languages encounter significant difficulties, particularly in regions where local languages are more widely spoken. These obstacles hinder not just academic success but also limit future opportunities in the job market. It is crucial for higher education institutions in India to develop and implement targeted language learning programs that are both effective and financially viable. By empowering female students to excel in both English and their native languages, this approach facilitates the development of comprehensive language proficiency, enabling students to succeed academically and professionally.

Furthermore, the gender-specific breakdown of results offers crucial insights for educational policymakers, underscoring the unequal effects of language-related challenges on female students. This study highlights the vital responsibility of policymakers in assessing the effectiveness of strategies and their impact on the enrolment rates and educational advancement of women in India. Numerous female students experience heightened challenges grappling with the complexities of learning regional languages, resulting in discomfort and a decline in motivation. Removing obstacles to learning in educational systems is crucial for providing all students with fair access to quality education. Helping female students overcome language

¹⁶ India Today Web Desk India Today Web Desk, "Why English Language Skills Matter Most for Your Child's Academic Success," India Today, March 12, 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/featurephilia/story/why-english-language-skills-matter-most-for-your-child-s-academic-success-1778503-2021-03-12>, 1.

barriers offers India a chance to significantly enhance its educational resources, which in turn can drive economic growth and support community development. To sum up, fostering an inclusive educational environment that acknowledges and embraces language diversity not only enhances the educational experience for female students but also contributes to societal progress, promoting fairness and prosperity for all.

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